

THEATER

Do you have a poster of a piece of art that you love to look at, even though it's a cheap reproduction and not the original? Have you ever formed a first impression, only to discover later that the person is very different from who you originally perceived?

36 Views, written by Naomi Iizuka and produced by Portland Center Stage this month, explores those issues of perspective and authenticity in art and relationships.

Iizuka, a rising star of contemporary drama, was inspired by the woodcuts of Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai, who spent 10 years working on *36 Views of Mount Fuji*. In this case, the mountain is a particular pillow book—a courtesan diary alleged to be 1,000 years old that turns up in the Asian art world.

From Darius Wheeler, an aptly named wheeler and dealer of art, to Claire Tsong, a skilled artist who warns, "Always read the fine print—there is always fine print," the six characters come and go from the spotlight as the authenticity of the pillow book raises questions of value and reality.

Wheeler wants the book, but does he want Setsuko Hearn, the young academic, more? Is Hearn's older colleague, Owen Matthiassen, pushing her toward Wheeler in order to gain access to the book? Is Tsong taking advantage of John Bell, Wheeler's brilliant assistant, and what does she hope to gain from the play's mystery woman, Elizabeth Newman-Orr? (Hint: more than just a professional opinion.)

And what is real about the pillow book? What does it mean if it's a fake?

Gay director Chay Yew feels the work raises relevant questions for the queer community. "Inherent to the play," he explains, "is the idea of what is real and not real, what's authentic and what's not authentic, and, honey, if you spend time in a gay bar, you know what I'm talking about."

Yew, former director of Seattle's Northwest Asian American Theatre, serves as director of Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop in Los Angeles. He began his career as a writer; his play *Red* was produced by Portland Center Stage in 1998.

Yew's *Porcelain*, about a gay teen who murders his lover, received the London Fringe Award for Best Play. It was initially banned in his native Singapore for depicting a gay character who was, according to one U.S. publication, "too sympathetic and too straight-looking." *A Language of Their Own* follows the interconnecting stories of four men exploring love, desire and sexuality.

Yew's numerous honors include a Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation Media Award and the Asian/Pacific Gays & Friends Community Visibility Award.

Yew brings his own perspectives to *36 Views*. "There is this establishment in society that's...typically straight, white, male," he

Fake out

36 Views turns on the Sapphic charm in art dealer intrigue

BY KAREN KUDEJ



Just what does journalist Elizabeth Newman-Orr (left) want from artist Claire Tsong besides her opinion on sculpture?

states, "and there are other people, who are on the other side, brimming to come forward to assume the positions...and the people of color, women and gays and lesbians are trying to equalize, I would say, the establishment." Watch for the power shifts throughout the play.

Earlier productions of *36 Views* staged in New York and Berkeley, Calif., employed multimedia technology, which enhanced elements of traditional Kabuki theater. Don't expect that here. Yew keeps the set simple, inspired by the subtler Noh theater traditions. "[Iizuka] has written delicious characters," he says. "The bare stage magnifies the performance."

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Yew trusts the work to speak for itself. "It's fun, too," he adds. "The actors get to do stupid things like create sound effects. So I think that it's total theater in that way."

36 Views is a play that will challenge you to keep up. "I'm probably doing a terrible thing," Yew notes, "putting the onus of the storytelling onto the audience—saying that, look, if you do not listen, I'm not going to spoon-feed you...if you're not gonna participate...and be active in the story, in the telling of the story, then you'll be lost."

Yew believes theater should raise questions, not answers. And he trusts Portland audiences will be up for it.

But the play isn't all work. Iizuka's "dirty little secret," he shares, "is she has a penchant for reading Ruth Rendell mysteries, and she has technically created a Ruth Rendell mystery in this play."

The mystery reveals itself in an ever-shifting way as the 36 scenes unfold. "Every time you go into a scene you think this is the world that we're going to bring you," Yew explains. "And the next thing you know, something else is happening. It keeps changing—like an onion peeling off its layers of skin." □

Portland Center Stage presents *36 VIEWS* Feb. 13 to 29 at Newmark Theatre, 1111 S.W. Broadway. Tickets are \$16-\$51 from the box office or 503-274-6588. Gay and Lesbian Audience Night is Feb. 17.

KAREN KUDEJ is a Portland free-lance writer.

36 VIEWS

BY Naomi Iizuka



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