

# The Kitchen Center for Video and Music

Concepts In

## PERFORMANCE

### Brilliant Bagatelle

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A square glass table laid with four tea bowls, four scripts, four microphones, and a Mah Jong set . . .

#### Stephanie Woodard

**Chinoiserie**  
**The Kitchen**

*Chinoiserie* is a gem. Its author, Ed Friedman, calls it a "verbal decoration for four characters." The characters are an older married couple, Swan's Flesh and Violet Shade, who are a freelance charter pilot and an ex-actress, respectively. They have invited to their home for a game of Mah Jong and a bit of match-making two young friends, Lingering Snow, a gardener, and Black Jade, a cosmetics saleswoman at Bloomingdale's. The action takes place in Los Angeles.

Each of *Chinoiserie's* other theatrical elements is a masterpiece of decoration as well. Its set, by Beth Cannon, includes a square glass table centered on a square woven straw mat. The table is laid with four tea bowls, four scripts, four microphones, and a Mah Jong set, surrounded by four white cushions, and backed by a pastel floral screen and two potted plants. The costumes are bright and elegant, with bold patterns and simple lines that suggest a kimono or sarong.

Peter Gordon's music provided a delightful aural backdrop. Being taped rather than live, the softly chiming vibraphone and prepared piano (played by Dave Van Tieghem and Robert Sheff, respectively) embellish the dialogue modestly. Witty variations in style occur subtly, but obediently, as the conversation shifts from Violet Shade's and Swan's Flesh's skiing trip to Japan with the CIA, to Black Jade's flirtation with an older woman in an imitation-Mexican motel in Florida, to Violet Shade's and Black Jade's re-enactment of the graveyard scene from *The Wild Ones*.

The script is packed with bizarre situations, exaggerated descriptions, and literary devices like alliteration and internal rhyme — "a breathtaking view (phew) of Mount Fuji." The actors, Ed Bowes, Ellie Karanauskas, Rochelle Kraut, and Robert Kushner, are superb.

They read the dialogue in a purposely stilted way, laughing enthusiastically at private jokes. They describe their own conversation as "brilliant repartee."

Friedman says he directed them for "a kind of coolness" and asked the actors not to "take the verbal clichés and make them into dramatic clichés." He sees the piece as being about the opulence of the verbal interchanges rather than about personalities, and tried to have as little happen as possible. Quirks in each character's personality do begin to emerge — a violent streak under Black Jade's "sweet and simple" facade, and jealousy between happily married Swan's Flesh and Violet Shade.

*Chinoiserie* is a stylization of two concurrent improvisations, a conversation and a game. It is written so that the intersection of these two elements creates a fascinating rhythmical asymmetry. An actor pauses mid-line to consider the tiles (objects much like Scrabble-letter-sized playing cards with which Mah Jong is played) that other players have discarded or to plan the next move, the others prompt him/her, and he/she picks up the train of thought, the occasional clatter of the tiles and the pauses between the sections of the musical accompaniment further enrich the rhythm of the piece.

Friedman has captured the flavor and intention of oriental theater forms, where meaning and entertainment co-exist, and appreciation of either — or any combination of both — is a complete, self-sufficient experience of a work. In the East a theatrical presentation may be enjoyed by a philosopher or a child, as well as by a butcher, baker, or candlestick maker. In the West art is often categorized as "high," folk, or pop — the first demanding appreciation of the forces behind its creation, the second two requiring that these forces be ignored.

*Chinoiserie* is certainly a product of Western "high" art, but it allies itself with the East by making itself available to a variety of kinds of understanding.