

THEATER

Ping Chong
Inside Out

By William Harris

Ping Chong stands downstage at a lectern. In a tone more melancholic than judgmental, he recalls an awkward dinner in a Chinese restaurant with a museum curator and his female companion.

"As we undress the chopsticks from their paper clothes," Chong tells the audience, "the lady friend frowns and says, 'Why don't they use knives and forks? This is America. Why don't they stop using chopsticks?' I wonder who she thinks 'they' is. I don't bat an eye. I don't lose a beat. I don't murder her..."

Thus begins *Chinoiserie*, the latest installment in Chong's ongoing exploration of the clash between Eastern and Western values and perceptions.

A graduate of Pratt Institute and the School of Visual Arts, Chong, 49, is an experimental director, designer and choreographer known for his use of allegory and the cool, visual elegance of his productions.

But since 1992 and the performance of *Undesirable Elements*, a piece about cultural identity that was presented at the Artists Space in lower Manhattan, Chong has been more interested in history than allegory. *Chinoiserie* is actually the second work in a planned trilogy about the relationship between Asia and the West. In 1990, Chong created *Deshima*, which centered on Japan. Vietnam, he says, will be the subject of his next work.

For the first time since he began making theater pieces in 1972, Chong has chosen to explore his own identity as a Chinese-American. *Chinoiserie* is a devastating portrait, not just of the historical mistreatment of one immigrant group, but of an enduring mistrust of Chinese people.

The title itself reflects this deep hostility. In the nineteenth century, the word *chinoiserie* referred to Chinese objects—such as heavily lacquered furniture and orna-

mental screens—that had become a passion among the European aristocracy. Today it is a term used to sneer at an "oriental" decorating approach that is considered *déclassé*.

Chinoiserie moves back and forth in time, blending nineteenth-century events such as the Opium Wars and the building of the transcontinental railroads with autobiographical snippets about Chong's upbringing in New York's Chinatown,



PERCEIVING CHINESE: Ping Chong (left) explores identity in *Chinoiserie*, featuring Shi-Zheng Chen.