

# Cultural Exchange

By Marcia B. Siegel

**Ping Chong**

*Deshima*

John Jay College Theater  
December 15 through 18

**Colonialism takes** many forms, according to Ping Chong's bitter reading of international relations. Outright political takeover does a pretty good job on the native instruments of power, but one culture can seep into the bones of another in subtler ways. Language is the most obvious medium of exchange, and Chong's theater piece *Deshima*, made in collaboration with Michael Matthews, is very word-intensive. But there are others—religion, art, fashion, technology, tourism, dancing.

*Deshima* is a collage of scenes, a chronology with neat anachronisms that keep reminding us cultures are always in the process of doing one another in. The same actors come back in different slots of the power structure. Early in the piece Michael Edo Keane plays a Japanese daimyo, a feudal lord, who makes Brian Liem, a 17th-century Dutch merchant, literally grovel as they negotiate a deal. Later Keane is a Portuguese priest who presides over his flock of Japanese converts, with the same bullying condescension.

When the Dutch arrived in the 1600s, they were interned on Deshima island off the coast of Japan so they wouldn't contaminate the populace. Two hundred years later they're complacently ensconced at a diplomatic ball. "Can you believe it?" one mevrouw gossips to another, "they've invited a native!"

As the top dogs become the underdogs, and the downtrodden turn around and stomp on somebody else, the security of "us" as the good guys looks pretty shaky. There are no good guys, and, after centuries of miscegenation, there's not even any "us." The myth of America as benevolent haven for immigrants was exploded in 1942, when Japanese Americans were imprisoned as aliens. In the piece, a hard-nosed official lines up men and women and snarls instructions. Before they're shipped out they sing a spiritual, "Go Tell It on the Mountain."

Race prejudice plays a part in this game, but only when it confers power. Ching Gonzalez, dressed like Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, calmly gives his country over to the Japanese. "We must liberate ourselves from the Dutch," he explains. "It's for the good of our people to ally ourselves with those of the same race."

Nothing succumbs to the cultural rinse-job quicker than what people do for entertainment, and we see Japanese teenagers jitterbugging in 1941, against projections of old woodcuts depicting harbors full of Dutch trading ships. Of course we think of the attack on the American fleet by the Japanese the same year.

Deena Burton, with Jennifer Kato and Barbara Chan, does a Javanese classical dance while on tape a Japanese businessman brags about how he's cornered the market for tape recorders and transistor radios. Through all the ages, a narrator (Ric Oquita) harangues us as the cynical voice of commerce and ambition. At one point he's Vincent van Gogh,

yearning to soak up the exoticism of Japan; at the end of the piece, he's Vincent the street artist hawking his postcards while the cast, now almost neutered by multiculturalism, dances a decorous chorus line number to some Japopop music. In the end, Chong seems to say, it's cash, more than hunger or blood, that keeps the trade in motion—the music, the clothes, the appliances, and the license to call ourselves more civilized than someone else. ■