

BEIJING JOURNAL—PART FOUR

WHAT IMPRESSES ME MOST ABOUT THE PLAYWRITING CLASS IS HOW FAST THESE CHINESE STUDENTS OF ENGLISH *GET IT*.

WHAT CONTINUES TO IMPRESS ME ABOUT JOE GRAVES IS HIS ABILITY TO RUN A PROGRAM, TEACH, DIRECT *AND* BUILD A FIRST-RATE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE LEAD CHARACTER, *JEREMY CHESTER*, IN MY PLAY, *BIG SUR*.

WHAT IMPRESSES ME MOST ABOUT *ME* IS DISCOVERING THAT I CAN TEACH AN ENGLISH CONVERSATION COURSE TO AFTER-WORK CHINESE ADULTS (WELL—AFTER A FASHION, I *CAN—DO—TRY*. . .)

THE PLAYWRITING CLASS:

The playwriting class (thanks to some administrating magic of Joe's) is set up—miracles of miracles—as a weekly seminar of *six* committed undergraduate students of English (rather than the usual twenty to sixty students in a class). The students are Wang Tianhang (English name, Michael), He Shanshan (Hattie), Lin Ying (Sarah), Mao Yuanbo (Edgar), Yu Tang (Rachel), Ding Fei (Spencer).

Hattie is also doing sound for my play *BIG SUR*; Michael and Sarah are acting in *BIG SUR*.

SARAH, I ALREADY KNOW:

I first meet Sarah the very first week I arrive on campus, during the winter holiday. Hardly anyone in China works that week. Classes at Peking University are on hiatus. Joe Graves is asked to conduct one English-speaking class for visiting elementary school students. While he's talking to the kids, he spots Sarah outside the classroom (she's returned to campus a week early, before classes begin). Joe introduces Sarah as a PKU student of English who has appeared in many of his productions. She speaks to the students about her theatre

experiences at PKU. Joe asks her if she would perform a dramatic speech in English for the students. She does one of Prospero's speeches from *The Tempest*. Suddenly this average-sized young woman takes stage, grows a foot, and, with great vocal and physical presence, puts Prospero *out there*—in all his iambic glory. The young students are impressed. So am I.

I'm delighted Sarah is in the playwriting class. These students of English will read each other's new works in class, and it always helps to have at least one good reader reading. But I will discover that they are *all* good readers. By that I mean that each student *puts out there* what is *on the page*—not what he/she *assumes* to be on the page (more about this later).

Each class is two hours long with a ten-minute break. I decide, before I even get to China, that I will teach the class the same way I teach my beginning playwriting classes back home: I will give my usual four assignments, based on—: 1) Wants and obstacles 2) The Dramatic Event 3) Dramatic Character and 4) The Monologue *Play*.

I start the discussion my usual way—comparing dramatic writing with other forms of creative writing.

I emphasize the *projectile quality* of dramatic dialogue on the page, so that the live actor can more easily ride that projectile out to the live audience—as opposed to dialogue in fiction, where narrative description can add the pressure needed to activate a mundane speech of dialogue; or, as differentiated from dialogue in film, where close ups, camera angles and underscoring can provide the pressure to keep the tension tense, even if the dialogue is *stagnant, flat, flabby*.

I give an overview of all aspects of my method, based on my theory of dramatic “*pressures*” —with thanks to the great critic George Steiner . . .

(In his book, *“The Death Of Tragedy”*, Steiner writes, “Drama is language under such high pressure of feeling that the words carry a necessary and immediate connotation of gesture.” Knopf, pg. 275)

. . .I talk about how “*pressured wants and pressured obstacles*” must (or should) inform each dramatic moment;

—why placing the “*why-is-this-day-different-from-every-other-day?*” *pressure* close to the top of the piece helps keep audience tushies in their seats (a playwright’s obligation);

—the preference of my term “*disturbances in the universe,*” over the usual “*given circumstances*”;

—searching for, then rendering what I call, a character’s “*center of pain*”;

—formulating *the dramatic question(s)*;

—*defining a Dramatic Event (DE), as: A new pressure (NP) that journeys (J) to a consequence (C)—thus the formula: NP+J+C=DE;*

—how *dramatic punctuation* can illuminate the *text as score*;

—the imperative for *drama-for-the-stage* dialogue to be *confrontational, never conversational*;

—how to allow your true playwright’s *voice* to emerge in *your text*.

I am curious about what will result from the mix of my method of teaching and the sensibility and background of the Chinese student.

BIG SUR REHEARSALS—OR GRAB THEM WHEN YOU CAN.

Rehearsal schedules are built (and constantly adjusted) daily around the heavy schedules of the students. Sebastian (Li Shin), who is playing the Indian, acts as stage manager, who takes down blocking, contacts the students, arranges schedules. He sits in for actors who are missing when Joe is staging a scene.

Sebastian is smart, sharp, interested in all things relating to theatre. Throughout my stay at PKU, Sebastian—besides dealing with anything related to *BIG SUR*— is putting together a production of a one-act play, *MEDUSA TALE*, by American playwright, Carol Lashoff, for an upcoming campus showcase competition. He is also acting in the play and directing it (with assistance from Joes Graves).

On occasion, Sebastian also acts as my guide—even introduces me to the great La Mian noodles at the student noodle restaurant on campus.

Sebastian is a recent graduate of Peking University. After graduating, he sat in on one of Joe Graves' courses and fell in love with theatre.

Sebastian is a professional photographer and, until recently, was heading his own business in Beijing—creating photo portraits of wealthy people who posed in traditional Chinese costumes because they wanted to make connections with their Chinese roots. He has since left the photography business to devote himself full time to theatre, as producer, director, and actor.

Sebastian is skilled in computer technology and program design. His extra appendix is the cell phone, in which he squint-views text messages constantly, and speed-thumb replies immediately. He is smart, generous, and one of the sweetest men I've ever met. Sebastian's fiancée, Li Yuxia (English name, Anna), is a PHD student at PKU. Anna also sings in the famous PKU chorus. Later, Sandy and I will attend a choral concert on

campus, combining the PKU mixed chorus and a visiting Lehigh University chorus from America—a high point of my PKU stay.

Sebastian sits in on my playwriting class. He also downloads a recording of the Andrews Sisters singing, *APPLE BLOSSOM TIME*. We need the recording for the Aging Hippie scene in *BIG SUR*.

The *BIG SUR* rehearsals take place in a number of spaces: a large meeting room in the Democracy Building; a large classroom next to the English Office in the Old Chemistry Building; in Joe's office and, on occasion (when we're dispossessed from *all* spaces) —outdoors.

BIG SUR rehearsals are dispossessed many times and everyone learns to swing with it. Each time it happens, though, Joe vows to get his own theatre space on campus—an entire building, if possible; preferably one of those old, large, traditional structures, with dragon statuary in front, found around some of the lakes in the wooded areas of the campus. —Bet he gets it, too.

The *BIG SUR* set consists of four chairs (the car) and a steering wheel.

Early on, rehearsals for the first scene are rarely called. Joe Graves sacrifices working on this opening monologue scene for a while because the scene is basically about him—*his* character. He needs to get on, devote time, to the other characters, to the other scenes.

The Balladeer strums his guitar and introduces the play. Jeremy Chester enters, picks up his free-floating steering wheel, and sits on the driver's seat and drives. A darkly clad character enters and sits in the rear seat. Jeremy has a long opening speech. Here it is.

BALLADEER

(Stops strumming and humming. ANNOUNCES)

Here begin, the nine pickups of Jeremy Chester! Prelude: The First Pickup!

(MUSIC: Overpowering measures of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. Immediately brought under)

JEREMY

(Happily driving; projects the speech back over his shoulder to the passenger)

I hope you don't mind sitting back there!

(MUSIC: UP then quickly brought DOWN)

But you hear so much about the dangers of picking up strangers—and putting you back there is my one concession to safety!

(MUSIC: UP then quickly brought DOWN)

And I hope you don't mind the music!

(MUSIC: Up then quickly brought down)

Johann Sebastian Bach!

(MUSIC: Up then fades out under)

You would think I'd get tired of it—the music, I mean. But the fact is, I'm an organist by profession. At the Roman Catholic Church. In Bodoni County. I've been in that position ever since the war. The Second World War, I mean. You know; the one we were all in favor of? And I've never left it, Bodoni County.

JEREMY

(Continued)

Would you believe it—in this year of nineteen hundred, six and eight? —1968 in this good old U. S. of A? Oh! — Don't get me wrong; it's a nice enough place, Bodoni County. Tree lined streets —wake up with the lark, that sort of—. . .

(Discovery; more to himself)

Just a wee bit boring, however. . .

(Then back over his shoulder, to the passenger again)

I guess you're wondering, "Why didn't you take a trip sooner?"

(Gets no reply; answers the question)

Weeeel, my salary has always been low— and I've been sort of plagued with a few—oh—ailments; high blood pressure, a touch of diabetes, psoriasis. —Things like that tend to stop you from moving about much. Anyway, there just never seemed to be any reason to go anywhere. —But, in the past few years, I've become antsy—have wanted to talk to people—not past them—open up to them— have them open up to me—have wanted to start a — and this is one of my favorite words —"dialogue." Isn't that beautiful. "Dialogue." . . .And besides that, I've had this urge to get to see— Big Sur!

(Light change. Balladeer strums and hums under following. Light change— as Jeremy, in a kind of happy, lyrical fog, leaves the car and seems to be pulled toward some overpowering distant image)

That's way out in California, you know. Some parishioners were there and never stopped talking about it. Like being out on the edge of the world, they said. The cliffs going right down to the Pacific. The Pacific smashing against the big rocks there. And the spray, the ocean spray; they'd talk about the force of that spray and how it would reach up the side of the cliffs. . .like fingers, trying to clutch on. . .Big Sur.

(Light change. BALLADEER stops strumming)

and humming. JEREMY gets back into the car, behind the wheel, driving again. Excited—over his shoulder, at the passenger again)

JEREMY

(Continued)

That's where I'm headed now! —straight across this great country I've never seen! — and it happened in the most incredible way! "Guess how?" . . .

(No response)

I WON THIS CAR IN A RAFFLE, THAT'S HOW! At my church. In Bodoni County! —Isn't that something? First time I ever won anything. —So, I took it as a sign. God was giving me the wheels and he was saying: "You're forty five years old. Twenty years of staying put in one place is enough. —Take off!" Why not? It's never too late to start, eh? I want to "dialogue" all over this country. And then, when I get to Big Sur, I want to rest; just rest and think about it all.

(He thinks about it all)

By the way, my name is Jeremy, Jeremy Chester. And yours?

(Instead of a reply, the passenger shoves a gun to Jeremy's head)

BLACKOUT. Spot light on Balladeer)

BALLADEER

(Strums and sings)

*RIDE, OH RIDE, JEREMY CHESTER:
TRYING TO FIND YOUR WAY.*

*RIDE, OH RIDE, JEREMY CHESTER.
THE ROAD MAY NOT BE ALL THIS GRAY.
THE ROAD MAY NOT BE ALL THIS GRAY.*

* * * * *

When Joe works on scene two, I begin to see how he juggles the director/actor personas.

That scene adds the policeman, who has retrieved Jeremy's car after chasing the car thief; then adds the American Indian, who has been discovered hiding in the boot of the car.

Joe merely has others sit in for his Jeremy character, while *he* directs. Often it's Sarah (observing rehearsals, even when she's not called) who will read the lines and walk through the staging and commit to (and notate) the business (if Sebastian is *in* the scene). Sometimes, though, it's someone else who just happens to be observing the rehearsal, while Joe reads the lines and stages the scene from offstage.

Joe has an impeccable eye—and ear. He urges the actors to project—even though, at the moment, they might be rehearsing in close quarters in his office. The English language does not trip off the tongue easily for these Chinese actors, so, initially, they tend to attack each beat in a cautious and internal way. Also, like actors everywhere, now influenced by film, the *BIG SUR* actors tend to expect a mike, off camera, to pick up and amplify the dialogue. In fact, the actors are surprised when they're told they *will not* be miked for the performance.

These actors, remember, have had no speech or vocal training for the stage. Even as they sit opposite each other in Joe's office—a low, blacktop table between them—Joe urges the actors to belt out their speeches and, eventually—(as they understand and commit to these *big pressures* that are pushing the character in each scene)—the vocal projection gets naturally more amplified. The actors come to understand that the characters' emotions are bigger than they thought, and the actors begin to render that bigness, vocally.

BIG SUR is structured so that each scene begins at an emotional high for Jeremy and each new character. The actors

merely have to commit to the rising emotional journey in the scene in order to get behind the projection that will be needed when—*amplification deprived*—they will get into the mike-less space of the Administration Building auditorium.

Joe can talk about, and demonstrate, diaphragm support and speech placement. He analyzes the language phonetically when he has to. Above all, he demonstrates how to let the pressured text surge through the body and get the body to move and gesture. Joe becomes director, vocal and movement coach, and text analysis dramaturge—as needed. And he wears all the hats with ease.

I really have little to contribute to the rehearsals.

Years before, after I had adapted my television play to the stage, *that* stage-version had been workshopped in many play-developmental venues. The text, Joe and I feel, is now well honed.

I *do* make some cuts, though.

In the second scene, for example, the Indian appears. Like a half-breed Harpo Marx, he won't speak; uses a throat atomizer to indicate that he has laryngitis. He also tries to sell Jeremy a variety of items, including a book: "*CUSTER'S LAST STAND: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE.*" I cut that: The amount of time I would need to explain General Custer and all *those* resonances to Chinese audiences isn't worth the joke.

THE ENGLISH CONVERSATION CLASSES

are very large—averaging 40 students to a Section. At first I think I have two sections. Wrong! I have *four* Sections! Each section meets for two hours: The classes meet Mondays (Sections one and three—7to9PM), Sundays (Sections two and four—1to3PM). The students range in age from the early twenties to the early 40s. They are all working adults. They are taking other English courses in reading and grammar. The

English-speaking Chinese teachers for those courses are very friendly, seem very, very competent, and offer to help me in any way they can. There is a textbook we all use.

The class sections meet in two separate buildings—one old (about a five-minute walk from my digs), with dark, dingy hallways; the other, a much newer building with well-lit halls and large and small lecture rooms. The rooms I teach in have about 50 seats with desks, facing a platform (a little stage) with dais and large chalkboards. The newer building has electronic capabilities in the classroom.

I enter the first class and give the students a Chinese “hello” (“nee-how”) —the one word I can say with ease. That seems to delight them. I then pronounce my name and, without prompting them, they all repeat it in unison. They even pronounce the *g* in Gagliano properly (*Go/lyano*). I then warn them that, though I live in Pittsburgh (and here I make a crude drawing of a USA map on the blackboard and place a chalk-star where I crudely place Pittsburgh, in a crudely drawn Pennsylvania rectangle) —I warn them that my English accent is a New York one (“*once a New Yorker. . .*”)— Brooklyn, precisely—where I was born—but I’ll do my best to speak clearly and slowly because, “*when I go on riffs, I tend to motor-mouth away and eliminate consonants altogether.*” This leads to a little detour discussion about the words “*riff,*” “*motor-mouth*” and “*consonants.*”

I place a chalk-star on the map, for Brooklyn. The chalk breaks. It is very soft chalk and always breaks. I never master the proper pressure to keep the chalk *from* breaking. The consistency of the chalk-breaking bit will begin to get laughs. Luckily, the class does not hear me mumble, “*shit.*”

Another constant laugh in the old room is the door that, on occasion, mysteriously opens, slooooooowly, and my double-take each time the door decides to open and the hinges squeak.

I tell the class that I admire their struggles with English and how well they do; that I, on the other hand, find Chinese very difficult and intimidating to deal with. I mention my nemesis, the Chinese word for paper napkin, *can jin zhi*—roughly pronounced TS(ah)N J(ee)N ZH(ur), with the first two words having a flat, high tone and the last word having a down and up tone, ending in a sound that for me resembles *choking-on-a-chicken bone and pleading for someone to give me the Heimlich maneuver*. It's a word that always has me go into frightening facial contortions that set the class laughing, and they try to help me pronounce it properly. Between laughs, I get them to pronounce the English word *napkin* over and over again. Later in the Paradise Cafe, the barista, Cindy, will also give up on me trying to pronounce the word and will delight, instead, in saying the word *napkin* in English. At first it will come out as *nap-a-kin* but, finally, for Cindy, the word settles into its normal two syllables.

I have been told that all the students have English names. This turns out to be so. I start with that. I ask each to stand and say their English names. They seem shy and find it difficult to project (indeed, they find it intimidating *to stand and be on*).

In unison, no problem; solo performance—awkward.

I sort out the pronunciation of each name, repeat it for the class, and get each student standing to repeat it and then get the class to repeat the name in unison. I then write the name down on my roll.

This all takes lots of time. The names intrigue me and I get each student to tell the class how he/she arrived at that name. Sometimes there are stories attached—often, the name simply sounds nice or is attached to an English person they have met and liked, or a celebrity they admire, or they feel it is an English word that describes *them*—how they feel about themselves.

One student's name is Nancy and I tell the class that Nancy was my mother's name, and is also the name of my niece who

works for the Olympics Committee, helping to set up Olympic Villages for the games. Niece Nancy, in fact, will visit Beijing while I'm at PKU. This prompts a discussion about the Olympic games, which will be held in Beijing in the summer of 2008.

Conversation has begun.

Here are some of the English names of the students: *Phoebe, Joyce, Frank, Jessie, Alice, Stella, Iris, Summer, Kevin, Tom, Jenny, Icey, Sony, Flora, Lucia, Vividly, Lisa, Amanda, Jules, Himily, Cici, Esther, Sunny, Amy, Cola, Young, Celine, English, Ocean, Selina, Raine (pronounced "Rainy"), Shark, Lock, Jolly, Echo, Rainbow, Swallowking, Tim, Shin, Webster, Laury, Samantha, Gabrielle, Deryck, Sophiser, Feeling, Jason, Lynn, Handy, Clark, Nick, Olly . . .*

The range of English-speaking proficiency in the class is a wide one. But there are common problems of articulation and clarity for all of the students, no matter the proficiency. *Articulation and clarity*, I realize immediately, will have to be my main focus in the classes, or the conversation and the communication will be babble.

Common problem: Ends of words are often dropped.

I note, when I use my international phone card for the first time, that the robotic telephone operator says: "*You have a new car with 100 minutes on it.*" Ms Phone Robot has dropped the *d* on the end of *card*, and the announcement seems to be about a new *automobile* with a hundred minutes on it! I use that example in class to show how the dropping of a final sound can change the meaning of a phrase.

Also, combinations of sounds are often difficult for the student to execute.

I devise my first tongue twister to deal with these issues.

1) "*Ends of words must all be said, said Ed, who read with dread the final consonants put there to break his head.*"

In unison, I get the class to hit all the ends of the words (the *z* sounds at the end of *ands* and *words*, the *t* at the end of the word *must*, and the *d* at the end of *said*).

The word “*Ed*” perplexes the class: I tell them that “*Ed*” is short for the name Edward, and that the word “*read*” is the past tense of the word “*read*” (same spelling), and that, in this case, “*Ed*” and “*read*” must rhyme with “*dread*”—and how important it was, as an exercise, to “*hit those d endings*”)

We define, “*dread*,” and kick *that* word around.

We deal with the word, “*consonants*,”—defining it, saying it, and take a long time to explore the colloquial phrase, “*break his head*.”

Conversation in English continues to happen. In addition, the class members, most of whom were strangers to each other, are getting to know *about* each other. I know I certainly am.

The W and V sounds in words are often hard for the students to negotiate. So—over time—I come up with my second and third tongue twisters:

2) “*Violent Willy Vividly Wishes His Windows Were Very Wide*.”

3) “*Very Wild are Veronica’s Wildflowers; Waving To The West, and Towards the Watery, Willowy, Woods*.”

The word, “*willowy*” generates some discussion.

Their Ls are often a problem. So I devise my fourth tongue twister—somewhat more elaborate and silly and moving back into rhyme and with a few plosives thrown in.

4) “*Largely likeable, lanky Lucy leaves her longings in the lobby of the Paradise Pavilion in the Park, and leads her limpid leotard-ed leopards to the liberating Ark*.”

“Lanky,” “longings,” “limpid,” “leopard-ed leopards,” and “Ark,” provoke discussion and build vocabulary.

But it’s the tongue twisting itself that seems to have the most value and that loosens up the students’ mouths. The students seem to appreciate and enjoy executing these in-unison tongue twister exercises (the sillier the better, and most fun when there are rhymes involved).

I will continue adding new silly tongue twisters throughout the semester and try to deal with most sounds and their combinations. Most of the tongue twisters are nonsense, of course; some become esoteric; but the exercises I believe, stay apt *as* exercises.

I decide to include in one of my tongue twisters some sound combinations—*“D”* and *“Th”*—that I find difficult to execute when the words are close together

6) *“I wonder if dear Wanda feels the vibes that Victor weaves, when watering verdant violets that dot the dangerous den of thieves.”*

When I try to demonstrate the final *“dangerous den of thieves”* phrase, they see me struggle with the switching of my tongue from behind the teeth for the *“d,”* to biting the tongue for the *“th”*, They also see me nail the phrase when I slow down and slowly—veeeeeeeery slooooooowly—go through the words.

“Vibes,” “Victor, “weaves” “watering verdant violets” are causes for discussion—for definition—for conversation.

By the time I leave PKU, I will have written 26 tongue twisters and (as bonuses) three additional raunchy ones (—those final three, I don’t dare share with the class).

(Look for the complete list—along with excerpts of student plays—in Part Five of this journal, including the raunchy

tongue-twister bonuses for those adults who can deal with smut.)

After the first class I formulate an overall statement-of-purpose for the course.

“To speak a language, any language is a wonderful thing. To speak a language, any language—well, is an even more wonderful thing. To articulate “what you mean” in any language—so that the person you are speaking to knows exactly what you are saying—is best of all.

Why?

Because then, the dialogue—the give and take of ideas—can be completely understood; and “understanding” each other is a beautiful thing. That is the best kind of communication between people: Knowing what you are truly trying to say; then articulating well what you mean—brings clarity to the dialogue.

“Articulation” and “Clarity” through “Dialogue” is what we will strive for in this class. That will require “Repetition” and the courage to slow down.”

I get the class to repeat every line after I say it. We define the words that are not understood. I tell the class that the *attempt to dialogue* is a theme of my play *BIG SUR*, and that I hope they will see the play when the Institute of World Theatre and Film produces it at PKU in May.

The students are impressed that they have a playwright teaching them English, but they have never heard of the Beijing Institute of World Theatre and Film.

I assure them they will.

THE PLAYWRITING STUDENTS HAND IN THEIR FIRST DRAFTS.

The assignment had been to write a scene between two people; one wants something—the other doesn't want him/her to have it. The *want* must be very pressured, and the *obstacle* must be *very* pressured as well (so pressured that the *obstacle* becomes a pressured *want*). No stage directions are to be used (“If a stage direction is necessary, get it in the dialogue”). The scene may be a fragment of a larger scene in progress.

To my surprise, Hattie hands in a draft of a *complete* short piece. The others turn in complete first scenes of larger, mapped-out pieces, to be developed. Edgar had not been able to make the first class. He shows up for this class, gets the assignment, and will have his draft in for the following class. This second class has one more carry-over student from the first class. She will have to drop the class because of scheduling conflicts (my course is elective). For *this* second class though, she turns in a promising scene. Michael and Rachel hand in first scenes and Sarah hands in an outline for a promising piece based on the *Orpheus and Eurydice* legend. Spencer will join the class later, finally handing in a piece about a six-year-old boy who creates a monster to help him navigate through a tense homecoming.

The student who will not return after this second class has built her first scene around a mother/daughter conflict, in which a mother (after seeing from a distance, the daughter with a young man the mother considers a drifter and inferior to her daughter) confronts her daughter and screams that the relationship with the young drifter will disgrace the family. It's an immediate, incendiary scene, well observed, honest and felt. The scene ends when the young man in question shows up at the door, setting off a new pressure that promises further confrontations. Mother/daughter fireworks, plus class conflict: Nice. I'm going to be sorry to lose *that* student.

Hattie's play has a charming premise: On the eve of the Chinese Lantern Festival, an elevator operator—a handsome

young man—takes on a final rider for the day—an attractive young woman who forgot to take important papers to work on at home, and has to get back up to her office to get the papers before the building closes down.

The young man, bored with his job, has a rich fantasy life and has had his eye on the woman for many months but has never had the courage to speak to her. Tonight he's desperately lonely and immediately asks the woman out to dinner. She's amazed, outraged, appalled and distracted—because, besides the office pressures, she's having boyfriend problems. The woman's character is sketchy. She certainly is an obstacle to the boy's wants in the scene, but she doesn't seem to have a pressured want of her own—in which the man, in the scene, will become an obstacle to *her* want. As a result, the play is *the Young Man's* play, about *his* pressured needs—not *their* play about *their* pressured needs. The woman (at this early stage of the play's development) is there to illuminate the man's character and problems.

But the man is already a wonderfully drawn character—flaky and quirky, charming and ingenuous—and vulnerable. His *center of pain* is so clear that you long for him to achieve *his* want—get that dinner date and ease his pain. The woman is annoyed, mostly, but doesn't seem to have a *center of pain* that needs to be alleviated in the scene, so Hattie just has the woman run out on this strange young man. The play peters out and this early first-draft stays a sketch—but it is on its way to becoming a full piece. Hattie already has a sweet, comic voice; she has a light touch, and the premise has the makings of a charming romantic piece.

Michael and Sarah give a cold reading that delights the class. I urge Hattie, as a next step, to concentrate on the woman's *center of pain*, by inventing *disturbances in the woman's Universe before* the play begins. Eventually Hattie will do just that, and she hones a piece that ultimately is simple, charming, gentle, inventive, funny, and ends by bringing the two strangers closer together, and who will have to spend the night in a stalled elevator, with only the lights from their cell

phones keeping their close faces illuminated—and as backdrop, the Lantern Festival lights, flickering below them in the city, outside the glassed elevator walls. The finished play will be a sweet compressed journey, from loneliness, to connection, to romance, in forty minutes.

Michael, in many ways, *is* the Young Man of Hattie's play; attractive, smart, often vaguely troubled—almost always makes an entrance in a room as if he has just come from some looming disaster or other, and is expecting the worst.

Michael participates in the Asian International Model United Nations 2007 Conference being held on the Peking University campus and tells me that he visited the US once when he was part of a Chinese student delegation to UN headquarters in New York City. He didn't have much spending money and was frugal and intimidated about the concept of tipping (there is no tipping in China). When he visited the New York City Metropolitan Museum of Art, and saw that the entrance fee was just a "*suggestion*," Michael innocently handed over a quarter (\$.25 cents).

I love that story. Michael's innocence and the ticket-taker's probable amazement and annoyance, must have been a delicious moment, as Michael bent one of those mini-badges, clipped it to his tie (the UN Model students always wear black suits and ties), and, sans guile, Michael moved on to the Egyptian mummy exhibit.

Rachel's developing play *The Arson*—which takes place in the present—is a complex piece about a young, very sick boy, Sago, who runs away from a scheduled operation to The Forbidden City in Beijing. His doctor and future stepfather, Milo, follows him to bring him back to the hospital and discovers that the boy plans to burn The Forbidden City down and to go up in flames with *her*—The Forbidden City—because "*she is perfect*," and he, Saga, is not.

As the play develops, other characters will confront Saga on his journey to death: The Phantom of the Chief Eunuch, the

Phantom of Lady Gem—both tormented souls from the Qing Dynasty—and Saga’s mother Hikaru who, in a startling moment, threatens to disown her dying son if he succeeds in burning down The Forbidden City.

Saga’s idealized view of The Forbidden City is erased and turns to despair, when he discovers and confronts the cruelty toward eunuchs and women that took place inside a hallowed time and in what he thought had been hallowed walls.

Rachel had first turned in a short but powerful historical scene about Richard The Third’s desire to murder the two Princes in London Tower. In that scene, Richard’s emissary attempts to convince (and bribe) the jailer into murdering the princes. The jailer refuses to do so. Rachel had taken the subject of this scene from a painting, but she lost interest in *that* developing piece and turned to the story of Saga, and his confrontation with bloody Chinese history that takes place in a setting of exquisite beauty.

I realize that Rachel has an invaluable playwright’s casting instinct about who works best in her play. One of the students reads the part of Saga before Edgar comes into the class. Once Edgar enters the class and Rachel hears him speak, she requests that Edgar read the role of Sago. She’s right. Edgar has Rachel’s voice and will read the part of Sago throughout all the play’s permutations in the class.

Edgar and Sarah also deal with the theme of death.

In “*Eurydice’s Escape*,” Sarah uses the Orpheus legend to deal with the theme. Her initial outline shows an Orpheus who follows Eurydice to the Underworld in order to bring her back and continue to humiliate and subjugate her.

Eurydice, in Sarah’s version, doesn’t *want* to return. The central pressure in the play will be to win over Pluto, the Lord of the Underworld, to either Orpheus or Eurydice’s side. Pluto’s wife, Persephone, will play a key part in the conflict. There is some humor in the drawing of the character of Pluto—a bit of

a Fool—and the possibility of some battle-of-the-sexes fireworks. And all taking place in hell! Apt.

Edgar's play, "*A Summer's Tale In Winter*," is the tale of a sister, Allesnada, ("*alles*" —German for "*all*"; "*nada*"—Spanish for "*nothing*"), and a brother, Tinko, who are on a journey in some mythical landscape, to find—what? They don't know at first. It seems to have something to do with the death of their parents, but they are not sure. When the dead father appears to them, he gives them a task that could bring the dead father and mother back to life, and they can all be a family once again. The play includes fireflies, phantoms, the sculpture of an Albatross, the flapping of birds' wings, and the search for "*the Coffin Bird*." The language is purposefully archaic and the scoring is filled with ellipsis. I tell Edgar the tone of the piece reminds me of the plays of *Maurice Maeterlinck*, especially the Belgian playwright's play, "*The Bluebird*." Edgar immediately Googles *Maeterlinck*.

I also tell him that "*A Summer Tale In Winter*" sets off a feeling in me of Debussy's opera, *Pelléas and Mélisand*. Edgar doesn't know the Debussy opera, but he knows Debussy: Edgar plays classical piano.

"*A Summer Tale In Winter*" is already a wonderful mood piece. I am not sure if Edgar will be able to develop some bruising (or even benign) confrontations between characters that will add dramatic tension to the piece. Later, Edgar *will* outline a conflict between Allesnada and Tinko that will show some promise for dramatic confrontation. As it stands, "*A Summer Tale In Winter*" is a (very Robert Wilson) theatre piece of mood, ritual, stillness, and Chinese mysticism.

Michael's play, *KIDNAPPING*, also deals with death—but in a contemporary, Film Noir way. Middle-aged Jack kidnaps 18-year-old Lisa because Jack believes that Lisa's father, Tom, has ruined his life, and he wants revenge and money from Tom. But Lisa also wants revenge *on her own father* for killing her mother and framing her boyfriend. Or so she says. The clever Lisa (a part the young Barbara Stanwyck would have played to

the hilt) convinces Jack to join her in exposing her father, to “bring him down.” The two-scene piece ends in gun violence and a death. The first scene has the kind of crackling dialogue and blatant exposition that the Film Noir genre calls for. The second scene (Lisa, Jack, Tom) is rendered in quick strokes—more of a sketch of events still to be fleshed out.

Or not. Michael may have run out of steam on this one.

Michael has begun a new piece, “*THE TRUTH*,” (also melodramatic) that may hold more promise than “*KIDNAPPING*.” Though the piece contains another kidnapping, the idea develops in a different way.

Samuel has kidnapped Robert’s daughter. Years before, Robert, a detective, was instrumental in having Samuel’s son put away for murder. The son claimed he was innocent and, in jail, committed suicide. Now, Samuel will hold Robert’s daughter hostage (she has food for four days), until Robert revisits all the witnesses and evidence and clues to find the real murderer and clear the name of his son.

In my play *BIG SUR*, Michael is cast as the big city policeman who has been demoted to a rural headquarters. In the big moment of his big scene, he steps into a spot and directly regales the audience with the injustice of his demotion. In Michael’s play, “*THE TRUTH*,” he uses a similar tried-and-true, “*direct-to-audience*” theatrical device. I’m delighted the *BIG SUR* experience has opened up some theatrical doors for Michael.

Michael likes melodrama and characters that are involved in a need to redress injustice through violence. In a way, he may be the most commercial writer in the class.

Spencer’s play, “*THE MONSTER*,” has a parable-like quality that has wonderful theatrical possibilities. A lonely six-year-old boy, who had been sent away from his home, because of what the playwright calls his “*autism*,” now rejoins his family, finds life with the family difficult and creates a creature who will finally

help the boy reconcile himself to his family—and his family to him. The creature is not benign and that’s interesting, but the piece, at the moment, is an outline in search of a play. But there *is* the sense of a Chinese Fairytale here that, with the addition of more dramatic events and perhaps with music and dance, might hold some enchantment for young and adult audiences.

What is encouraging about “*THE MONSTER*,” is the leap Spencer has taken from the first piece he handed in—a fragment that seemed to be influenced by Michael’s melodramatic subject matter, but without Michael’s penchant for that kind of material. There is something simple in ‘*THE MONSTER*’ that seems to be emerging from Spencer’s Chinese roots. Promising, indeed.

SO. . .

Teaching, rehearsing, observing, writing daily on my Mac laptop in my digs, connecting with the world via Email and China Daily, meeting each morning at the Paradise Café with Joe and students and new friends, eating at fine restaurants on campus, walking the paths through the many splendid wooded areas on and around the lovely lakes—these will make up the mix of my Peking University existence, for the three months I will exist there.

In addition, there are always the noontime street-fair activities and happenings to observe, that happen each noon near The Centennial Hall, where students mark off a little turf for themselves on a carnival-like midway, in which they demonstrate Kung fu, or play classic Chinese instruments, or show off their solo or choral-singing talents, or Break-Dancing skills; or they’ll hand out samples from Cosmetic or food Companies, or give away free tickets or flyers for free lectures or shows.

And then there’s the buying of my daily apple.

Each day I head down the 35 steep steps to the underground world of the Mini Mart, featuring a supermarket, pharmacy, eyeglass and eye exam section, clothes, household goods, a bakery and coffee shop, a book and CD/DVD shop and a store for Olympics 2008 paraphernalia. In the household goods section I buy a mattress pad to cushion the box spring on my bed.

And each day, at the produce section of the little supermarket in Mini-Mart, I buy the largest, crispest, juiciest, sweetest apple I've ever eaten. I'll often pick up a container of yoghurt (the students eat tons of it) and milk and black tea and crackers and a small jar of a delicious blackberry jam—and, of course, bottled water.

So I pretty much confine my life to PKU.

When I attended the 2005 Conference at PKU, where I delivered my Arthur Miller tribute, my wife and I did the tourist things: The Wall, Tiananmen Square, The Forbidden City—visited all the famous sights. This time, the Peking University walled-in city is a Chinese world that seems to contain all that I need. I will be alone in my digs for two months before Sandy joins me for my last month in Beijing.

On occasion, I will venture outside PKU with friends to try more new restaurants, or to walk a couple of miles through the teeming streets and boulevards to the French owned, well stacked Carrefour department store and supermarket (in a fairly new, quite extensive, underground mall) —a store that sells items you can't get at the PKU Mini Mart.

Still to come—continued anxieties about structuring my conversation course, helping the playwriting students to tweak their plays, acupuncture for a back that starts to spasm, a trip to Shanghai and, of course, the production of *BIG SUR*.

TO BE CONTINUED. . .

(La Vida E Es Sueno.

What had been sporadic, had now become commonplace)