

March 6, 2007:

Rehearsals begin in The Democracy Building.

The actors walk and bike to the first read-through. Sebastian and Sarah set up the chairs in a circle in the large room. Then they hand everyone a script, which each one is seeing for the first time. The Director Joseph Graves tells everyone to read the script cold.

Then begins a process I have seen over and over, over many decades—actors fumbling and stumbling through a script of mine in a first read-through, before the rehearsal process begins—a process that will break the play down, pull it apart, and then put it back together again in a live performance, for a live audience.

This time there are two major differences from my past experiences:

- 1) In this read-through, the actors do not (commit the sin-of-sins:) paraphrase.
- 2) In this read-through, the actors are English speaking English majors at Peking University in Beijing, China. . .

—except for Joseph Graves, who is a professional American Equity actor, director and writer, and who, besides acting the lead role of Jeremy Chester in my play, will be directing it.

Joe is also the Artistic Director of The Beijing Institute of World Theatre and Film.

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I am impressed with the reading because it is an intelligent reading. By that I mean that these actors simply seem to be looking to discover what each moment is about in the text; they are not looking for clues—yet—to an emotional life for their character. Nor are they superimposing on the character what they already think the character is all about. They seem

to be looking at the whole. The first read-through, in short, is about the text.

Of course, it may simply be that their struggle to stay with the English is keeping the actor's main focus on the text; or, since these actors are not part of a professional training program, the training may not—as it often does—get in the way of contacting a text.

Ultimately, of course, I will want from these actors an emotional life.

Joe Graves, who has worked with many of them before, assures me that the cast will achieve that; that in the understanding of their objectives, and by simply playing the actions and saying the words (and shifting with the pressure shifts in the score—as written), that the emotional lives will simply emerge through the words.

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These actors are not drama majors.

There are no Drama or Theatre departments in all of Chinese Higher Learning. Nor is there a curriculum in Dramatic Literature.

Nor are there creative writing courses.

Apparently, I'll be teaching playwriting at a Chinese University for the first time—ever.

These actors in my play are very intelligent students (nothing but the crème-de-la-crème for Peking U), studying English in the Department Of Foreign Languages; with talent, instinct and the desire (need?) to perform. Many have never seen a play. Still they turn out in droves when the casting call goes out.

It's part of Joseph Grave's charge to explore, develop and integrate dramatic programs throughout higher education in China—not for purposes of initiating a professional training curriculum, but, ultimately, to inject creativity into the academic goal of turning out a more complete educated Chinese student—to better compete on (Dare I say it? Why not? ) the world's stage.

This is the three-fold mission for the Beijing Institute of World Theatre and Film:

- 1) Producing theatre in Beijing and the surrounding areas, often mixing Eastern and Western theatre artists, and sometimes students with professionals.
- 2) Promoting, financing and encouraging artistic and cultural exchange between the Chinese theatre communities and those from other countries
- 3) Developing Theatre Departments in Mainland universities were none presently exist.

Peking University is often called (and I hear this a lot) “The Harvard of China.” Academically, certainly, the comparison holds; but, from the limited view of this newcomer to China, Peking U seems so much more than a major academic University: It seems to be a major force, at the very center of the country's Cultural, intellectual and political life.

Peking University's faculty, students, thought and research are looked to, to help shape China in most areas of the country's development. It follows, Joseph Graves assures me, that any play of mine produced at Peking University will resonate throughout China in some special way.

Joe and the Beijing Institute of World Drama and Film are already a national force, becoming a paradigm for a next step in the way Chinese Theatre develops on the (Dare I say it? Why the hell not!) world's stage.

As if to underline that fact, a few days after arriving on campus I am contacted for an interview by the Classical/Performance Editor of the Beijing publication of Britain's "Time Out" Magazine.

My play is called, BIG SUR. Here's some BIG SUR background. And a blurb. I present it in some detail because the work on BIG SUR will be a major part of this Beijing journal.

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*BIG SUR was originally commissioned by NBC for its Experiment In Television Series and was presented on the NBC Network. The television program included James Coco as The Policeman, Gene Troobnick as Jeremy Chester, Danny Sullivan as The Indian, Susan Tyrell as The Girl, and Billy Dee Williams as The Black Graduate, The television show was produced and directed by Peter Goldfarb. The first stage production of BIG SUR (published by Dramatists Play Service) featured Richard Simmons as Big Arnie.*

*It is 1968 and forty-Five year old church organist Jeremy Chester, wins a car in the church raffle ("the first thing I ever won in my life"), and decides to take to the road and head west ". . .straight across this great country I've never seen. . . .Have wanted to talk to people— not past them . . . have wanted to start a—and this is one of my favorite words—'dialogue.' . . . and besides that, I've had this urge to get to see Big Sur . . ."*

*Jeremy Chester's journey to Big Sur becomes a tragic-comic American odyssey as he picks up nine passengers, including: A hold-up person who steals Jeremy's car; a frustrated big city policeman, now relegated to the sticks; an aging, now ineffective, hippie on her way to an anti-war rally; a flamboyant rock star who owns the world; an African-American law student (who really wants to act), and is on his way to a new job as a token "black" in a law firm; an eccentric old mother, being taken to "an old lady's home" by her son; a*

*priest, who listens to Jeremy's confession and who turns out to be deaf; —and, as his constant companion on the trip, a Native American who comes on as a cigar-store, Tonto-like, stereotype, but who ends as a tragic, hip American, looking for his roots "in a dunghill."*

*Using a guitar-strumming balladeer to frame the journey—and with Gagliano's noted quirky humor and compassion for all his characters—in BIG SUR we come to understand that the incongruities and anachronisms of contemporary life are more than merely annoying or depressing—they are lethal.*

*Yet the journey goes on, heading for Big Sur and the redeeming state of naturalness, which may already have escaped us forever.*

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My fear had been that BIG SUR, originally written for television during the 1960s and Viet Nam War era, and later turned into a stage piece, would have little meaning for contemporary Chinese audiences; or that my quirky humor would fly pass them. But the circle of actors and crew, in the large room in the Democracy Building, laughed whenever a joke or schitck landed. I was relieved. If there are no laughs in BIG SUR, the serious intent won't land either.

BIG SUR resonates for me now (and why I want to revive it) because of the Iraq war, which seems to be tearing the United States apart, the way the Vietnam War did.

Not that BIG SUR is about the Vietnam War (that war is not even mentioned in the piece); but the dislocation of the American psyche and the deeper wounds to the American soul certainly were outgrowths of that terrible period when BIG SUR was written.

Would the Iraqi-war resonances resonate for a Chinese audience? Would it resonate for the student actors, many of whom were not yet born during a major upheaval in their own

country — the Cultural Revolution? Would the vertigo and current anxieties and excitements the one billion, three hundred million Chinese are going through, as they keep pulling from the wings, on to the (Dare I say it? Of course I'll say it) world's center stage, relate, in some way, to the dizzying contradictions that the 1960s pressured the people of the United States to face?

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The students' English articulation of the language of my text will have to be worked on, but Joe is convinced that will improve. He's done many plays with English speaking students (and professionals) at Peking U and in Beijing and China, over the past five years, and the plays have all been successful—and well attended (well, you figure: If even a fraction of the millions turn out, you've got full houses).

### SEEDS OF IT ALL

In the summer of 2005, I was invited by Joseph Graves and the Beijing Institute for World Theatre And Film, to attend a Conference on American Theatre. There I read my tribute to Arthur Miller, who had died on February 8, that same year. The Conference, in fact, took place in that same Democracy building where my BIG SUR was now having a read-through.

During that same Conference, in August, 2005, there were a few interludes (of about an hour each) from the panel discussions where English-speaking students from the Institute of Business presented scenes from American plays.

Dr. Sun Jianqiu, Professor of English in the University of International Business and Economics, used drama to teach her Business students English. She collected scenes from contemporary American plays (many of them excellent scenes, but unknown to me), published them in Chinese/English editions, rehearsed the students in her classroom and, at the

2005 American Theatre Conference that August, presented the scenes in the Conference Room of the Democracy Building.

I knew nothing of this background; I just witnessed the result and I was enchanted. The pieces were simply, imaginatively, staged for a classroom and the young actors were quite-well skilled with their English, absolutely knew what they were saying, moved well, got behind the pressured moments in each scene, and put it all “out there.”

I was amazed when I discovered that the actors were not part of a training program; that they were, in fact, part of a Business Institute and that drama was just another way to apply English.

Now, a year and a half later, I am on sabbatical from West Virginia University, and my play BIG SUR is about to begin rehearsals. I am also going to teach a semester of playwriting in Peking U’s English Dept, in the School of Foreign Languages. In addition, I am asked to conduct some sections of an English Conversation course to adults, seeking to improve their English.

This journal will cover the making of the BIG SUR production; the teaching of playwriting to English speaking Chinese students; and will include my conducting English conversations classes with large groups of adult Chinese, who are part of the enormous working engine that is China business, and who are at various levels of English speaking expertise.

This journal will also explore how I came to fall in love with these remarkable people.

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I first met Joe Graves at West Virginia University four years ago. I was directing an all-Equity production of my play, FATHER UXBRIDGE WANTS TO MARRY. Joe was a guest director on the first Social Justice project for the incoming University

freshman students that the Division of Theatre was producing to dramatize date rape, alcohol, drug abuse and other dangers (problems that don't seem to exist on the campus of Peking U).

The Social-justice piece, created by the students, was very hard-hitting, well acted and very well directed by Joe. I told him so. He saw my production of FATHER UXBRIDGE WANTS TO MARRY and liked the play and production. He told me so. We hit it off; talked about working together in the future.

In June of 2005 I was asked to write a tribute to Arthur Miller and present it at the Last Frontier Theatre Conference, held yearly at Valdez, Alaska. That year, as part of their reading series, my revised play, THE COMMEDIA WORLD OF LAFCADIO B was presented as well.

I sent a copy of the Miller Tribute to Joe Graves in China. He asked if I would attend a Conference of American Theatre that was being held at Peking University in Beijing and would I read the Miller tribute to the Conference. I said yes. During that Beijing week, Joe asked me if I'd consider returning in the Spring of 2007 to have a play performed and to teach a playwriting course. I agreed.

Between that summer of 2005 and my arrival in Beijing on 15 February 2007 I saw Joe perform in a number of roles in the United states: In his own one-man tour-de-force play, REVEL'S WORLD OF SHAKESPEARE (based on a true eccentric teacher of Shakespeare, who taught Joe when he was a student in England); saw Joe play the role of Lenny in an excellent production of Steinbeck's OF MICE AND MEN at the Arkansas Rep; and saw his world-premiere production in the San Francisco area of a new opera (Joe directed), based on the life of Jack London.

Here follows the biography of Joseph Graves. I offer it in detail because I want to emphasize the expertise of an artist who will play an important part in this journal.



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*Joseph Graves; spent his professional life as a director, writer and actor for both theatre and film in Great Britain and America, directing in London's West End and at The Royal Court Theatre, and in many of Great Britain's regional theatres.*

*In America he has directed at such places as The Mark Taper Forum, The La Jolla Playhouse, and many other regional theatres and Shakespeare Festivals. in China Joseph has directed at such places as The People's Art Theatre among many others, in such productions as OUR TOWN, THE TEMPEST, A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, and the China premiere of FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, to name only a few.*

*Since 2000 Joseph has directed five World Premiere pieces: WUORNOS, an Opera, based on the life of female serial killer Aileen Wuornos and presented in San Francisco; REVOCO, a musical drama which is based on the violently anti-Semitic writings and actions of Martin Luther, and was performed at The Texas Shakespeare Festival; WORD CIRCUS, a play in poems, performed with internationally acclaimed poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, performed in Moscow, Russia; and ROUGE ET NOIR, an historical drama and environmental theatre piece in which the audience followed the actors for a two mile journey along the infamous Trail Of Tears in America.*

*Most recently, in November 2006, he directed the World premier of the Opera EVERYMAN JACK, by Grammy Award winning composer Libby Larsen. The opera is based on the life of Jack London, and John London's autobiographical, "John Barely Corn", and was presented in London's hometown area, through the Sonoma City Opera Company.*

*As an actor Joseph has appeared in guest-staring role in dozens of television shows and in over one hundred stage plays, performing such roles as Hamlet, Henry V, King Lear, Richard III, Tartuffe and Uncle Vanya, among a host of others, both classical and contemporary.*

*Joseph's screenplays include SWEETWATER and HANNAH AND JACK for Academy Award winner, Sir John Mills; and his plays include the above mentioned REVOCO, WORD CIRCUS, and ROUGE ET NOIR, along with BUNYAN, MALTVÉR and others. These have been given productions at venues in the US, Great Britain and Russia.*

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WEDNESDAY: MARCH 14, 2007

(HEADS UP)

Yesterday, Qing took Joe Graves and me for a Chinese haircut in a head massage and hair styling salon outside the wall of Peking University.

Very young, hip, Chinese Hair Cutters and Shampoos and Head Massagers, all with thick black hair and stylish cuts, are waiting to adore your head and hair. We opt for the works; head massage and haircut.

You first put on a waterproof outer jacket. Then you sit straight up as she applies the shampoo. While she's sudsing up your hair into a thick froth, she's doing things with her fingers; kneading, rubbing and SNAPPING THE TOP OF YOUR SKULL. I swear, there is a snapping/crackling, Rice Crispies thing going on; but it is all, somehow, sensuous and (Dare I say it? Of course I'll say it) erotic. And you wonder if (wishful thinking) an erection will result and embarrass you. ("BAMBOO RISING"—a new Kung Fu feature).

Then you are taken into another room where you get on your back on a kind of padded, stationary gurney, with your head hanging over the back into a sink. Rinse, then out to the Barber, who is male, small, slight and with spiked, thick black hair.

(Aside: Will I never see a balding Chinese man in Beijing? And why did the great hair stylist in the sky, observing us with her

Cyclop's eye pressed against the blessed ozone hole, bless the Chinese with so much black hair? Did she do that to taunt this thin-haired "FD" (Foreign Devil) in order to mock him further? Is it not enough of a mock to out-economic my breed? Must she mock us further, surrounding us with full-black-haired, stylish people, as well?)

Generally, in the states, I get a quick buzz cut that takes about 10 minutes--tops. This Tonsorial Tiger took half an hour to complete—maybe forty-five minutes.

First he blow dries the hair, cuts it dry. He uses electric clippers and comb and scissors and carefully contours the sides and back and keeps looking at my head in the mirror — like an artist; KNOWING THAT IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS — and he shapes and reshapes. Fascinating — and upsetting.

Upsetting, because, while he works I have to look at my image in the mirror—for a half hour or more!—forced to see reality—the turkey waddle under the chin—the face that is now all nose. (My God! I'm beginning to look like my Grandmother!) And closing my eyes is no good. I must face that face, if I am any kind of a man. Oh woe is me!

The beautiful Shanghai Princess, Qing, is luxuriating in her head treatment a few chairs down from mine — though she is not stunned by the treatment; this is how one's head is worshipped all over China. She was stunned at the quick cuts in the States, from whence she had just returned, interviewing for various graduate MFA Directing programs at leading universities.

Qing is a talented actress, director and Joseph Graves' Associate at the Beijing Institute of World Theatre and Film.

Qing has very long (you guessed it) bible-black shiney hair and bangs (and a smooth skin, and exquisite skin color that would make Venus herself die with envy). While her head is getting the full treatment, Qing is constantly relating to me, two stools away, in English, what the Young Master Of The Clippers

is asking her in Chinese: “Is this man with his grandmother’s face, satisfied and happy with my artistry?”

And I am overcome with emotion. Screw the waddle. Nobody in that magical tonsorial temple gives a crap about that waddle on my grandmother’s face—so why should I?

When the ceremony is over, Joe looks years younger, and I am once again nineteen. And I vow to become entrepreneurial for the first time in my life and approach some venture capitalists to back a “Pamper Your Head China Cut” franchise back in the United States.

We pay the 25 Yuan (a little over three dollars), and leave.

### THE BEGINNING

16 February 2007. My Beijing Odyssey begins.

Pittsburgh flight on United to Chicago. Thirteen Hour flight to Beijing. I’m anxious about being cramped upright in a straight-jacket seat for so long because of how that affects my ankles.

Miracle. The plane is half full. I pull up the arm rests and stretch out across a whole row of four center seats and I’m able to sleep on my side (for the first time in my flying life), with my legs and feet up. And I do not have to pay the billion dollars for Business-Class comfort to do so.

No elephant hoofs after this trip, I’ll wager!

The United Airlines food on the other hand. . .well, I can understand *tasteless* food; but when the food does have a taste that I don’t recognize, I reach, instead, for the breakfast bars in my carry-on to survive the flight.

The plane is half full because it is the first day of the Chinese New Year (“The Year Of The Pig”) and those multitudes of U.S. Chinese returning home to visit their families have already

arrived in China days before to enjoy the important first day with their loved ones.

The food may be tasteless but the frequent-flyer flight is excellent. Easy landing in Beijing. Customs check, a breeze. I suppose that the holiday traffic has thinned out the usual crowds.

Joe Graves at the Beijing airport to greet me. With Sebastian—Nèe Li shi.

I am to discover that many Chinese give themselves English names. Li Shi has chosen the name Sebastian because he is a lover of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Sebastian will be cast as the native American, Nobel Savage, in my play BIG SUR. Indeed, Sebastian resembles and, in another life may well have been, the grand-grand-grand-son of the mighty warrior Geronimo.

Sebastian is also a computer maven who helps me set up my Apple laptop in my digs.

My digs are in a four-story Guest House on the campus.

Large bedroom with two beds; a smaller, though quite roomy, sitting room with desk and little refrigerator; full bathroom; and all off a hallway, leading in from the second floor landing. Three very-large closets, sun streaming in from large windows that look out on the back of a large building and, down below, behind a long, rusty fence, piles of . . . stuff

—about a hundred bicycles, parked under a rusting tin roof; 25 or so discarded, humongus air conditioners and fans; and other closet-sized metal containers. . .stuff—

Directly below, separating the back of the Guest House from the rusty fence, is a wide alleyway, wide enough for cars and people to move through.

The rooms in the digs are wired to the Peking University internet.

The New Year holiday week has rendered so much of Beijing a ghost town— but a noisy one. The holiday week is noted for the continuing explosion of fireworks—BIG, LOUD, WAR-ZONE sounding explosions, mostly detonated at night—not only set off to light up the sky, but set off at ground level, too. You might turn a corner and confront a group of young people—those who, for one reason or another, have stayed in town—setting off belts of fireworks, or who might interrupt your dinner at "The Peking Duck" restaurant by creating a mini crimson battlefield of explosives and smoke outside the restaurant's window.

And the Peking U campus is also deserted. Just about everyone is gone. Students, faculty. Restaurants and coffee houses are also closed (except for the main restaurant in the campus hotel).

A blessing. I can get over jet lag. Settle in. Before all hell breaks loose. And Joe and I can start talking. Before all hell breaks loose. But where to relax and talk? Surely a Starbuck's, outside the Campus walls, will be open. One of them is. Larger than any Starbuck's in my neighborhood at home. Same (in my opinion) burnt coffee. And—surprise—same US prices.

Joe is a coffee drinker and a smoker and a great talker.

"I assume," I say to Joe, "that this is unreal; that all hell will break loose soon."

"You can count on it, " He says.

And it does.

TO BE CONTINUED. . .

