

PART SEVEN

IN WHICH I FIND MY GROOVE IN THE ENGLISH CONVERSATION CLASS FOR ADULT EDUCATION CHINESE STUDENTS—

IN WHICH I LECTURE ON THE TURNING POINT FOR AMERICAN DRAMA IN THE 1960s, AND I HAVE AN EPIPHANY—

IN WHICH SHANGHAI FISH INTRODUCES ME TO LU XIN AND HIS “CALL TO ARMS” —

AND IN WHICH THE PLAY GOES ON—

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As usual, I listen to BIG SUR from the rear of the theatre.

It's true. I do tend to *listen* rather than *look* at my plays when they're produced before a live audience.

And I try to *listen* from an empty rear row of seats, or behind that last row in the standing room section (if there *is* a standing room section), or from the lobby, carefully opening up the doors a crack into the theatre and, ear-to-crack, *listening* to parts of scenes and gauging the performance on the stage that evening through what I hear from the line readings only.

If the words are clear and the proper pressures on the character are being rendered through the voice and diction of the actor, that's when I know the story for that moment is being told, and I look up at the stage and, sure enough, actors' gestures and actions are usually in sync with their words. When the words are being put out there with *little* pressure behind them, I know—*without* looking up—and by just listening—that there's a disconnect between gesture, movement and intention. If, on those occasions, I *do* test my reaction and look up, I'm always right, the

moment is *not* working—the moment is dying for me. That is to say, the *pressures in the text* are not being contacted and *put out there*.

I have been known, at the start of a performance, to stand in standing room section (if there *is* one) and listen to the first speech and *know* that the performance *is being phoned in* and I decide to hang up. I turn on my heels and walk out of the theatre.

I am really a menace during a live performance of one of my plays. I tend to mouth the lines as the actors are saying them. Sometimes my mouthing turns vocal as I supply—out loud—the pressure and articulation missing from the actor's line readings. When what I'm doing is pointed out to me (I'm seldom aware of it), that's when I know it's time for me to leave and get out of everyone's way.

Rehearsals are another matter. I love rehearsals. I can watch anything at rehearsals, when everybody is trying to find out what the hell the piece is all about (including me), and everything—including language—*especially* language—is being deciphered; I am not thin-skinned then, and I don't believe I vocally mouth my lines.

But put the play together in a production—put me out there watching it with a live audience—and . . .

So, as per usual, I will mostly *listen* to *BIG SUR* when the play is produced in the Administration Building on the campus of Peking University—but I will *listen* more out of habit than out of anxious necessity. For the truth is, I am not overly anxious or stressed out about *this* BIG SUR production. For two reasons: 1) There will be an op-trans (translation) of the text on stage for the Chinese audience to follow in Chinese, which means that even if the actors aren't telling the story of the moment, the audience can contact the text itself; and

2) Joe Graves is in charge.

JOE GRAVES, ACTOR.

In 1969, in the NBC studios in Brooklyn, New York, during a lull in the shooting of *BIG SUR* (which I had written specifically for the television medium under commission from the Network), the late James Coco and I

had an illuminating talk, in which I learned something very important about casting my work.

Jimmy was playing the Policeman. I had originally wanted him to play the lead, Jeremy Chester. To my surprise Jimmy preferred playing the role of the cop; he felt he was more right for *that* role. Jimmy had that natural ability to go over the top, which the part required, but to keep it light and funny and somehow elegant and, therefore, less abrasive and more poignant. He was riveting *and* funny *and* sad *and* set the tone for all of Jeremy Chester's subsequent quirky pickups. He also said *all* the words as *written* and naturally eased into the rhythms of the language.

During one coffee break, I asked Jimmy how he so easily hooked into the role of the cop—the *sound* of the cop, the *rhythm* of the cop's language—and combined the absurd humor with the pathos and frantic energy that *I had intended when I created the role*.

Jimmy said something like, "*I don't know really, but I just know I heard your voice in my head when I read the script. It's like with Terrence's plays (McNally) –or Israel's (Horowitz), same thing at work. I hear the "quirk" and I'm at home with it. Those same quirks in the character's voice, I guess, are part of my quirks, my voice. Your cop's voice is my voice"*

Whatever that special Gagliano thing is—that "*quirk*"—it's either in the actor or not. Certainly many, possibly most, good actors, could get what *I intend* when I first write a role, but I have often been disappointed because—and this was the only way I could phrase it—*they weren't Gagliano actors*, or, in Jimmy Coco's words, *didn't have "the quirk"; my voice was not part of their DNA*.

Joseph Graves has it.

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One day, at the Paradise Café, Joe says, "You know Frank, Jeremy's confessional scene is really very moving."

We're a couple of weeks into rehearsal and Joe has been so busy directing *BIG SUR* and demonstrating to the actors how to render *their*

JEREMY

(Continued)

I'm glad you're awake because I'd like you to—well, in point of fact, I stopped at your parish—actually—to go to confession. And when I was asked to take you to the bishop's parish—well, I thought—well, will you? I know it's unorthodox but—will you hear my confession? Here? Now?

(Priest clears his throat)

Good.

*(Jeremy leaves the car
and moves into the Limbo Space.*

MUSIC: Any Bach organ piece.

Jeremy kneels)

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned, it's been. . .I can't remember how long it's been since my last confession. —Come to think of it, how long have I been out on the road? You see, I'm headed for. . .Big Sur. . . —Would you believe it, for a second there, I almost drew a blank. Anyway, I'm afraid this will be a strange confession because—well—I really have nothing to confess; and yet. . . —You see, I've wanted to open up— meet and understand people on this trip. But I haven't been able to touch them—and they couldn't care less about me. I know that's not a sin and yet— . . .ah! —Is this it? Somewhere, Father, deep down. . . yes . . . I've begun to despair. And isn't to despair to despair of God? But why should I despair? All that's failed to happen is that the dialogue hasn't happened, but then, it never has for me. I just don't understand. I—

(Beat, Discovery)

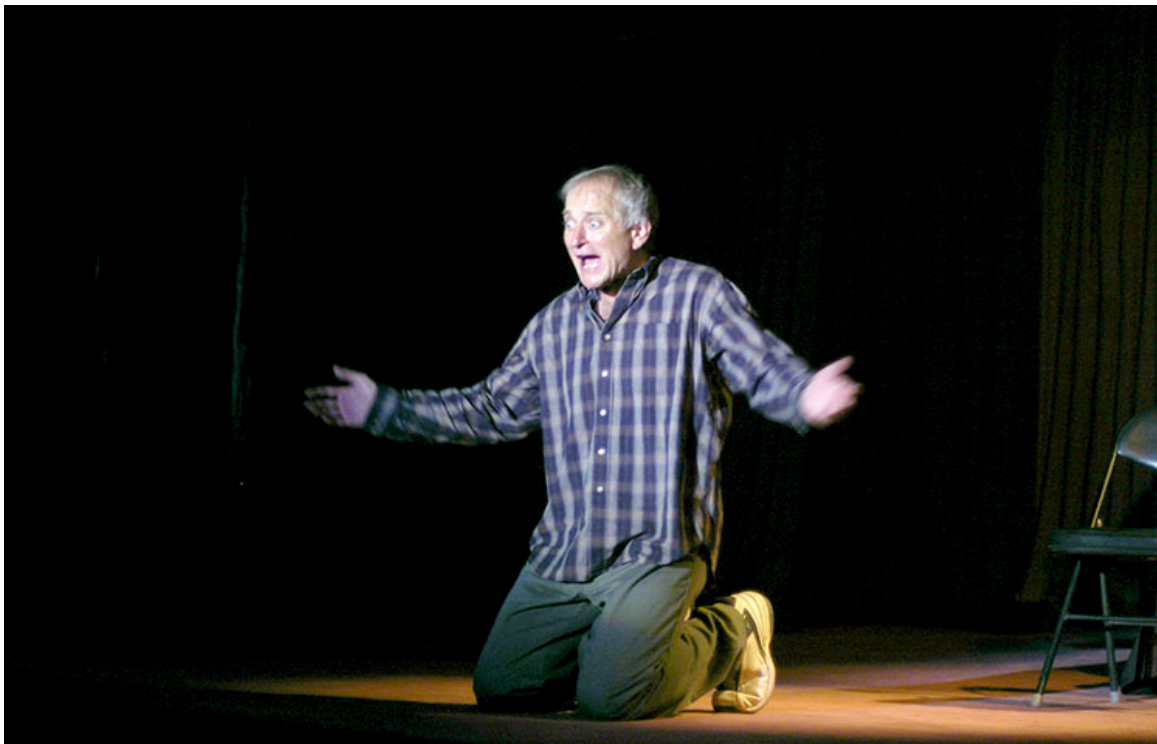
That's not true. I understand something. That throughout this entire, absurd trip, they've all been in—what . . .a kind of pain. And I couldn't do anything about it. But if they're in pain, then I'm in pain . . . and I can't do anything about that and— . . .But at least I can talk about it—to you, Father. And you—even though it's not clear how I've sinned—can forgive me.

*(Priest makes sounds,
his fingers frantically gesture.
Limbo space light--OUT)*

What's the matter, Father? What are you doing? And why haven't you said a word? You're not getting sick?

Nerd the character and make Jeremy's quest a *vital* one, something I had always intended. Also, Joe has the *Gagliano quirkiness* in his bones. The humor—both physical and verbal—is always contacted by Joe and *put out there*—and the humor, often slapstick, is part of the *BIG SUR* DNA.

In short, if I find nothing else on this Beijing/*BIG SUR* adventure, I am finding another Gagliano actor: Joe Graves.



BIG SUR, Confessional Scene: Joseph Graves as Jeremy Chester

I also find a structure for the Adult Education English conversation classes that works for me and seems to work for the Chinese Adult students.

I start each class by making an event out of the saying of their English names, joke the students out of their natural timidity and shyness, and encourage each to stand and proudly tell the world (of the class) his/her English name. The student repeats it; then the class says it in unison. At that starting point I will often get the student to speak about his/her job,

family, everyday aspects of their lives. In one class a student announces that she teaches kindergarten classes at a certain school. Another student, delighted, stands and says *she* also teaches kindergarten *at a nearby school*. As they communicate in English I correct and clarify the problem words and have the class repeat the words in unison. The jobs range from secretarial work to administrative positions in major Chinese corporations to work with military personnel. One woman announces she owns a small start-up company “*Peking View Estate*” that finds apartments for short or long-term rentals, and, during the class’s ten-minute break, many of the students ask her for her business card. Questions are always asked. Often it’s a struggle for the adult students to continue communicating in English, but they become more and more game and their English improves as their confidence grows.

I always tell them how much I admire their courage and persistence in working on their English conversational skills. I contrast that with my pitiful attempt to speak a few Chinese words. I will always bring in a Chinese word or phrase and ask the class to correct my pronunciation: Lots of loosening up humorous moments during those exchanges.

I then move to my tongue twisters. I always introduce a new one and we say them in unison. As the twisters become more and more elaborate we need to define more words in the twisters and the class seems to understand and enjoy the silliness. I move about the room and I learn how to listen to individual voices through the unison exercise, and when I hear someone having a pronunciation problem, I stop and deal with the word.

Here are a few of the recent tongue twisters the class particularly likes to get its tongues, lips, and vocabulary building, around:

- *I wonder if dear Wanda feels the vibes that Victor weaves, when watering verdant violets that dot the dangerous den of thieves.*
- *See sunny, silly Sara sensing Celia’s sinuous, sensuous Siren songs; and showing off her chiffonier of slinky, snappy, slickly slit, Sarongs.*
- *The Titanic tinted tots had tied their toes behind their ears, and drowned their sorrows every night by drinking Chinese beers.*

- *Barry brought the things he bought and biked them to the ballroom for the big band bash; then brightened as he bunkoed all the big boys, and broke the bank of all its crass Casino cash.*
- *Enough of eating everything in easy English eateries, where Elephants all egress to the Exit in the east; and aging, ailing, Alligators frolic in the foam of every frightful fish-fry feast.*

After the tongue twisters, I turn to the textbook.

All the adult students in their English Grammar, Writing, Reading and Conversation classes use the textbook. Sections on popular culture, dating habits of young people, friendship and shopping and money matters are rendered in a breezy, contemporary, often slangy English. There are dialogue snippets that are simple and effective. I cast the students to speak the dialogue and we deal with the troublesome words and concepts.

There are also terms that are defined; the word “*genre*” is one of them. A number of students mention that they liked the film *TITANIC* and we discuss that film’s *genre*. To some, *TITANIC* is in the romance *genre*; to others it is *adventure genre*, others like it because it is in the *disaster genre*. This sets off a lively discussion about the varieties of genres and how they can be mixed—an idea the class is facing for the first time. At one point I mention the *TITANIC* screenplay. Everyone is perplexed; they don’t know what a screenplay is. Fortunately, Joe Graves has written many screenplays, so I’m able to bring in some pages from one of his screenplays, and we use them for one of our dialogue exercises.

One of the sections in the textbook is entitled, *Every Jack has his Jill*. Nowhere in that chapter is the famous Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme mentioned. I Google *Jack and Jill* to be sure I’ve remembered the words correctly and I do:

*JACK AND JILL WENT UP THE HILL
TO FETCH A PAIL OF WATER.
JACK FELL DOWN AND BROKE HIS CROWN,
AND JILL CAME TUMBLING AFTER.*

I also discover a second verse:

UP GETS JACK AND HOME DID TROT,
AS FAST AS HE COULD CAPER.
HE WENT TO BED AND BOUND HIS HEAD,
WITH VINEGAR AND BROWN PAPER.

I discover, too, that *that* nursery rhyme has many possible interesting origins; from 17th Century King Charles, who reduced the volume of “Jack” liquor below a half pint to effectively increase taxes—to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, who lost their *crowns*—to the mention in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (“Jack shall have Jill”) — to many references to *Jack and Jill* in contemporary Pop music.

I also discover a grizzly aside to the Louis XVI/Marie Antoinette *Jack and Jill* reference. The general belief that the holding up of a severed guillotined head was not only to play for the crowds’ cheers but because the head still had enough residual life to recognize it’s own severed body. (“*See what you’re going to be missing from now on. Nyaa, Nyaa!*”)

Anyway, a lively discussion follows those *Jack and Jill* findings (sans the grizzly stuff).

Also, at the beginning of each class, I often use for discussion columns from the English language *China Daily* newspaper that explore social problems in China’s increasingly complex society. The columns are very well written. One column exposes obstacles in the traditional week long New Year’s holiday break, when virtually the entire population stops work and visits family, often in far off areas of China. The column claims that there is evidence that that is often enough time for cracks in the family structure to develop, or for holiday fatigue to set in. In unison, we read the column and we discuss the content. Some of these adult students agree with the column’s point of view and say that they would be happy to curtail the visit, and *suggest* that potential family hassles seem ready to erupt by week’s end. One student, on the other hand, (and many agree with her) says that a one-week holiday break is not *enough* time to decompress, that she works so hard at her job that she needs an additional week and would like *more* time with family.

One section of the textbook deals with popular music and contains a dialogue about Elton John’s *Can You Feel The Love Tonight*. I don’t know the song (my knowledge of pop music stops at Sinatra’s *One For My Baby*

and One More For The Road). I ask for someone to hum the Elton John song for me so that I can get a better understanding of what the dialogue is about. A student volunteers, demonstrates—a breakthrough in class-courage. I ask about other favorite songs and how the songs speak to them. One woman mentions another song, *I Want To Fly*. The lyric deals with a woman wanting to soar up to her dreams. The song's singer is well known and loved, Fiona Feng. (Later, among my Apple laptop iTunes, I spot the song on "shared files" and listen. Nice. Ms Feng is good.) This student loves the song *I Want To Fly* because she, too, wants "her soul to fly." Another student likes *Eyes On Me*, sung by another Chinese favorite *Fay Weng*. Still another student likes Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*.

Another student delights in sharing with the class how warmly she remembers the Alphabet Song from her English classes in elementary school. I am amazed to discover that it is the same Alphabet song I learned as a child. The student recalls the song fondly because she remembers the kindness of her elementary school teacher who taught her the song. She sings the song. Simply. Very moving.

I close some classes by having round robin readings from my children's play *The Total Immersion Of Madeleine Favorini*. More amazement! How simply and accurately the students' render the meaning of the speeches!

My favorite classes are the ones I close by round robin readings from the Chinese classic *Call To Arms*, by Lu Xun.

Yu Shuyian—English name, Fish, introduces me to the writings of Lu Xun.

SHANGHAI HIATUS AND FISH

Sandy and I take a hiatus from Beijing and fly to Shanghai. Qing, Actress/Director, Associate Director of the Beijing Institute Of World Theatre and film, and Joe Graves' wife, is from Shanghai and makes all the arrangements. Her former English professor Tan Zheng, from Fudan University, recommends a Fudan graduate student to be our guide, Yu Shuyian (English name, *Fish*—that's what her name means in Chinese). Fish meets us at the Shanghai airport. She is small, attractive, charming and speaks excellent English. We stay at the Broadway Hotel overlooking the river and the Bund, the financial district of Shanghai. From our hotel room window we see the meandering river and the mind-boggling

skyscrapers. We also see the landmark *ORIENTAL PEARL*, an enormous tower, resting on a tripod of elevators that rise up many floors in seconds and deposit you in a circular observation room that, from the outside, resembles a richly ornamented pearl-shaped jewel and from which, inside, you observe the 80 story skyscrapers for as far as the eye can see, including the even higher skyscrapers being constructed.

Fish accompanies us to the *ORIENTAL PEARL* and to the famous Shanghai Bronze museum and to Fudan University where she's a student—and to Shanghai's *Performing Arts Center*.

At the Performing Arts Center we are met by Li Ying Ning, teacher of drama and well-known playwright, who writes under the name Bei Ying. Bei Ying is a soft-spoken mature woman who seems unsure of her English but who, in fact, speaks English quite well. Qing has arranged for Bei Ying to introduce us to theatre artists in Shanghai; Bei Ying seems to know everyone in the Shanghai theatre scene. Like so many professional Chinese I meet, Bei Ying has visited the United States many times and plans to visit again, soon.

The Shanghai Performing Arts Center building is very impressive. In it, there are a large state of the art theatre, administrative offices, studios and —(and this is most impressive)—a large, well-equipped gym for the professional actors. I am not clear if the theatre serves as a producing company with a substantial Repertoire, or as more of an outlet for visiting international companies. Both, I suspect. A production of a Marguerite Dumas play is playing that night. We can't get to see it.

The Shanghai Theatre Academy—our next stop—is one of the three mainland professional theatre training schools in China. The others are in Beijing and Hong Kong. Bei Ying has set up a meeting with acting and directing faculty at the Academy, as well as a dean and editor of the international "Theatre Arts" Quarterly. They all speak English and, after a relaxed meeting, Sandy and I are shown around the grounds of the Academy, with its many buildings and dorms, and are shown the theatres and classrooms and shops and a visual/sound/electronics lab that, among other projects, is creating some stunning visual effects for the Shanghai International Exhibition, that will open on the heels of the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

For that brief visit I tend to bond with an excellent acting professor and stage director Gu Yi. He is in rehearsal for *MACBETH*, which he's chosen because, "*foul is fair/fair is foul*' describes our world today," he says. "*It's not only the outer world pollution that is doing us in; it's the inner pollution, as well . . .MACBETH is about all that—.*"

As we stroll the campus on our way to lunch, we pass many students on their way to classes. Very attractive group, with faces "the camera will love," as a film director friend of mine would say. Like the students I've seen at professional schools in the States, one feels that the students we pass are playing to a camera, hoping to capture their budding star, camera-loving, auras, even as they walk. My sense is that there is more work for actors on television and in film in China, so that constant playing to a camera makes sense. I also suspect that among the group there are some excellent, budding *stage actors*. Gu Yi says as much, though like most committed teachers, he expresses his irritations with lack of student focus and discipline today.

The faculty then treats us to one of the most elaborate lunches we are to have in China, and we discover that fish and seafood dishes in Shanghai are superb.

Following that, Bei Ying takes us to an experimental theatre space, DOWNSTREAM GARAGE, that shows experimental dance, film and theatre pieces. It is located somewhere on the outskirts of Shanghai in an industrial area.

It will take an extended visit to Shanghai to see actual productions in all the theatrical venues we're visiting.

Later, Fish takes us on a tour of Fudan University and we meet Professor Tan Zheng who invites us to an excellent dinner in a restaurant near the University. Professor Tan will publish the Chinese version of BIG SUR in a publication he edits, TRANSLATIONS. Professor Tan is cultured, charming, speaks English beautifully and clearly is steeped in English drama and literature.

BACK TO BEIJING WITH LU XUN

When we leave Shanghai, Fish gives us little presents and a copy of Lu Xun's *CALL TO ARMS*. The edition is part of a series—*ECHO OF CLASSICS* that are written in Chinese and English. Fish inscribes the book, "*Lu Xun (1881-1936): the greatest writer in modern China—leader of the Left-Wing Writer's League in 1930s.*"

Fish concludes the inscription with a personal note, "*Keep young and moving. . .Fish*".

I start reading the book on the two-hour plane trip back to Beijing. This is the very first line of the preface to *CALL TO ARMS* —

"When I was young I, too, had many dreams."

I am immediately pulled into the book.

Recently, you see, I've been thinking a great deal about my life's dreams—actually about my life *as* a dream. I plan, in fact, to explore the subject in some depth in an essay at some future time. What had been sporadic—the feeling that everything I've done in my life has been a dream— is now taking on a constancy: Each week lived seems, immediately looking back, to have been a recent dream: Will this feeling lead to my feeling that each *present* moment also is a dream? I write to Joe Graves, ask him if the *BIG SUR*/Peking U adventure *did* happen. He assures me it did.

In the *CALL TO ARMS* preface Lu Xun pursues this exploration of his life's dream to something darker:

"That was when I became conscious of loneliness . . . and this sense of loneliness grew from day to day, entwining itself about my soul like some huge poisonous snake . . .still my attempt to deaden my senses was not unsuccessful—I lost the enthusiasm and fervor of my youth."

Later on in the preface Lu Xun writes,

"As far as I am concerned I no longer feel any great urge to express myself; yet, perhaps because I have not forgotten the grief of my past

loneliness, I sometimes call out to encourage those fighters who are galloping on in loneliness, so that they do not lose heart. Whether my cry is brave or sad, repellent or ridiculous, I do not care.”

This is a writer who speaks to me. This is a writer who is articulating what I’m feeling. This is a writer who moves me.

I decide to close each adult conversation class by having round robin readings of stories from *CALL TO ARMS*. The students all know the writings of Lu Xun; they have studied him in their high school Literature classes. We read from Lu Xun’s first story, *A MADMAN’S DIARY*. From the opening section, we are in a *Kafka/Notes From The Underground* world, with a Chinese voice.

I

“Tonight the moon is very bright.

“I have not seen it for over thirty years, so today when I saw it I felt in unusually high spirits. I begin to realize that during the past thirty-odd years I have been in the dark; but now I must be extremely careful. Otherwise why should the Zhaos’ dog have looked at me twice?

“I have reason for my fear.”

II

“Tonight there is no moon at all. I know that this is a bad omen . . .”

The madman diarist begins to believe that he is living with Man Eaters and that he is in danger of being cannibalized—even by his brother. Every perceived slight is added proof that he will be eaten and the diary becomes more and more hallucinatory—and grotesquely funny. I ask the students to read each paragraph aloud in English first and in the original Chinese. They see and render the humor immediately and they illuminate the rhythms of the original when they read the paragraph in Chinese.

The diary continues:

“In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look it up, but my history has no chronology and scrawled all over each page are the words: ‘Confucian Virtue and Morality.’ Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night until I began to see words between the lines. The whole book was filled with two words — ‘Eat people.’ . . .

“I too am a man, and they want to eat me!”

In the next to last section of *A MADMAN’S DIARY*, the diarist is winding down.

XII

“I can’t bear to think of it. . . .

“How can a man like myself, after four thousand years of man-eating history — even though I knew nothing about it at first — ever hope to face real men?”

XIII

Perhaps there are still children who haven’t eaten men?

And then the moving concluding line of the story:

“Save the children.” April 2, 1918

Later, looking through one of the brochures I had picked up at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center but had not read while *in* Shanghai, I see that a “Bilingual Dialogue” group called *Physical Theatre* will be performing a piece called, *LU XUN BLOSSOMS*.

The brochure’s blurb reads: *“One of China’s greatest modern writers, whose influence still endures today. An insight into old China.”*

Sorry I hadn’t read the brochure while in Shanghai, or known of the writings of Lu Xun then. We would have tried to attend a performance of the piece.

Re the Theatre scene in Shanghai: I take away with me a general feeling that there seems to be money around for state-of-the-art buildings and

The girls in the sound booth cue “*the overwhelming opening chords of Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*” and the audience becomes even more attentive. There is a figure seated in the rear seat, and friendly Jeremy Chester is throwing his cheery remarks back to that shadowy person.

At one point, Jeremy leaves the car, places the driving wheel on the seat, steps forward and talks to the audience about fulfilling his dream of getting to the Big Sur area of California, and about what Big Sur means to him. The balladeer plays under the speech. Then Jeremy moves back to the car, picks up the loose driving wheel again and drives, and the balladeer stops playing.

When Jeremy asks the pickup’s name, the pickup puts a gun to Jeremy’s head. Blackout. Before the next scene, the audience has seen established most of the play’s conventions: Bach on the sound track, a character stepping out and addressing the audience, a balladeer setting scenes and underscoring moments, and all of it happening on or around four chairs that represent a car.

I’m in the back of the orchestra doing my listening thing. Joe, as Jeremy, is off and running: letter perfect, word-stresses right on, intentions clear and, vocally, reaching me. By the time the second scene is over, the kind of quirky humor and additional quirky characters will have been introduced—a frantic, impotent and demanding cop and a non-speaking, Tonto-playing, hokey American Indian. If the audience accepts all that, we should be off and running.

The second scene opens with Jeremy seated in the passenger side and a policeman driving. The policeman has retrieved Jeremy’s stolen car. The policeman’s opening line is:

Say, if I come across as being a little hard of hearing, it’s because I’m a little hard of hearing. So you won’t mind if I speak loud. . .”

Because of that line, actors who play The Policeman often shout throughout the entire scene. Wang Tianhang (English name, Michael), playing the policeman in this production, gets caught in that shouting trap. But Michael is a very winning and sympathetic young man and his attractive qualities override the often one-note loudness. But I wonder

how the audience will take the introductions of these quirky characters and how they will react to the scene's explosive activity.

This is how they take it: When Michael as the cop, in his frustration and impotence, loses it and starts smashing up the car and beating on the Indian at the end of his scene, the audience explodes in applause. So Michael, on opening night, has his Jimmy Coco tour-de-force moment.

In the next scene, an over-the-hill Hippie woman (the year is 1968) needs a lift to a political demonstration. In her monologue to the audience, she admits to being an over-the-hill activist still struggling to hang on to her idealism, and paints a picture of profiteering in her family from a past war she remembers, and tries, in a bravado moment, to cover up her subtext of disillusionment with the current *movement*—a movement that she senses may also be corrupt. This is the speech:

* * * * *

WOMAN-DRESSED-AS-A-HIPPIE

It's true. I am over 30.

(MUSIC: I'll Be With You In Apple Blossom Time)

You know, I can remember the Second World War. Food rationing. Those stamps.

(Music: Abruptly out!)

My father owned a grocery store then. Made a fortune overcharging people for things like sugar, butter and salami. —Don't misunderstand! —He was patriotic! Had a huge roll of honor in the store; a day-glo chart of the neighborhood boys off fighting. When one died, my father gave the family a free salami. He really did think this was the humane thing to do. It turned out to be good business, too. My mother, in the meantime, worked in the store, rolled bandages for the Red Cross and lit candles for my brother who was in the Army. She needn't have worried. My brother bribed some superior with a never-ending supply of sugar, butter and salami; promoted a cushy deal for himself near home. . .I even passed a Math course I was failing; failing, that is, until my father had a little business talk with the teacher. Again—sugar, butter, salami. . .After the war a supermarket chain put my father out of business. He went to work

for it and got even. Began cheating them out of SBS—sugar, butter and salami. My father died a bitter man. He loved me—but the love was always tainted with SBS. He never knew that, of course. SBS was simply the way of the world. I don't know when I really realized that. I think it was when I was on that Fulbright overseas. Over there, it was SBS all over again. They really had to make up for lost time. Had to fill those bomb craters with SBS. And later all the young men I'd meet—there, here—out killing themselves in the rat race for SBS. —But not in the new movement . Free, open. Out of sight. They dug the evil of sugar, butter, salami; and were so hip to that corrupt trinity that they took the sugar bit and added acid to burn through the SBS lies.

(Beat. Discovery!)

But you know something. . .Big Arnie is beginning to make a fortune on the lecture circuit; where people pay a lot of bread to hear him spit in their faces. He gets big money for his interviews. And he has a best-selling record out. I even hear he's going to make a film. Is it sugar, butter and salami all over again?

(Desperate)

—No! It's different! It has got to be! Because I've got to stay in the Movement.

After the speech she gets into a minor confrontation with Jeremy and she hits him with one of her signs. The two actresses alternating the roles have a tough time hitting Joe with the sign. During rehearsals it's very hard for them to overcome their respect and admiration for Joe and whack him with the sign, but by Showtime, the two actresses swing away and the moment gets some gasps from the audience. Of course, the Hippie woman becomes contrite and apologizes to Jeremy and she gains and earns the audience's understanding.

Then the theatrical surprise and change of structural rhythm in the play— The over-the-hill Hippie woman spots the leader of her movement coming from the distance—Big Arnie, the iconic rock star.

Big Arnie makes his long entrance from the rear of the auditorium down one of the aisles to the stage, pointing to people, and shaking aisle-hands. Rock music blares. The entrance cries for strobe lights to sweep the audience as Big Arnie “*Jagger-swaggers down to the stage,*” but our single spot will have to do. It does just fine.

There is a moment in the Big Arnie scene where Jeremy is trying to dialogue with the rock star—with music. Jeremy sings Bach; Big Arnie sings a rock piece. They battle back and forth. Zhang Jia, the actor playing Big Arnie, uses a once-famous Chinese rock number for his song, and the audience recognizes it and goes wild.

The (seemingly) out-of-context *Tour Guide Interlude* scene that follows works very well and the majority of the audience goes with it (see my analysis of the *Tour Guide Interlude* problem in Part Two of this Journal). Joe Graves’ stylized staging of this scene *does*, somehow, seem to be part of the style of the *entire* play. And the two actresses, alternating the part of the Tour Guide fearlessly and with great joy, put the scene *out there*.

The next scene takes us back to Jeremy’s pick-ups. The audience discovers the silent Indian still seated in the back seat and a new pick-up seated next to Jeremy, a young African-American. He has just graduated from his law school and is on his way to a job with a famous law firm—a job he doesn’t want—a job he’s taking because his father, a famous judge, insists he take it. The *Black Graduate* wants to be an actor and judging from his various Shakespearean recitations in the scene, not a very good one. But acting is *his Big Sur* dream. So far, in this scene, the content of the event is the same as all the previous scenes—a pick-up is unhappy and Jeremy tries to dialogue with him, but can’t; but that rhythm is broken when the Indian, for the first time in the play, speaks—insults the black graduate who is about to pummel the Indian, but stops when he realizes he’s about to do violence and, ready to vomit, the black graduate leaves the car.

In this scene the audience delights in what is essentially a new character—an Indian who has been in the play almost from the beginning but who *now speaks*. I think (hope) they are also somewhat disturbed by the sight of two minority Americans about to fight.

Jeremy drives away from the vomiting black graduate because a black car that began following him during the Big Arnie scene is now bearing down on him again.

The next pick-ups are a middle-aged man and his mother; He is taking his mother to an “old ladies home to die.” This scene has two of the strongest actors in the company: Lin Ying (Sarah) and Chang Wuming.

Sarah is truly a gutsy actress who taps into the comic rage and pain of the furious Old Lady. Wuming, who has studied in the US, is wonderful when he finally lets out the rage of *his* despair in this situation. And Joe as Jeremy, naively steps in to diffuse the explosive confrontation between son and mother and dialogues *wrong again*, making matters worse. In this scene Li Shi (Sebastian), who has some funny lines in the early part of the scene, says nothing during the closing moments of the scene, but his understanding and compassion for the situation can be seen—even from the rear of the auditorium where I’m sitting, and (this time) I’m looking up to the stage, very-much caught up with the mother/son conflict.

In the following confession scene Joe contacts Jeremy’s despair and I certainly feel that despair and when the priest Jeremy is confessing to turns out to be deaf, that nails it—Jeremy’s trip has been a total washout—he has failed to dialogue. But in the last section of the play I completely change my mind about that.

Jeremy and the Indian are alone in the car and they are driving out west somewhere and it’s snowing and the Indian, exhausted from playing the stereotypical “me keepum up charade” Indian, begins reciting a Indian poem and Li Shi stops speaking in broken English and talks in Chinese.

The audience gasps. Jeremy understands and responds in English. When Jeremy speaks English the projected subtitles continue to be in Chinese; when the Indian speaks in Chinese, the subtitles are in English.

And I am moved.

Remarkable. I thought I had written a play about the inability of Americans to have true dialogue and that that despair-climax in the play had come in the confessional scene, and suddenly I’m seeing two people dialoguing in

INDIAN

(Continued)

my roots. Does this surprise you, Jeremy Chester? My being serious, I mean? That's how we Indians are: Manic Depressives.

(Tom-toms again

as Indian resumes his dance.

Tom-toms out

as Indian falls to his knees again.

Applies more war paint)

—I managed to educate myself, but it didn't help. They would never let me make more than a hundred dollars a week. At that I feel superior. Most Indian families live on thirty dollars a week.

(Tom-toms.

Dance.

Tom-toms out.

The Indian falls to knees

in profile to the audience.

He turns his face slowly to the audience)

I'm thirty years old. The average Indian dies at forty-three. I have thirteen more years to live. Comforting.

(Pause.

The Indian stands.

Suddenly begins moving in his

Limbo Space, like a caged animal)

So I've been hitting one Reservation after the other—like a pinball weaving in and out of the Great White Father's pinball machine. GREAT TOTEM POLES AND TINY BREASTED SQUAWS! Those Reservations are depressing! Filthy! Full of disease! I visited my relatives on one of them. Some of the kids had trachoma. You know what that is? That's an eye disease that can lead to blindness—a disease that hardly anybody but Indians get anymore. The others had middle ear infections and were on their way to becoming deaf. —And this last visit? —One of my teenage nieces had killed her self. And most of the kids, and their friends, were

INDIAN

(Continued)

sniffing glue. And that's common, common among my clan. . . .why, Why, WHY, Jeremy Chester, did I make this trip?! I'M DIGGING FOR ROOTS IN A DUNG HILL! Jeremy, they won't let me belong on my land. And when I get to that bridge, it won't be anything near what I expected. —I'll bet all those Braves walking on air up there—hoping for their highs—really get nothing but spectacular earaches! Anyway—anyway, I get dizzy on heights; and the great Moccasin Maker in the sky made me all left feet. Jeremy. . . I feel so half an Indian! And that means I'm less than half a man! So what do I do?

(Falls to his knees. Sobs)
(Limbo Space light--Out!
Pause)

JEREMY

(Leaning toward the Indian, as if he wants to touch him, comfort him. Instead, he says:)

It stopped snowing. And look—look, Noble. We've reached California.

• • • • •

The black “mafia like” sedan is once again in pursuit of Jeremy’s car. Jeremy relinquishes the wheel to the Indian. The Indian drives the car into Monterey Bay.

The final beat of the play takes place deep in the waters of Monterey Bay. Jeremy and Noble bob up to bobbing, standing position in the submerged car and Jeremy asks if they’ll ever make it to *BIG SUR*. Noble Savage says,

“I guess. When the garbage boats pass over us and dump their garbage out to sea.”

Can one imagine an *Experiment In Television* being supported by a major network today? *Experiment In Television* featured a documentary about the Watts riots in L.A., an original piece by Harold Pinter, a document about/by Federico Fellini, as well as new commissions, like *BIG SUR*. Of course, in those days NBC had it's own NBC Opera Company and it's own NBC Symphony Orchestra,

I take up the theme of *1960's Experimentation in the Theatre* in an informal University lecture I give while we're in rehearsal, about the state of playwriting in the United States today, and use as my starting point the remarkable energy of the theatre scene in the 1960s and how that period was, in so many ways, a turning point in form and subject matter in the theatre, as well as in political and social areas.

I make a note to develop a course on the 1960s as a turning point in American and world theatre.

And then, after *BIG SUR* closes and we are just weeks away from returning home, the time remaining becomes a blur of tidbits:

Cliff Baker has arrived from the states to direct the next production for the Beijing Institute of World Theatre and Film—Moliere's *TARTUFFE*. Cliff was the founder of the Arkansas Repertory Theatre in Little Rock and its Artistic director for 22 years. Cliff is a big, good-looking, bright and theatre-savvy guy with an expansive laugh. Joe Graves is one of the stars of the Arkansas Rep and he and Cliff often work together there. Before Cliff arrives on the Peking University campus, Joe (while still appearing in and directing *BIG SUR*) casts and prepares the actors for *TARTUFFE*, until Cliff arrives on the scene. Joe will play the lead part of Tartuffe. Unlike *BIG SUR*, the production of *TARTUFFE* will have elaborate period costumes and a lighting design with many cues and will be performed in the smaller theatre in the Centennial Hall.

Cliff is added to the morning coffee soirees at the Paradise Café and he and my wife Sandy and I hang out together. Sometimes we're off for an American breakfast or excellent pizza at the Crow's Nest—an off PKU campus pub run by a young Norwegian (tattooed) guy named Crow, who you'd swear is American and who has a

miniature pig as a pet. Crow is in partnership with a Chinese guy (you need a Chinese partner in business in China—that's the law) and they're developing a Crow's Nest franchise throughout China. Crow serves on-tap Guinness Beer—apparently not an easy thing to get in China. Sandy and Cliff often go on shopping sprees while I'm teaching my classes. Trying to schedule *TARTUFFE* rehearsals is often frustrating, and Cliff has to coach his actors (as Joe has had to do on *BIG SUR*) as well as direct the actors, and manages to help them find the Moliere style. They use the brilliant Richard Wilbur translation of *TARTUFFE* and the production is a success.

At some point my back spasms; first time in my life with this severity and intensity and frequency. Qing takes me to a Chinese hospital for acupuncture therapy. Doctors and health practitioners from the United States observe the techniques. First time I ever had acupuncture. The acupuncture works; my spasms are relieved.

Sandy and I go to the Chaoyang Theatre, Beijing's premiere Acrobatics Theatre—a variety show featuring men, women and children acrobats in fantastic acts that show off the ancient Chinese art. The men do the warrior acts and the women take on the more elegant acts. Their work includes back flips, forward flips, human pyramids, body-through-the-air hurtles, sharing bodies—via feet-to-feet handing over, a closing act of a dozen women on one bicycle riding in one large circle around the stage—plus a dazzling bit—what I call *the amazing fellatio tree*—where the women acrobats clamp their mouths onto phallic-like protuberances extending from a very tall clothes-like rack on which they do unimaginable back bends in the air, with their hands never touching the clothes-like rack and their mouths never de-clamping from the protuberances. At the conclusion of another act, two men walk up and down stairs on their hands, and one man from the audience runs up to the stage and kisses one of the acrobat's hands. With stunning acts like this, one can well imagine how spectacular the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics will be.

And in the Chaoyang Theatre lobby, before the show, a family drama: A young boy about 12 years old or so has had a fight with another boy his age. He has been pulled away and the mother is berating him. He's furious and won't stop talking and crying. At first

it seems as if the mother (I assume it's the mother) is blaming the boy for the fight. But as the boy rants she seems to understand his sense of injustice and stops shaking him and tries to calm him down. The other boy in the fight is standing apart and *he* seems to have his adherents calming *him* down. The family gathers around the spectacle and one man (an uncle?) stands aside the family group, catches my eye, seems slightly embarrassed, shrugs and seems to say, "Families. Young boys. What can you do?" I remember this incident more than I recall the show. I wonder why?

Just before leaving China to return home, Sandy and I attend a joint choral concert at Centennial Hall showcasing the mixed choruses of Lehigh University and Peking University. The voices are lovely, the musicianship is high, the blending is smooth, repertoire is diverse and runs the gamut from Mendelssohn to Cole Porter, to Irving Berlin to Elvis Presley to Stephen Foster all sung in English, Chinese, French and German, and run the serious to comic gamut. The conducting by the American and Chinese musical directors is professional, skillful, and sensitive. The solo voices are lovely (the American woman singing Porter's *Every Time We Say Goodbye* has a pop approach to the classic—and it works), some of the young Chinese tenors are extraordinary. The American chorus runs the gamut—mostly young College students and some adults—the Chinese chorus seems to have mostly student-aged members. Sandy and I are very moved by this blending of young people from different cultures effortlessly blending.

Before leaving I get my last haircut and message. This one is so profound, so extended—with each strand of hair so finely shaped and fingers and shoulders and scalp and arms so well messaged, that I break the no-tipping rule—I ask permission to leave a tip. The boss allows it.

We fly back via an overnight stop at the Toronto airport and are jetlagged for about a week.

Joseph Graves leaves Beijing at the same time we do. He stars in a summer season of plays at the Texas Shakespeare Co, including the lead in *MAN OF LA MANCHA*. When he returns to Beijing in August he resumes teaching at PKU and casts and begins to rehearse a production of *THE TEMPEST*. He will combine the Chinese *TEMPEST*

cast with an American cast at Oashita University in Arkansas. That production is to open on 2 November 2007. Sandy and I will be there for the opening, where I'll be hugging and cheering on (and probably crying with) many Chinese people I have come to love. While there Joe and I will start exploring my return trip to Beijing in 2009 and for a possible new production of a play of mine.

It doesn't get better than this.

FG/October, 2007