

\$10⁰⁰/£7⁰⁰

FORUM-**THEATRE**FORUM-TH
RUM-**THEATRE****FORUM**-THEAT

INTERNATIONAL THEATRE JOURNAL

**THE COMPLETE SCRIPTS OF
J. STEPHEN BRANTLEY'S**

PIRIRA

PAVEL PRYAZHKO'S

ANGRY GIRL

PLUS

THE WORLD OF EXTREME HAPPINESS

DEAD WHITE ZOMBIES

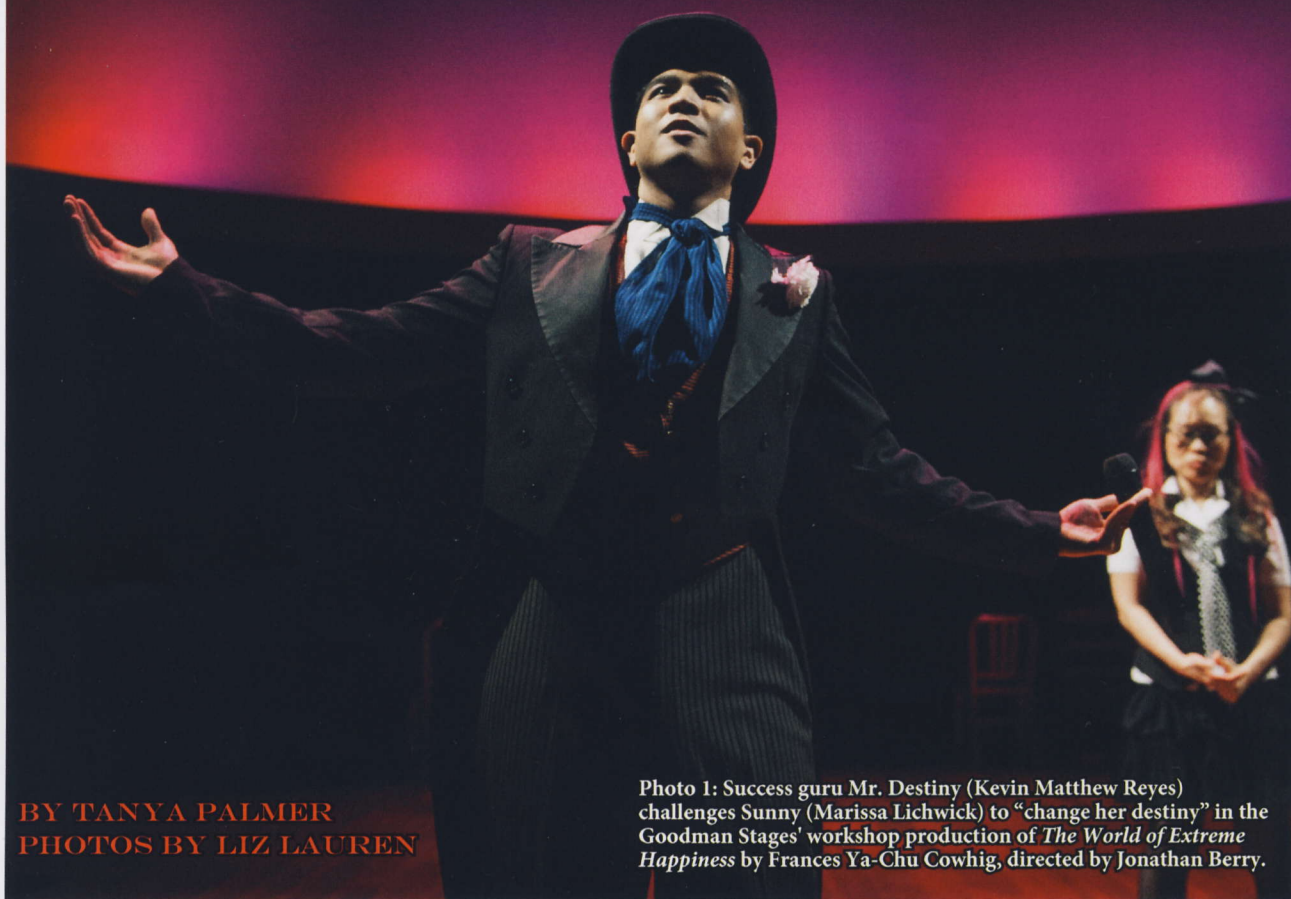
EMMA DANTE

PINKOLANDIA

TF

FILLING THE GAP

FRANCES COWHIG TACKLES THREE PLAYS ABOUT CHINA



BY TANYA PALMER
PHOTOS BY LIZ LAUREN

Photo 1: Success guru Mr. Destiny (Kevin Matthew Reyes) challenges Sunny (Marissa Lichwick) to “change her destiny” in the Goodman Stages’ workshop production of *The World of Extreme Happiness* by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, directed by Jonathan Berry.

The term double-consciousness was first coined by author and sociologist W.E.B. Dubois in an attempt to capture the experience of African-Americans caught between two cultures: “One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” (Dubois, 45) Since it first used in Dubois’ groundbreaking 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, the “double consciousness phenomenon” has continued to persist as a reality for both African-Americans as well as millions of other Americans—particularly, as sociologist Qun Wang points out, for “first generation immigrants and those who struggle to identify their ontological and cultural relationship with both the mainstream culture as well as their ethnic heritage.” (Wang 89)

For playwright Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, this sense of double-consciousness is literally embodied in her physical appearance. “I’m really tall, so I don’t ever get treated as an Asian women,” she explains. “In America, people think of me as Asian, but in Asia, I’m just a white person.” The

product of a Taiwanese mother and an Irish-American father, Cowhig spent her adolescence in Beijing where her father worked for the US State Department, and it was there that she observed and absorbed stories of a rapidly changing nation and its people from the perspective of someone who was both an outsider and an insider to the culture. She says:

My experience in China is through the lens of an extremely sheltered young person going

Tanya Palmer is the director of new play development at the Goodman Theatre, where she coordinates New Stages, the theatre’s new play program, and has served as the production dramaturg on a number of plays including the world premieres of *Smokefall* by Noah Haidle, *The Happiest Song Plays Last* by Quiara Hudes, *The Long Red Road* by Brett C. Leonard and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Ruined* by Lynn Nottage. Prior to her arrival in Chicago, she served as the director of new play development at Actors Theatre of Louisville, where she led the selection process for the Humana Festival of New American Plays. Palmer holds an MFA in playwriting from York University in Toronto.

to international schools, living in compounds surrounded by barbed wire and police guards, and, until I was eighteen, having diplomatic immunity. But because my mother was from Taiwan and I shared a common language and culture through her, I also felt not entirely American either. Like many mixed race people, my parents come from different languages, continents and faiths, so I ended up occupying the spaces between those worlds more than either place.

Cowhig's first two plays, *Lidless* and *410 Gone*, focused on characters who traveled across borders, real and imagined: *Lidless* centered on an American interrogator at Guantanamo and *410 Gone*, a harrowing and imaginative journey into the land of the dead, drew heavily on Chinese mythology. But her next three plays—*The World of Extreme*

Happiness, which will premiere this fall in a coproduction between the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and Manhattan Theatre Club in New York—and two others currently in development—all take place in China and grapple with some of the most pressing and contentious issues facing not only that nation, but the rest of the world.

The World of Extreme Happiness tells the story of Sunny, a young woman who travels from the Chinese countryside to the booming city of Shenzhen in Southern China to work in one of the many factories that have grown up in that "Special Economic Zone" in the last 20 years. The play grew out of extensive research into the lives of migrant workers combined with her own observations and stories from her family's history. "I was really interested in internal migrations and with that broad question I went

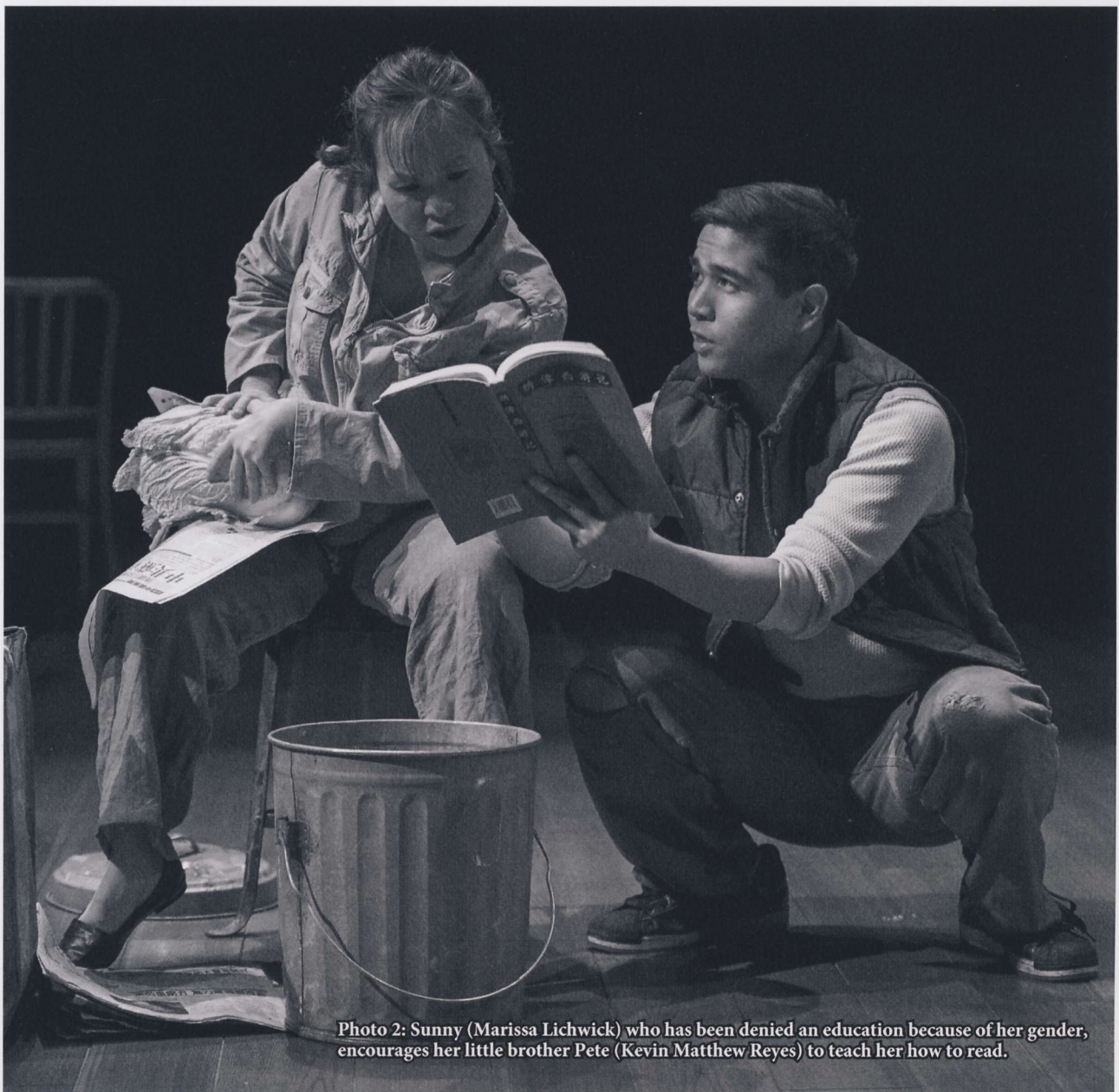


Photo 2: Sunny (Marissa Lichwick) who has been denied an education because of her gender, encourages her little brother Pete (Kevin Matthew Reyes) to teach her how to read.

and stayed with my parents for maybe five or six months when they were living in Chengdu, China which is where my dad was working at the US Consulate on the Annual State Department Human Rights Report on China,” explains Cowhig. “I tried to soak up my father’s 20 years of knowledge on Asia through osmosis. He’s worked for the state department since I was nine, and we lived in Beijing for five years, between the time I was 13 and 18. I also drew a lot from my mother’s family history—she’s from rural Taiwan and her mother never got to go to school because her grandmother thought girls shouldn’t be educated. My mom’s brothers were all in the shoe business and some managed factories in China so through osmosis again, I picked up some of those family stories and they found their way into *The World of Extreme Happiness*.”

Originally commissioned by South Coast Repertory Theatre, *The World of Extreme Happiness* was developed through workshop productions at the Goodman Theatre

and the National Theatre in London. The play begins in 1992 with the birth of Sunny, who narrowly escapes death when her parents throw her in a rubbish bin because she’s a girl. But she survives, and as a teenager joins the exodus out of the country to become a migrant worker and send money back home to support her brother’s education. One of Cowhig’s primary sources for the play was the 2008 book *Factory Girls* by Leslie Chang, a Wall Street Journal reporter who lived amongst the young women who had left their villages to work in booming cities like Shenzhen and Dongguan and “power the assembly lines of the nation’s export economy.” These young women are part of a population of over 130 million migrant workers in China—representing the largest migration in human history—three times the number of people who emigrated to America from Europe over a century (Chang 16). Their stories also provide a window into just how radically life in China has changed in the last three decades. As

Photo 3: Marissa Lichwick (Sunny) and Ben Wang (Old Lao) Now working in the booming city of Shenzhen, Sunny (Marissa Lichwick) gets a lesson in workplace politics from Old Lao (Ben Wang), who surreptitiously slips her a petition protesting working conditions at the factory.

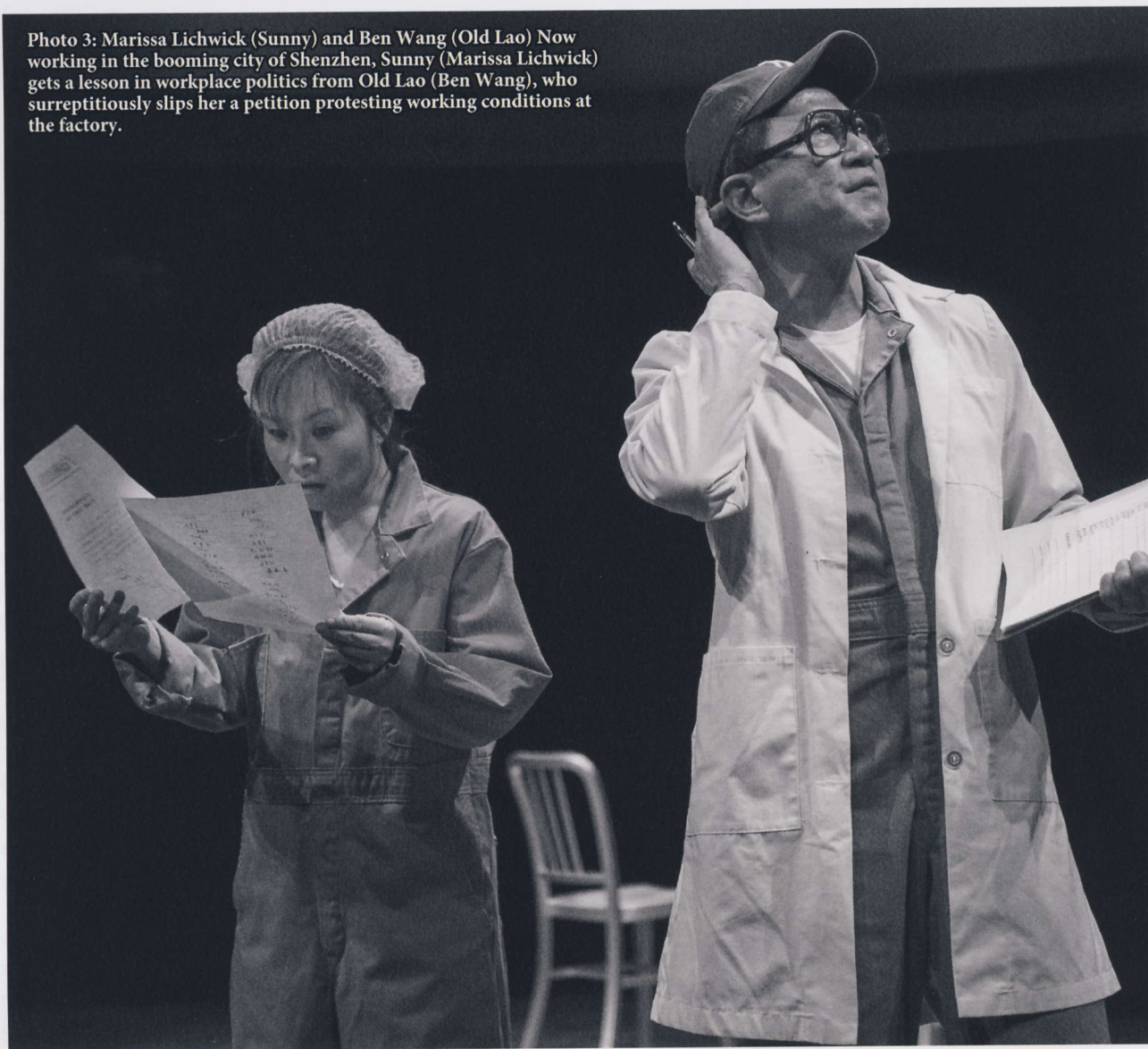


Photo 4: Businesswoman Artemis Chang (Mia Park) is interrogated by police (Ben Wang, Cindy Im) because of her family's revolutionary past.



journalist John Gittings explains in his 2005 book *The Changing Face of China: From Mao to Market*, in 1980, China was still predominantly a nation of peasant farmers, with 81% of the population dependent on the land for its livelihood. Twenty years later, 31% of the population were urban dwellers, with the number of cities growing from fewer than 100 to more than 700. In 1992, the year of Sunny's birth, Deng Xiaoping, the de facto leader of the People's Republic of China in the years following Mao's death, made a surprise visit to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone to deliver the message that "if capitalism has something good, then socialism should take it over and use it." Later that same year the congress endorsed Deng's formula of "building socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Gittings, 252).

One of the results of this rapid change is a deepening divide between an older generation which lived through the trauma of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and a future-oriented younger generation

whose values, along with their geographic and economic mobility, are unfathomable for their parents. When asked what contextual information is most critical for an audience to have in order to understand the world of the play, Cowhig replied "The level of intergenerational trauma that is there." She went on to explain:

Liao Yiwu, the writer whose book I'm adapting for my next play, *Go On Living*, once said that China is a nation full of people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Things there just happen so fast that people are shell shocked and reacting to reactions, back and forth, and there is an absence of intergenerational conversation. When I was in the countryside once, I was waiting in line for a bus, and the bus came, and all the old people pushed by me onto the bus, and all the young people were shocked and appalled, and apologized for their barbaric, elderly citizens. But they really don't know what those people have experienced—they've been through famine—so there's an inability to really understand each other.

Photo 5: Sunny's father Li Han (Daniel Smith) builds a home for his beloved pigeons while fellow villager Wang Hua (Mia Park) looks on.



We see this misunderstanding play out both in the rural landscape of Sunny's home village and on the factory floor in Shenzhen. Sunny's father, Li Han, is a hard man, a coal miner who treats his children harshly and only shows affection for his pigeons. But, as with every member of an older generation whom we meet in the play, he has lived through unspeakable violence, including his brother's death during the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square, and he carries that trauma with him in silence. The mutual misunderstanding between old and young is laid out clearly—and comically—in a scene between Sunny and Old Lao, her 65-year-old supervisor in the sanitation department at the Shenzhen factory. Desperate for a promotion, Sunny tries everything she can think of to make an impression. Old Lao remains unimpressed.

SUNNY: I'm not a political person. I'm just a person who deserves to be promoted to section manager.

OLD LAO: Here we go again.

SUNNY: I've been a level-one sanitation technician for fifty months. I've done superior work and never failed a—

OLD LAO: (*interrupting*) You are the most important person in the world. Your bowel movements are radiant. Full of meaning. If you wait for success you'll die in a sewer. Being a spoiled brat is the only worthwhile thing.

SUNNY: I need a promotion

OLD LAO: I need to be hung like a donkey.

SUNNY: Give me the job!

OLD LAO: Give me a naked KTV waitress.

SUNNY: Why are you so allergic to my success?

OLD LAO: Why is every young person an idiot?

(Cowhig 55)

Sunny must try and make her way in a world that offers very conflicting visions for how to behave in order to get ahead. Old Lao advises her to "keep your aspirations low

and your expectations even lower.” But Ming-Ming, one of Sunny’s coworkers, and a devoted acolyte of the evocatively named self-help guru Mr. Destiny, advises repetition of a daily mantra like “It is my destiny to make lots of money” in order to “reroute the circuits of [your] brain and bring [you] two steps closer to changing [your] fate” (Cowhig 26).

Some audiences have seen *World*, with its clear-eyed, unsentimental portrayals of the realities of life in both rural and urban China and its harsh, clipped language as a “Shame On You, China” play. But for Cowhig, it is equally an indictment of “one of the biggest Western exports, which is the self help movement, the belief that you can ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps.’” We see this personified in Mr. Destiny, whose crowd-rousing call and response chants are part Dale Carnegie, part evangelical preacher.

MR. DESTINY: What do you deserve?

CROWD: Money!

MR. DESTINY: When do you need it?

CROWD: Now!

MR. DESTINY: What do you have?

CROWD: Power!

MR. DESTINY: When will you use it?

CROWD: Now!

MR. DESTINY: Two, four, six, eight—

CROWD: Now it’s time to change our fate!

MR. DESTINY: Three, six, nine, eleven—

CROWD: It is time to feel alive!

MR. DESTINY: Seven, eight, nine, ten—

CROWD: We will not be crushed again!

(Cowhig 40)

A true believer at first, Ming-Ming eventually becomes disillusioned when the promise of “Money, Fame, Power” proves illusory. Desperate for answers, Ming-Ming follows Mr. Destiny home one night, only to discover that he, like them, is a peasant living in substandard conditions. While abstract notions of success and achievement provide Ming-Ming and Sunny, (and their non-fictional counterparts laboring in factories across China who flock to self-improvement classes, sales seminars, and dubious learn-English-quick schemes) with hope for the future, the life of a migrant worker is precarious and filled with hardships. China maintains a residency system that separates rural and urban residents—a system that denies migrants access to basic services like education and healthcare in the cities where they work. Workers are frequently paid late or not at all by unscrupulous subcontractors—and they have little recourse to protest. Discrimination is the norm: workers are often denied jobs based on everything from age and gender to height and birth order. Job postings aimed at migrant workers frequently cite the ability to “eat bitterness and endure hardship” as a prerequisite for the position.

(Chang 152) Migrants are subject to harassment by the police, and are viewed with suspicion by many city dwellers. And yet the rewards can be high: a majority of migrant workers can easily make the equivalent of one year’s worth of rural income in a month in the city. And while it is often precarious and unpredictable, social mobility in this new China is not entirely an illusion. We see this brought vividly to life by another character who represents the first generation to profit from China’s new free-market economy. Artemis Chang, a successful middle-aged businesswoman whose company contracts with the factory where Sunny works, represents a potential model for Sunny to emulate. But, as Sunny discovers when she overtakes her one-time mentor Ming-Ming “success”—as it is defined by self-help seminars and motivational speakers—comes at a high moral price.

For the playwright, Sunny’s journey through the play was consciously modeled on that of a tragic hero. “I was trying to follow what was articulated in “Tragedy and the Common Man” by Arthur Miller,” explains Cowhig, “about the stages of being a tragic hero and how they were really just fighting for their rightful place in society. I was trying to find ways that that could also be very ugly and antisocial and impolite. Sunny has to go through lots of not very attractive personality traits before she can come out on the other side—she destroys a lot of things and hurts a lot of people in order to gain perspective.” Sunny ultimately becomes politicized: she sees the illusory nature of the success she has been striving for and makes a decision to speak up in defense of her fellow migrant workers. This final decision is undoubtedly the most courageous thing to do, but it also leads to her destruction. The play is filled with images of transformation. Sunny’s younger brother Pete dreams of joining the Peking Opera and playing the mythical figure of the Monkey King, who can transform himself into 72 different incarnations. Sunny travels to the city and meets Mr. Destiny who challenges her to “CHANGE YOUR DESTINY!” But in the final, tragic, image of transformation we see the once vibrant Sunny drugged and tortured and relegated to a psychiatric hospital. For Cowhig, the audience’s conflicted experience of Sunny’s journey, and the transformation that experience demands from them, is exciting and productive:

The most exciting point of view I’ve heard from an audience member was in London; a woman wrote on her blog that she was with Sunny the whole time, rooting for her to do the right thing, and then at the end, when Sunny was ruined in a mental hospital, she realized that as an audience member she was rooting for all the things that would result in Sunny’s death. I’m interested in

those really personal journeys, and perception shifts that happen in the mind of the audience.

While *The World of Extreme Happiness* tackles the cost of resisting authority for one ordinary (fictionalized) citizen, the two plays that follow it—*Go On Living* and an as yet untitled work co-commissioned by the Goodman Theatre and the National Theatre in London—explore resistance through two extraordinary real life figures. *Go On Living* is an adaptation of the prison memoir *For a Song and a Hundred Songs* by exiled Chinese poet Liao Yiwu, who was jailed from 1990–1994 for writing a poem decrying the deaths of pro-democracy activists in Tiananmen Square. The adaptation also draws on material from *Corpse Walker*, a collection of interviews that Yiwu conducted with members of the Chinese underclass. Cowhig was initially drawn to *For a Song and a Hundred Songs* because, as she explains, “it’s unlike any prison story I’ve read. It’s extremely theatrical and funny at the same time. [Yiwu] focuses on the ways in which prisoners try to create meaning for themselves through rituals and performances inside prison, which I think gives a real levity to all of their struggles.” A new version of the play, which Cowhig has developed through a series of readings with New York based director Mei Ann Teo, will be workshopped in Chicago this spring. It has gone through several incarnations as Cowhig has struggled to find the center of the story—and to avoid the thing she fears most, being simplistic and didactic. She recently made the decision to shift away from modeling the protagonist on the author, Liao Yiwu, in favor of doing so with the morally ambiguous and self-serving Wang-er, the Cell Chief, a powerful, sometimes sadistic prisoner who governs the cell—and the motley assortment of prisoners inside it—with an iron fist.

The third play is inspired by the life of Dr. Wang Shuping, a doctor who, at great personal risk, publicized the facts surrounding a horrifying practice which took place in rural China in the early 1990s. Health officials in Henan province profited from the collection and sale of blood drawn from impoverished peasants and then in turn, infected those same peasants with HIV/AIDS. “It’s a fascinating story,” says Cowhig, “and is simultaneously a really compelling metaphor; the Chinese government was literally profiting off the blood of poor peasants and through their profiting, giving them all AIDS, which speaks to a lot without having to say very much.” She was introduced to Shuping through her father—who encouraged Frances to write a play about her, describing her as “the Chinese Joan of Arc.” When she met with Shuping, who is now based in Salt Lake City, she was struck not only by her courage and the epic scale of her life story, but also by her skill as a fascinating and lively storyteller. “She told

me all this gossip about doctors and nurses having affairs in China; it’s all very Chekhovian,” says Cowhig. “She also told me about her husband, who was the one that encouraged her to take the job. But when she became a whistleblower, her husband, who worked for the government, began to get increasingly depressed because he was getting shut out of meetings, and eventually they had to separate because there was no way he could do his job if he was connected to her. I think there are many ways to tell this story through these relationships which will give it a more personal frame for telling the story.”

With all three of these plays, Cowhig was drawn to the idea of depicting individuals who challenged the status quo, characters “pushing against the grain” who challenged our image of China as a “conformist society.” Writing these plays has also allowed her to address what she sees as a “big gap in the contemporary theatre canon: plays about China that have all Chinese characters in them and don’t have a Western interloper who the audience is supposed to identify with.” But while her status as an insider has given her access to these characters’ stories and an understanding of their world, her status as an outsider has given her the freedom to dramatize those stories. “There’s not really a way for Chinese writers to be honest, and write candidly about China without fear of censorship, house arrest, prison or exile,” explains Cowhig. “So I hope that maybe I can bridge a generational gap before a new generation comes of age and there are more Chinese writers telling their own stories.”

SOURCES

- Chang, Leslie. *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008.
- Cowhig, Frances. *The World of Extreme Happiness*, unpublished manuscript, Oct. 2013.
- Cowhig, Frances. Personal Interview. 24 Feb. 2014.
- Dubois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903.
- Gittings, John. *The Changing Face of China: From Mao to Market*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Wang, Qun. “‘Double Consciousness.’ Sociological Imagination, and the Asian American Experience.” *Race, Gender & Class*, 4.3 (1997): 88-94.
- Yiwu, Liao. *The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories, China from the Bottom Up*. New York: Anchor Books, 2008.
- - -. *For a Song and a Hundred Songs: A Poet’s Journey through a Chinese Prison*. Boston: New Harvest, 2013.