



## center stage

**Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig** is tearing up the theater industry with *Lidless*, providing much-needed inspiration to aspiring female playwrights

*The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* by Lewis Hyde. *The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories, China from the Bottom Up* by Liao Yiwu. *Understanding Power* by Noam Chomsky. *The Winona LaDuke Reader* by Winona LaDuke. *This is Water* by David Foster Wallace. According to Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, these are essential reads for any American. With everything from eroticism to corpses and LaDuke to Foster Wallace, the list proves she is no ordinary bookworm.

Quite the contrary, Cowhig, the recipient of more than \$60,000 in awards alone for her new play, *Lidless*, is an accomplished wordsmith. Few can boast an acclaimed career in playwriting like 27-year-old Cowhig can. Her plays have been developed with companies everywhere from Philadelphia to Seattle to Ojai, CA, and she recently received the 2010 David Calicchio Emerging American Playwright Prize.

*Lidless*, which won the 2009 Yale Drama Series Award for Playwriting and the Keene Prize, tells the story of a former Guantánamo Bay detainee's visit to the home of his female U.S. Army interrogator 15 years after his detention. Upon arrival he demands half her liver for the damage incurred on his body and soul during her interrogations.

Cowhig began writing the play after reading a series of articles in *The Economist* about female sexuality being used as a weapon in places like Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. "Some detainees were

being smeared with what they were made to believe was menstrual blood," says Cowhig. "Others were subjected to lap dances from U.S. military women in an attempt to humiliate them into confession."

Politics and spiritual cleansing go hand in hand in this play, and it's this fusion of topics that set Cowhig's work apart—the blending of East and West and the fresh take on postwar healing. Raised in Philadelphia, Northern Virginia, Okinawa, Taipei, and Beijing, Cowhig's traveling roots may be responsible for her bravery, though it may flow from something far more intrinsic to her being.

"I tell myself regularly that I'm not good enough, and it's a provocation to become better," explains Cowhig. "I don't think you need to be crazy to write well, just persistent." As for being a woman in a male-dominated field, "I am not convinced [being female] plays a bigger role in my conception of myself as my Taiwanese-Irish roots or my transient childhood."

To commit to a creative craft like playwriting is pioneering at its finest: unmooring oneself for the sake of a piece of work that may or may not congeal. There is no career track post-MFA, no training for how to take a Yurt across a Mongolian river to discover a character or flesh out a plot. So far, so good, though, for Cowhig: She's headed to San Francisco in September to become the playwright in residence at the Marin Theatre Company for the 2010–2011 season.

— **Merissa Nathan Gerson** • photo by **Brian Awehali**