

THE WRITE PERSPECTIVE:

The Newsletter of the Michener Center for Writers

Fall 2009

Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig: Covering New Ground and Changing the Landscape

A groundbreaking theater research study reported this summer by *The New York Times* revealed a shortage of good scripts by women. Don't tell that to recent Michener playwriting graduate Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig (2009), who has pulled off an astonishing coup. This spring she was chosen by the Olivier Award-winning dramatist and Oscar-nominated screenwriter David Hare as the recipient of the 2009 Yale Drama Series Prize for her play *Lidless*. Then in July she was notified that she had won the University's coveted \$50,000 Keene Prize for Literature for the play. Coupled with these awards was an earlier announcement that Frances was the first-place winner of the 2008 *Glimmer Train Press* short story award for "Monkeys of the Sea," her first publication.

Lidless, chosen from a field of 650 submissions for the Yale prize, tells the story of a former Guantanamo Bay detainee who journeys to the home of his female U.S. Army interrogator 15 years after his detention, demanding half her liver for the damage she inflicted on his body and soul during her interrogations. The prize carries with it a \$10,000 award from the David C. Horn Foundation, along with a staged reading of the work at Yale Rep in September 2009 and the publication of the play by Yale University Press.

The daughter of a career diplomat, Frances says that she was "made" in Taiwan, born in Philadelphia and lived in northern Virginia for the first nine years of her life before the family headed overseas to postings in Okinawa, Taipei and Beijing. She returned to the States to attend Brown University in 2001. An older friend from the International School in Beijing who was also at Brown took a playwriting class, and Frances thought she might as well take it, too, although she had no strong commitment

to the theatre; it was just something to do. Instead it marked a turning point for this sociology major.

Elmo Terry-Morgan, her teacher, liked her play about foot-binding, the first she had ever written, and produced it the next year at the Rites and Reason Theatre in the African Studies Department. Frances took another playwriting class, then another, and each time her teachers' encouragement and praise propelled her to the next level. Paula Vogel, longtime head of the Brown program and currently the Eugene O'Neill Chair of Playwriting at the Yale School of Drama, said "Frances was a remarkable voice when I met her; as an undergraduate she had already found a sharp, political use of the stage, strong and commanding language, complex character recipes, and a fluidity of form which uses eastern and western traditions." The world of theatre became Frances' refuge when her younger brother hanged himself during her junior year.

From the pain from that experience, Frances turned to playwriting for understanding. Writing allowed her to sink back into her grief and "go to the messy parts of my psyche and sublimate my sorrow into effective scene writing I began to wonder about the souls of the expatriate and immigrant dead, people who lived and died in a culture far from their ancestral home," she says. Out of these questions arose her play *410[Gone]* in which a sister journeys to the Chinese Land of the Dead after the suicide of her younger brother. She completed the first draft in the fall of 2004, six months after his death, and directed a workshop production of the play during her senior year at Brown. After graduation Frances went to New York and interned at the Public Theatre. The work of ensemble physical theatre companies intrigued her and using nothing more than a Google search she discovered the Dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre in Humbolt, California. Frances bought a car and headed west, where she would spend the next ten months living and making theatre with 20 other students who had left their previous lives, too. She describes the experience as an intensive boot camp for the body/spirit and one that awakened a passion for theatre. While at Dell'Arte she applied to only one graduate school, the Michener Center, with her play from Brown, and was accepted.

During the fall of 2007 when Frances was in her second year of the program, she grew desperate to leave the dream world of the dead she was exploring in *410* and attempt something visceral that related to what she was reading in the news about Guantanamo and the sexualized tactics of female interrogators. Her imagination was rekindled, and she set about immersing herself with the tools from her Dell' Arte days to understand her source material. She asked fellow classmates in a dramaturgy class to join her in a series of sensory deprivation exercises: interrogating them harshly with a bag over their heads, or blindfolding and binding them and subjecting them to a blasting soundtrack from the U.S. Army's torture playlist. Frances sought out and befriended a young man who had just returned from a tour of duty in Iraq as an army medic at a detention center. He lent Frances a duffel bag full of his soldier clothes and gave her a red-orange jumpsuit from the detention center and pictures he had taken illegally of his patients after interrogation sessions.

Frances would wear the clothes while she wrote—sometimes wearing earplugs or a bag over her head, or with music blasting or simply white noise that allowed her senses to inform her. Frances revealed in her thesis essay that “the process for *Lidless* has assured me that no terrain is off limits or too distant for dramatic interrogation, as long as I am willing to reach into the world or the people and experiences that will bring me emotionally and sensually closer to my characters and story.”

UT Professor of Theatre Steven Dietz says, “I remember the first pages of *Lidless* that Frances brought into my workshop. From the start, she was attempting nothing less than to get at the soul of what is owed to those we have injured; what must be exacted from those who have injured us. This was mid-career professional ambition in the person of a second-year MFA student. And, to no one's surprise (certainly not mine), she pulled it off. The surface events and poetic/theatrical details of the play have since gone in many directions, as Frances—a fearless reviser of her own work—has continued her work on it, but the fundamental intention has remained unchanged: how does a world, a marriage, a life at war come to some kind of tenable peace? This is a writer with craft and cunning enough to usher her audience into the thorniest of conflicts and bring them out the other side with grace.”

Playwriting Head Suzan Zeder echoes Dietz' sentiments: "We are thrilled that Frances has won the coveted Keene Prize as a capstone to her other amazing achievements this year! She is already changing the landscape of the American Theatre."

Frances' life has been a whirlwind since her May graduation. She immediately left for Whidby Island in the Pacific Northwest to work on her play at the Women Playwrights Festival and then continued her writing/revising at the Ragdale Colony in Lake Forest, Illinois. In July she was at the PlayPenn Playwrights Conference in Philadelphia, then on to the Alley Theatre in Houston for a staged reading of *Lidless*. She'll be in southern California in August at the Ojai Playwrights Conference, then on to the MacDowell Colony for a residency before heading to Yale in September for another reading. From October through December, she'll be in residence at the Santa Fe Art Institute polishing *Lidless* and *410* and working on new plays and exploring the Southwest. Frances will come back to Austin in October for the Keene Prize presentation, when her family will be stateside from China for an annual visit. She'll return to China and Taiwan in early 2010 for the New Year, which promises to bring even more new opportunities.