

FRANCES YA-CHU COWHIG

PRODUCED ACROSS THE GLOBE AND GARNERING NUMEROUS AWARDS, THE WORKS OF THE YOUNG PLAYWRIGHT FRANCES YA-CHU COWHIG HAVE A RARE POLITICAL URGENCY, TACKLING THEMES FROM THE FUTURE LEGACY OF GUANTÁNAMO BAY TO IMMORTALITY IN VIRTUAL SPACE TO RELATIONS BETWEEN AMERICA AND CHINA. HER PLAY *THE WORLD OF EXTREME HAPPINESS*, RECENTLY PRODUCED AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE, WILL HAVE ITS WORLD PREMIERE IN THE US LATER THIS YEAR.

MARIA DIMITROVA: What have you been up to?

FRANCES YA-CHU COWHIG: I moved to a rural town in northern California a few months ago with my partner, Brian, and our dog, so my life is pretty mellow these days. I have several plays that I am working on, one of which is pretty overdue.

MD: What are they about?

FC: Two are about contemporary China, each inspired by a person I met there. One is an adaptation of Chinese poet/historian Liao Yiwu's memoir of his life in prison, where he spent four years after 1989 for a poem he wrote in protest over Tiananmen. The other is inspired by the Chinese doctor Wang Shuping, who was working at a blood bank in Henan province during the mid-1990s and was the first to call attention to the fact that dirty practices and cost-cutting measures at government-run blood banks were causing massive HIV and hepatitis outbreaks in the countryside. She was no longer able to work in China – she got fired, harassed, they sent people to beat her up. She now lives in Utah and is a family friend, so we've done lots of interviews and now I just have to figure out how to write it.

MD: They both sound quite harrowing. Though knowing your work, they might be funny as well?

FC: Hopefully! The darker I go the more buoyant I also try to go, to balance it out.

MD: Your plays are often confrontational, sometimes explicitly political. Is there a conscious Brechtian element in your writing?

FC: Not really – I don't really ever try to call attention to the artifice of the theatre. I'm not convinced that a lot of Brecht's thoughts on alienation and estrangement work with contemporary audiences, though I definitely admire his work. I am interested in making the familiar strange and the strange familiar – which, given the subject matter I am attracted to, happens pretty organically.

MD: What compels you to write about tensions in Chinese culture?

FC: I lived in China from 1996 to 2001 (age 13 to 18) and Taiwan from 1994 to 1996. My mother is from rural Taiwan, her parents were both farmers and her brothers are all businessmen, some of whom work in China. And my father is a US diplomat who worked in China. So honestly, it's just the stuff I grew up surrounded by, ideas and people I was exposed to over a lifetime of going back and forth between Asia and the US. Also, because Chinese writers who try to write about social or political truths are often punished by the government, because there aren't many plays about contemporary China and because there aren't very many meaty roles for Asian actors in the US or the UK, by writing a few plays on China I can address multiple "gaps" at once.

MD: There has been a notable increase in cultural interest in China, though, largely prompted by its skyrocketing economic growth – also, ironically, one of the aspects most harshly criticised by playwrights, authors and artists. What do you think of that paradox?

FC: I think the danger is in creative work being



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used as an instrument for soft power – ie advancing Western hegemony in works that portray China as dangerous, bad or other, when in large part it is the West that has created the conditions for China's growth. I read recently that the film *The Stoning of Suraya M* was funded primarily by the head of Blackwater – an example of how a work can be used to create an almost definitive cultural perception of a place the intended audience has no other reference point for. I think it's necessary to be vigilant about such things. I would feel pretty bummed if that were the legacy of my creative output.

MD: Is there a collaborative element to your work?

FC: Oh, definitely. I am just creating the blueprints or the skeleton of a piece, so I completely rely on my creative collaborators to execute it. More so because I am always seeking oppositional choices – I want them to bring a tension to the text. I don't want actors to just act what is there, but instead find ways to play against it and push away from it. This is extremely important with sound design too – I am always trying to push designers away from underscoring the emotions that are already contained in the scene and, when dealing with a specific culture such as China, away from choices that are stereotypically oriental.

MD: What would you say are your creative influences?

FC: I'm a big fan of Naomi Wallace's work. Also, Tony Kushner's. And the films of Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu and writer Guillermo Arriaga. Octavio Solis' play *Lydia* was formative for me. I also enjoy the works of magical realist novelists, the way they can make all things strange and fascinating. Miyazaki's animations. And in a weird way, computer/video games, in the use of objects and inventory. I like using a minimalist palette of objects so that they can become visual metaphors and carry

a dramatic weight that transforms through the play.

MD: Tell me about *410 [GONE]*, your autobiographical play exploring the virtual as a space between life and death. What do you think about the modern dissolution of the material in favour of the virtual?

FC: It's kind of a Chinese American Buddhist Eurydice story that looks at a 17-year-old Asian American kid's journey into the Chinese underworld after he hangs himself, and his sister's journey through grief as she remains stuck in the closet where he hanged himself, and her attempts to contact him. I personally am attempting to remain as much in the physical world as possible, sometimes in archaic ways. I have recently started writing on a typewriter, and draft with fountain pens. It's mostly a visceral reaction to what happens when I spend too much time in a virtual domain: I feel depressed, unsettled and somewhat lost. I am, I think, the first generation of what people call "digital natives": my first computer game, played when I was seven, was called *Shoot Saddam*, where I would just sit at the computer and fire guns at Saddam's face. There are of course many great things about the virtual world, but it's best treated as a tool and not an alternate reality. I think my main discomfort with the internet is that it collapses valence: I could have one screen open to some horrific thing that happened in Afghanistan and another open to what some celebrity wore clubbing, and it makes them equal.

MD: What do you think should change about the contemporary theatre landscape?

FC: More colour-blind casting in plays that are already part of the canon (I saw *The Phantom of the Opera* for the first time while I was in London a couple of months ago – there is no reason for that play to have an all-white cast.) Less of a divide between text-based and physical theatre. More affordable tickets. Greater risk-taking on the part of institutional theatres: the Shed is a great model, in the way the National Theatre was able to use its West End successes such as *War Horse* to fund riskier work.

MD: Would you ever consider putting on something in China, despite having to comply with regulations?

FC: I'd love my work to be translated and done over there – a friend of mine is working in theatre in Shanghai and tells me there is a very lively underground scene where things go on without government regulation – but I have no idea whether there is any need or desire for a non-Chinese person's plays about China. Probably my non-China plays would go over better there. My father used to give talks to Peace Corps volunteers, and told them that the best way to talk about political problems in China is by using analogies from their own countries – ie, talk about the US abuse of Native Americans so as to talk indirectly about Tibet.

MD: What do you most hope to accomplish in the long run?

FC: I always choose projects that seem impossible. So I have several hugely ambitious plays that I want to pull off. Right now each one feels like an ultra-marathon – and they kind of are, in that it usually takes me three years of research and revisions to do a play justice. After that, who knows... part of me wants to take a theatre sabbatical and spend a few years on a novel, because there's a whole realm of experience I want to explore – a person's inner life over a period of time – that theatre is simply not the right medium for. Also, I would like the challenge of creating a piece of work that doesn't require 10 levels of collaborative interpretation but must stand on its own, exactly as I have written it.