

I KNOW JOE AND I ARE ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH WHEN THE AGING HIPPIE IN “BIG SUR”—WITH THE ARROW IN HER FOREHEAD?—MAKES HER ENTRANCE FROM STAGE LEFT.

In BIG SUR, Jeremy Chester’s very first hitchhiker steals Jeremy’s car at gunpoint and leaves Jeremy stranded in his underwear.

A local cop, who had been busted from a major city police force and is bitter about being exiled to the sticks, gets the car back for Jeremy and urges Jeremy to make a fuss over the deed when they get back to headquarters (“I could use the publicity out here in the sticks”).

A knocking is heard from the trunk, and an American Indian emerges and joins Jeremy and the cop. Soon, the Indian, who doesn’t (or won’t) talk, starts playing a flute-like instrument that drives the cop over the edge (persistent music playing through the floor in his city apartment, and the cop’s violent reaction to it, had played an important part in exiling him to the sticks). The cop smashes the windshield of Jeremy Chester’s car with his nightstick and, while mindlessly flailing away, hits the American Indian.

When things calm down, the cop, contrite and chagrined, exits, stage right. The Indian shoots a toy arrow at the departing cop, off stage right. An Aging Hippie (hitchhiking, on her way to a demonstration) immediately passes the departing cop. The Aging Hippie is entering also from stage right—with a toy arrow prominently stuck in her forehead.

During the early rehearsal of this scene, I suggest to Joe that The Aging Hippie might make her entrance with the arrow in her forehead, from stage left, opposite from the direction where the American Indian had shot his toy arrow. When the Aging Hippie enters from that opposite side, the Indian does a double take as the

Balladeer/Narrator un-suctions the arrow from the Aging Hippie's head—and her scene begins.

Joe buys it.

It's absurd, of course. It's schtick. It also fits in with the world of BIG SUR—the truth of the world of SUR (more about that later).

Throughout the early rehearsals I see Joe support whatever similar madcap business is indicated in the text — and top it; he seems to know that the zany elements are necessary to get to the pathos of the piece.

Since Joe acts out every role for the actors (more on that technique below), I also see that he has the style of the piece in his bones.

In the Cross-Country Bus Tour Interlude, for example, Joe pushes the surreal aspects of this segment right up to the edge.

This Bus-Tour Interlude was not in the original television show. I had been told it was a dangerous scene to include in the stage version because it stopped the forward movement of the action. True. And it's certainly not subtle; the scene blatantly adds a defoliated, polluted, landscape that makes perfect subtext sense for Jeremy's journey. It stops the journey, but adds a color. It's the kind of — what? — audacity, I guess, that one simply did in the 60s, and that Off-Broadway audiences bought. I have no idea if a contemporary Chinese audience will buy it; the Chinese tend to be more conservative when it comes to dramatic structure. Joe Graves seems to think they will buy it, and he is determined to go the distance with it.

Here's the short Interlude; comments follow.

Lights up.

The Tour Guide enters.

TOUR GUIDE

Interlude: A cross country bus tour.

(Tour Guide jumps onto the car's running board.

All in the car sit bolt upright.

They now wear gas masks.

Throughout the Tour Guide's speech,

all in unison, follow directions,

looking right and left, as automatons)

TOUR GUIDE

Now if you'll all look to the right and left, you'll notice that a kind of defoliation of the land begins to take place. Few trees. . .then

fewer. . .now no trees at all. . .only shrubs. . .dried shrubs for a bit, as we move along. And now, as we approach the hill—that's right,

look up ahead and you can see a steep hill. . . —as we approach it, you'll notice some dried grass to the left and right—just patches of

the yellow grass—and finally dirt. . .very, very dry, cracked earth, the result of this drought year.

—Now. As we strain up this steep hill, I would suggest we all put on the green-tinted sunglasses, passed out to you before. Because, when we caterpillar over the top, we will be blinded by the setting sun,

(All hold up green-tinted glasses)

whose rays, unblocked by buildings, trees, shrubs or grass, will blind the naked eye directly and, indirectly, by bouncing off the earth,

which will resemble burning clay. . .and by something else on that other, mysterious side of the hill.

(MUSIC: Opening, "Thus Spake Zarathustra")

Glasses on?

*(The Automatons place sunglasses
on their gas masks)*

Good. Because here we go— OVER THE TOP!

(A crimson explosion! Smoke pots! The Apocalypse!)

Surprised, eh? You didn't expect to see this, did you? . . . Holes

(MUSIC: OUT)

TOUR GUIDE

Large holes. . . Huge holes as far as the eye can see. With flames shooting out of each. Look like the mouths of midget volcanoes; do they not? — Uh uh! Don't look directly into them; shades or no shades. Those fires are too bright! —What's that, son?—No, no! This is not the moon. This is the Nation's New Central Dump! —As you know, they took over these thousands of what were once forests—well, the air pollution had done the trees in anyway; and what the pollution missed, that chemical warfare chemical — that the Army accidentally let loose? —you recall — did in the rest. So they hired the depressed area people from around here to make the mile-deep potholes and “tend to furnace”, as it were. So! — What you're seeing are last year's automobiles—that hole over there—. . .no return plastic bottles, over there—and it's a big one! —and, ah yes—the one they call the billion dollar hole — last year's military hardware, including the famous F-111's!

(All stand)

Burning, all burning, everything burning, burning, burning up!

(All sit and look sharply right)

HEY! You! Stop running alongside this ve-hi-cle! Do you want to get killed?! —Crazy kid! — I think it was a kid. Funny what happens to their eyes and ears out here. — I know! We'll play THE GAME! —How many of you think that that bald creature, running alongside with the puffed-out stomach and puffed-up, colorless eyes, and that strange skin—is a child?

(No hands raised)

. . .I see. —How many of you think it was a grownup?

(No hands raised)

. . . Other?

(All hands raised)

. . .HA! —Just like all my tours! —All of you think it was an “Other.”

(All look sharply left and down

Serious. Perplexed)

What? That hole? That’s a strange one all right. Filled with water.

Very clear, clean water, too. —No! It’s not man-made like the rest!

It sort of. . . just happened. A freak of nature, I would guess.

They’re working hard to get rid of the water. . . . —I mean, they need the hole. RIGHT? !

(MUSIC: “STARS AND STRIPES FOREVER.”)

Joe Graves has a stage-trained voice—well supported and placed. Trained at LAMDA (The London Academy of Music and Drama), Joe’s American speech is clear (even un-miked, his voice can clearly reach the last row of any balcony). He is also very physical—insists that moves and gestures spring from the text, through the actor, and are an organic extension of an actor’s speech and intention—all of a piece.

The actors we’re using have no training whatsoever. Just smarts, talent and an overwhelming need to perform. Rehearsals become both “play practice” and on-the-job actor training, for actors to reach performance level. To that end, Joe insists that directing by demonstration is the best way to go; especially for actors whose first language is not English. I’m skeptical — but secretly delighted. All of Joe’s demonstrations — take it from this BIG SUR source — are right on the money. In the past I’d wait for actors to “find it on their own” and what they found was often totally wrong, not supported by my text (But, what the hell: What would I know about my text? Right?).

Joe illustrates the kind of manic intensity in the Tour Guide, as she guides her tour of gas-masked automatons through a truly

magnificent apocalyptic wasteland. At every description of every turn of her wasteland tour she becomes more and more filled with an orgasmic joy. And when she reaches her “everything burning, burning, burning up!” Joe, in his demonstration, becomes some kind of an orangutan in heat, grunting all over the stage and between the robot passengers. Throughout, he sits on passenger’s laps, crawls over them, pulls knees apart and plops down between stiff legs, where, in one inspired bit of improvisation, he ties and unties a robot-passenger’s shoelace, while contemplating the strange and inexplicable hole filled with clear water.

Joe has double cast some of the roles to give more students a shot at building a role. The two actresses playing the Tour Guide are very different: one impish, physical and in your face; the other, more contained, with a more lady-like veneer covering the madness. Both take Joe’s demonstration as a template and fly with it; have fun with it; embellish it. They see how far they can take it. As rehearsals continue, they begin to project more. Their speech is clearer; their objectives, more specific.

And they don’t have an inhibited bone in their bodies.

I had never seen the Tour Guide scene go as far as Joe takes it; but once I see it, I buy it — a truthful conception buried in the text all along. And, as I say, ain’t nothing subtle in this scene, as written—so, might as well flaunt it.

While observing an early rehearsal of this Tour Guide scene, I have a revelation about the possible source of the manic/joy feeling in this despairing vision.

I’m very fond of a 1950s musical, THE GOLDEN APPLE, in which there is a Jerome Moross/John LaTouche number called, “Doomed, doomed, doomed” . . .

Oh, the Polar Cap is slowly expanding;
In a million years we’ll freeze to death, I guess.

If the ice age hasn't floored us,
There's a comet heading toward us,
In a year we'll be an interstellar mess.

* * * * *

For all of us are just
Little specks of cosmic dust;
Oh, it's doom, doom, doom,
For the well known human race.”

It's a kick up your heels, rikkytik number; full of joy, in its entertaining doom-saying way. I saw an excellent workshop revival of THE GOLDEN APPLE in the summer of 2006 at The George Bernard Shaw Festival in Toronto, Canada, and the number still works. In this Global Warming age, of course, the resonances are more disquieting. Joe's staging of the Tour Guide scene in BIG SUR certainly included the “Doom, doom, doom” zaniness.

Serendipity.

As far as I know, Joe never saw THE GOLDEN APPLE.

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A WORD ON POLLUTION AS A THEME.

Fast forward to the Shanghai Theatre Academy—one of the two mainland professional theatre training schools in China. I'm meeting with members of the faculty there and the excellent acting professor and stage director Gu Yi An is telling me why he's chosen MACBETH as his next production: “‘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 far back as in my Off-Broadway play, NIGHT OF THE DUNCE, Gerry La Mossa says of David, her ambitious scheming co-librarian, “Can’t you feel David’s presence? Like air pollution, all around us?”

In a later play, PARADISE GARDENS EAST, a character named William Saroyan O’Neill, is perched on a ledge outside an apartment window, threatening to kill himself in order to publicize his stand against air pollution. He’s stunned when he hears the crowd below urging him to “jump!”

In my children’s play, THE HIDE AND SEEK ODYSSEY OF MADELEINE GIMPLE, Madeleine, on her journey to find her parents, Hansel and Gretel Gimple, comes across a young activist fighting an evil organization, IMPULSE INC, and made deaf by waste and air and noise pollution—even has a song about pollution:

CHRISTIAN, THAT’S MY REAL NAME,
YOU CAN CALL ME CHRIS.
CLEAN AIR, THAT’S MY MAIN GAME;
IT’S BEEN HIT OR MISS.

ONE TIME THERE WAS AIR PURE AND FAIR,
CLEAN AIR TO DELIGHT.
FRESH AIR FILLED YOUR LUNGS DAY AND NIGHT.
REMEMBER? AM I RIGHT?

MADELEINE, COME AND JOIN ME.
WE’LL FIGHT IMPULSE INC.
WE’LL HELP SAVE THE GROWNUPS.
C’MON, WHAT’CHA’ THINK?

It isn’t Christian’s activism that leads to this young boy’s death, however; it’s his compassion and humanity for Madeleine’s

misguided journey (his death, in its day, was a shocker for a children's play).

In THE TOTAL IMMERSION OF MADELEINE FAVORINI, this adult Madeleine, my surreal heroine on a surreal cruise in the Mediterranean to find her Italian roots and to recover from a disastrous marriage, looks out over the sea and, delighted, thinks she sees "a silver school of silver fish" that turns out to be a huge, glittering, sea-stain of used condoms.

Pollution, of course, never is a stand-in for deeper dramatic needs, but the polluted atmosphere serves to exacerbate the darker (polluted) goings on in the characters in the plays.

Of course, Beijing is a very polluted city and China, a very polluted country, and I read, almost daily, in the English-language newspaper "China Daily" how China is aware of, and wrestling with, the high level of air, water and sound pollution threatening China's continued expansion, and I wonder how, just on that level, the Tour Guide scene in BIG SUR will resonate.

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Sebastian is playing The American Indian (The term "Native American," I believe, came later in the Political Correction lexicon, than in the late 60's, when BIG SUR was written). Sebastian's written English is exemplary, and his spoken English is quite good; but it's choppy—excellent for most of the play, when the Indian is playing very "Tonto"—but later, when the Indian drops the protective, stereotypical persona, he must be free of all choppiness and affectation to render his "center of pain."

"Can Sebastian pull that reversal moment off," I ask Joe?

“I’m not sure,” says Joe, “but I was thinking of having Sebastian revert to his own native Chinese when he drops the Tonto bullshit pose”

“—with Jeremy to respond—in English?” I ask.

“That’s right,” says Joe.

Whomp!

One of those epiphanies one gets about one’s play — after you think you’ve gotten them all.

Of course!

Maybe!

Makes sense. On lots of levels.

And will the Chinese audiences gasp, as I did, when Joe first mentioned the idea over coffee and goodies at the Paradise Cafe?

PARADISE

—and over cigarettes, of course. Joe is a smoker. And smoking is allowed in the Paradise Cafe. (Smoking is allowed in all restaurants in China)

The Paradise Cafe is a student hang out on the campus of Peking University, located under the Centennial Hall. The Centennial Hall is a huge building with an imposing square in front of it and houses two theatre spaces, one with 2,167 seats and a smaller 300-seat house.

You enter the Paradise Cafe by going round the back of the Centennial Hall and down an outside flight of steps. When you go through the doors, the Cafe is on the left; on the right is a steep

staircase going further down to an even lower-level restaurant — just one of many restaurants on the campus.

By the time I return to the US, I will have eaten excellent full-out Chinese meals at six restaurants on campus; there are at least twice, or maybe three times, that many non-fast food, major eating establishments on the Peking U campus, that cater to even non-students in the area.

The Paradise Cafe is a large Starbucks-styled space (with un-Starbucks-styled cheaper, per-cup, prices). As you enter the Paradise Cafe you spot the coffee bar at the other end of the room.

Clean, warm atmosphere.

Simple, clean-lined furniture; small, round, blond, wood-like plastic-topped tables and chairs, for the most part; some booths; some stuffed, dark-covered arm chairs;

to the right, the room, with more tables and chairs, extends farther back; some food cases with pastries, sandwiches, snacks;

the coffees range from an “Americano” to a latte to a Cappuccino to an Ethiopian blend I tend to favor; teas, cold drinks.

There are posters on the wall of the Italian film classic, Cinema Paradiso. Also, enlarged poster-sized photos of New York scenes are prominently featured on the walls near the large windows, where you can see the feet of outside passersby; one of the posters has a New York scene with the twin towers still standing.

The music loops are constantly playing and filling the room’s atmosphere with vocal and instrumental music that ranges from rock to pop to easy listening to Chinese pop to old-time jazz, to classical, to foreign artists, including my favorites, Jacques Brel and Edith Piaf. The music is always a little too loud.

Two baristas, Cindy and Tiantian run the place, augmented by two boys (baristos?). Sweet Cindy seems to be in charge (more about her later).

Chinese students, foreign students, campus visitors, sit alone, studying, working on their computers or putting tables together to socialize, study in groups and often, each coffee drinker is on the “Ubiquitous,” cell-phoning or text-messaging away; the ring-tone music always cutting through the music in the Paradise ether, no matter how high the canned-music’s volume. Many students can be seen sleeping over their books or laptops, or curled up on the stuffed chairs or sofas, scattered about.

On occasion, The Paradise is used for a magazine photo shoot or a shoot for a television series.

Often there’s some Young-Love kneeing and canoodling going on in some of the corner booths.

There is always time to appreciate the stunning Chinese student-beauties making their Paradise entrances and exits.

Listen to the foreign students, from all over the world, studying the Chinese language, as they sit, talk and create an interesting music of their own; and as they mingle and counterpoint their native languages with the four tones of the fiendishly difficult Chinese.

Lots of one-on-one goings-on; of language-coaching and group-reviewing for test preparations.

The Paradise Cafe is comparatively new on campus this semester and is not open during the winter “Year-Of-The-Pig” holiday-week when I arrive in February. (That’s why Joe Graves and I meet at a Starbucks off campus, that first holiday week). By the time I leave to return to the States, the Paradise Cafe becomes the place to meet. Eventually, I will have an all-day meeting at the Paradise with each playwriting student.

A little taste of Cafe culture for me.

Just about every morning I meet with Joe at the Paradise Cafe. The weeks he needs to go to Macau and Taiwan to lecture and perform his one-man show, RAVEL'S SHAKESPEARE, leave a morning-routine hole in my Peking U life (my wife will join me for the last month at PKU).

The talk ranges from the work on BIG SUR and the maddening Peking U obstacles that often derail a rehearsal to problems I'm confronting in my adult conversation classes, to sharing with him the tongue twisters I'm developing for those same classes, to talking American politics and how surreal all that seems to viewing Bush-era madness from China, to making arrangements with Qing to get acupuncture when my lower back starts spasm-ing, to a lot of smutty Graves/Gagliano sophomoric talk from two aging fantasizing sybarites—and to stopping whatever we're doing to chat with the passersby who stop by our table.

In the five years Joe Graves has been the Artistic Director of the Beijing Institute of World Theatre and Film, he has cast many students in his productions. His first casting call elicited 4000 requests to audition — that's right, 4000 (for his production of Gozzi's, The King Stag)! The students adore Joe and seek him out, whenever they can. Jane, for example, stops by our table.

Jane is a graduate PhD student (lovely, charming, sweet, studying the Linguistics of Character Development in Drama). Her spoken English is perfect. Joe embarrasses her by praising her acting ability. Jane lives some distance from the Peking U campus, so, when she arrives daily on campus, she sets up office in the Paradise Cafe and can be found there, laptop before her, whenever she is not in class. For most of the term Jane is feverishly preparing for an important examination. I will discover that most students will prepare for important examinations while I'm there (like, every week, it seems), and this will make life difficult for our BIG SUR rehearsal schedules.

Jane introduces me to the world of linguistics, where theories on drama and dramatic character (Jane’s linguistics’ focus) seem to dovetail with mine. I invite Jane to attend my playwriting class, if she has the time.

I am beginning to understand in more depth the lure of the Coffee House centers of creative camaraderie that were often the centers of artistic and political and social life in Fin De Siècle (and early 20th Century) Vienna and Paris and Berlin and Prague. Would I, while I’m at Peking U, hold court while chairing an all-day-long table, where a Chinese Picasso, or a Chinese Cocteau, or a Chinese Gustav Klimt, or a Chinese Arthur Schnitzler, or a Chinese Madam Alma Mahler—with five of her current lovers perhaps—pulling up chairs, regularly stop by and, over an Ethiopian brew, rage with me against whatever Establishment shackles are currently crushing our creative balls?

I’ll tell you this: Before heading for China I had become a tea drinker back in the good old USofA—mainly English Breakfast tea with milk and “Splenda” sugar substitute. At Peking U, in Paradise, I’ve become a coffee drinker again.

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THE WALK FROM MY DIGS TO PARADISE.

My rooms are located in a building near the West Gate, the main entrance to the Peking U campus.

I do have a small fridge in my study room, so each morning I always have juice with eye vitamins (for my macular degeneration, the dry kind) and perhaps cereal and milk, or a breakfast cereal bar and milk, and then I am off to Paradise for my Ethiopian.

My rooms are on the second floor and as I leave them I greet the maids with a “Knee How” (Hello) and head down the stairs.

The maids will clean and tidy the rooms and bathroom and change towels and bed sheets daily and leave large thermoses of hot water in two silver carafes in the study room, along with some green-tea tea bags.

From the front stoop of my building I walk straight a half block and turn right onto a main drag (across from an imposing building that always houses major events and conferences, so that there are often buses parked there and very large cars).

I turn right.

If I turn left, I will head for the many parks and lakes on the campus.

So I turn right and pass other very large residence buildings.

Always parked along the street are “black” cabs; called “black” because these are cabs not authorized by the city, and the drivers greet you and often, with other cabbies, play cards, either on the curb or on the boots of their cabs, as they wait for passengers to hail them. These cabs are usually small cars. Other authorized cabs (the yellow cabs of Beijing) are bringing people on and off campus constantly. These authorized cabs are medium sized and new.

Other cars are driving on and off campus all the time. These are usually new large sized cars. Lots of Audis, Buicks, VWs, Camrys, Mercedeses. Beijing now has millions of cars and they are adding a thousand cars a day—in a sprawling city that is building an elaborate subway system, and where new skyscrapers seem to spring up weekly, and where praying mantis-like derricks on rising skyscrapers dot the skyway, anywhere you look. It’s anybody’s guess how this will play out during the ‘08 Olympics!

I ask Qing if the Chinese buy their cars on any kind of an installment plan. No, she says; by and large they wait until they have the cash. They are not a society used to buying on credit (that discipline, I’m sure, will change).

The cars drive — even on campus— as if they have the right of way. And if a car isn't dogging you as you walk, a bicycle is bound to be (as one fed-up, English-speaking student once put it) “driving up your ass.”

The bikes are cheap and there seem to be hundreds of them at any given moment, also “driving up your ass,” as they get from one part of the huge campus to the other, often with someone sitting on the narrow rear shelf of the bike on the “Ubiquitous,” with the bike's peddler often peddling, also while on the “Ubiquitous,” cell phoning, or text messaging away (China now has more mobile phones than any other country).

When I get to the main hotel on campus, with the cabs and cars and bikes coming and going in abundance, and with some of the largest Audis I've ever seen (with dark, almost black, windows), I turn left and walk past the tennis courts where there are often tennis classes going on.

Then I pass a very large meadow where people sit alone, reading, or are sitting on the grass studying, or, in groups, doing Tai-chi, or looking at the stone sculptures scattered throughout.

When I pass the basketball fields (almost always filled with Chinese students playing—they are big fans of basketball), I veer right and walk toward the rear of the Centennial Hall, where I hold my breath, as I pass one spot with a terrible odor— sewerage, I guess; the smell of rotting vegetables (there's a similar spot near the campus hotel—same smell, same automatic holding of breath).

As I reach still another restaurant, where food is being loaded in, I turn right onto a back street and I'm looking at the spot where huge posters are often worked on, outdoors, that will be placed in front of the Centennial Hall, announcing the many world-class arts groups or films to be presented.

And there it is — the stairway, going down to Paradise.

Once a week, in front of the stairway, mountains of used plastic bottles and containers are sorted and bagged, and it is a scene from right out of the Tour Guide sequence in BIG SUR — “no return plastic bottles, over there.” If you hit that spot at that time, on those mornings, you’re forced to step into that plastic mound of plastic crap before heading downstairs to Paradise. Ugh!

Joe and I often talk about our classes at the Paradise Cafe. But when I first got my course schedule sorted out, it is at another Cafe on campus: The one in the hotel.

THE HOTEL’S COFFEE SHOP.

In the Shao Yuan Guest House—the PKU campus hotel—are two restaurants: a large one with an extensive menu, with many waitresses serving, uniformed in bright red Mandarin-styled jackets and black Pants.

The restaurant serves lunch and dinner. Come a half hour before the restaurant opens and you will see the entire red wall of serving, Chinese-attractive cadre at attention, being giving orders, and probably a pep talk, by some master sergeant man or woman.

Right next door to the restaurant is a coffee shop that does, indeed serve excellent coffee, but also serves American style breakfasts (more or less), as well as some traditional Chinese and Korean meals. You can run in for a fast meal or just for coffee or even alcoholic drinks.

One of my favorite fast meals in the Coffee Shop is a salad-sized bowl of won ton (dumpling) soup with many won tons (each stuffed

with meat and vegetables) and some delicious greens and seaweed type stuff (that I come to like), in a light broth. It's usually served with some spicy (hot) side salad dishes. Order a bowl of sticky rice (Mifan), and you have a great tasting, belly filling, healthy meal. One cup of the good Columbia coffee served there is twice the price of the won ton meal.

I have agreed to teach a playwriting course in the English Department, and to conduct an English Conversation course for adults who come to the Peking U campus to take classes after their day jobs, and who study English reading, writing, grammar—and who need practice in speaking English. Joe seems to think it's one course and that I won't need to prepare, just get the adult students to talk in English. (Wrong!)

Joe sets up a meeting at the Coffee Shop with me and two other people, Liu Shusen, Vice Dean of the School of Foreign Languages, and a woman, English name Sandy, who is in charge of the Adult Education English courses.

I'm handed an English textbook that the students will be using and a schedule of classes that I find hard to decipher. What is clear, however, is that I will be teaching a Tuesday night class (7-9PM) and a Sunday afternoon class at 12:20 (to 2:30). So, technically I am teaching one class but, apparently, there are two sections.

Or so I think.

During this meeting at the Coffee Shop in Shao Yuan Guest House, Liu Shusen invites Joe and me to dinner for the following week. There is a nearby restaurant that features a special north China cuisine that Liu Shusen has taken Joe to, and that features special entertainment. Liu Shusen makes it clear that he thinks it's a bit low class, but Joe is captivated by the entertainment, and he thinks I will be as well. So Liu Shusen satisfies Joe's request. Apparently, you never know what the acts will be. Joe saw some entertainer in

drag there, mugging his/her way through Chinese schtick. He found the show irresistible.

DINNER AND BELLY BUTTONS

Liu Shusen and Joe and I walk out the Peking U West gate and cross the heavily-trafficked street (luckily there's a traffic light there, or you'd be hit broadside—or into your ribs—by the speeding cabs, cars, bikes and buses), and straight through an archway that leads to an entirely different world of restaurants, shops, houses, tree-lined paths, and along a long waste-water canal. In the 15-minute walk to the restaurant Liu Shusen talks about the area and, in answer to a question of mine, describes how extensive the PKU Department of Languages is; they even teach Sanskrit.

Liu Shusen is a very cultured and respected scholar and professor and, according to Joe, a superb administrator. Liu specializes in the study of Greek & Roman mythology, American literature and translation. Prof. Liu is also chairman of the Australian Study Institution at Peking University. He's traveled to other countries — including the United States. Of medium height, Liu has a sense of humor and a particular elegance and sense of style that I can't readily define but that I will encounter in other Chinese professors.

Liu Shusen likes the food in this restaurant he's taking us to because it is an unusual cuisine for Beijing, he says, from a northern province in China, where, for a short period, he lived as a child.

We enter an elaborate courtyard where, on the side, food is being prepared and we walk through to the restaurant with red painted tables and benches. The high rectangular room has two other levels on the sides and back with open compartments that contain tables and benches and that overlook the floor of the main room. At one end of the room is a stage, empty at the moment, except for a small boy romping around and whose mother is taking pictures of him from her table on the floor.

Typically, the waitress immediately stands by the table, as soon as we're seated, and waits for us to order.

And waits and waits and waits and waits.

I find this disconcerting at first. I am so used to a waitress in the United States leaving a menu and disappearing and returning later, that I find it uncomfortable and intimidating to have the waitress just stand there while everyone decides. But the Chinese, who are ordering the food, and the waitresses taking the order, don't seem to mind. And ordering a Chinese meal can take a long time.

This business of eating is very important in China. Lots of questions are asked about the food. So the waitress stands.

And stands and stands and stands and stands.

Later I am to get used to this and become less intimidated.

Liu Shusen orders for us and we begin eating while we wait for the show (we will continue eating during the show). I like all the dishes except for a fish dish. I especially like a beef stew (apparently very unusual for Beijing), and a vegetable, fried with some kind of bark, I believe, that is hardened and that you eat like pop corn, only in large pieces. And, of course, there are the usual varieties of cooked vegetables that I come to adore in China. There is a plate of fresh vegetables as well. And, of course, the rice is usually served later in the meal.

The show's opening act is of a young, large, man who plays a number of different brass instruments—he even plays the traditional trumpet fanfare that opens each bull fight. He's very good and plays for about fifteen minutes (about five minutes too long).

This is followed by a young, slim, tall, rubbery comedian, wearing what seems to be a black, silk pajama-like costume, covered with

three very large, brightly colored, theatrical Chinese masks. He's very physical: Lots of body and rubbery-face contortions and a running patter of stories and comments told, apparently, in many dialects. The stories, of which Liu Shusen gives us the running gist, are amusing, and the crowd seems to enjoy him. No "drop-dead," "on-the-floor" laughter, but there's a feeling of delight in the air. The comedian seems to spoof a well-known story that gets the biggest laughs.

A female partner joins him. Small, slight. Lovely, Happy smile. Bare midriff. With a truly amazing bellybutton—volcano-mouth wide, crater deep. Bottomless. Too exceptional to be merely a "bellybutton." Only the Yiddish word for "bellybutton" will do to describe this bellybutton: It is a "pupik." Unfortunately, as soon as Ms. Pupik opens her mouth and talks, it's, "fingernails scraping-on-the-blackboard" time. An irritating screech (to my ear), but, apparently, a comic sound. Much laughter when Ms. Pupik talks. She is an amazing acrobat. I am especially impressed with her back bends—rounded pupik-belly volcano crater, arched to the ceiling, walking backwards on hands and feet and picking up a cloth with her teeth.

Later she gets to her feet and they juggle. All this is preparing me for the amazing Peking acrobats I will see later at the Chaoyang Theater.

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Back on campus, as we enter the West Gate to the campus, Joe points out the Administration Building. It has a large auditorium that can be used as a theatre, and he thinks it may be the right venue for BIG SUR.

The Administration Building's auditorium is famous for having world leaders speak at important international events. Bill Clinton spoke there. So did another famous leader—still leading his country—a

leader whose appearance in that building caused Joe to be roughed up the first year Joe arrived on campus. He was walking to his apartment one foggy night, and lost his way, and was grabbed by some guards when he got close to the Administration Building. The guards were Russian, on the alert for Putin haters (President Putin of Russia was speaking that night), and it took some English-Russian-speaking Chinese person to keep Joe from getting beyond the frisking (to the water-boarding?) stage.

I'm delighted about the possibility of the Administration Building auditorium housing my BIG SUR production—very prestigious; the first contemporary American play to be produced there. However, there would be very little run-through and dress rehearsal time in the space—the story of my professional life.

The only venues that seem to offer significant rehearsal and/or run-through times are in university theatres.

The only professional experience I ever had where we rehearsed in the theatre we would be performing in was in the Off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theatre in New York. The play was my NIGHT OF THE DUNCE. The very first day of rehearsal at The Cherry Lane, the company entered the theatre and saw on the stage William Ritman's set for a shabby public library—downstairs and up—and each day we rehearsed, the set got dressed, little by little, and by run-through time, that set was set in everyone's bones.

On the Peking University campus there is a small theatre in the Centennial Hall that seats about 300 and is right for BIG SUR; but it is not clear if the theatre is available when we want it; and it's quite expensive and lights must be rented and loaded in (that would not be the case in the Administration Building). I am surprised at how expensive it is to rent the theatre and how, in this communist country, there is very little, or no, subsidies for the arts—certainly not on the campus of Peking University. But, before I leave China, I begin to understand that, at the moment, when it comes to money

and business of any kind, it is as laissez faire a capitalistic country as I have ever seen.

More on this. Later.

Before heading to our individual digs, Joe and I discuss the upcoming BIG SUR rehearsal schedules. But now, besides needing to work around the actor's heavy class schedules, there is an added consideration: My teaching schedules.

I am about to start teaching a playwriting class (never taught on this campus and, rarely, throughout China), and an English-for-Adults Conversation Classes.

And I am more nervous about this than about facing any opening night.

(To be continued)

