

IDEOGRAM

*A play for 3 actors
and 2 musical instruments*

by
David Zellnik

March 18, 2008

This play is written to be performed by 3 actors

- **Jasper**, American, any ancestry except for East Asian, not too old.
- **Drew**, American of East Asian ancestry, same age as Jasper. This actor also plays an instrument: a Chinese recorder.
- **Wei**, is an older woman, born in China, heavily accented. Also plays a small gong.

When Drew or Wei are not in the scenes they should be neutral storytellers.

This play should be performed on or around 3 stools, with no props other than the musical instruments.

IDEOGRAM

Lights up on a man, speaking to us. Jasper.

JASPER

3 weeks before my friend disappeared, I wrote him a birthday card. For some reason, I couldn't decide what to write, spent like an hour writing various idiotic things – happy birthday man! – then I started doodling in Chinese – not *Chinese*: Chinese characters. Made-up um.... ideograms. I'd seen enough Chinese menus to do a reasonable approximation. It felt oddly natural. I covered the blank card.

Actor playing Wei hits a small gong

JASPER

So my buddy is of *Chinese ancestry* and as a joke I covered his birthday card in make believe "Chinese-y" writing. My buddy asked:

DREW

When did you learn Chinese?

JASPER

I said, It's made up. He said:

DREW

It looks pretty real to me.

JASPER

I said, Do you read Chinese?

DREW

No.

JASPER

It's made-up Chinese

Beat.

DREW

Come on, what does it say?

JASPER

Nothing.

DREW

Come *on*.

JASPER
(*A lie*) It says, happy birthday Chinaman!

DREW
Like how many times?

JASPER
Like a dozen times.

DREW
But these aren't the same three ideograms repeated over and over-

JASPER
CAUSE IT'S MADE-UP CHINESE!

Beat.

DREW
(*Oddly sad*) But it looks so real.

Actor playing Wei hits the small gong.

JASPER
2 days later my friend comes back to me.

DREW
It's Chinese.

JASPER
What?

DREW
Real Chinese. Where did you copy it from?

JASPER
It's not Chinese. He brings this old old Chinese lady with him, super old, *central casting* old, who says:

WEI
This is very beautiful poem. Some of the rhythm is not so good, some of it too consciously uh..... imitation of great 8th century poet Wang Wei, but it is beautiful.

JASPER
(*Beat*) You're shitting me-

WEI

It says:

I sit alone, in the hush of bamboo stillness
And I thrum a zither and think of a love who has gone.
Where are the words that once lingered so long
In the secrecy of the wood? Now no one can hear.

JASPER

Huh.

WEI

Write more.

JASPER

What?

WEI

Please.

JASPER

I can't.

WEI

WRITE!

Actor playing Drew takes out a recorder, and starts to play a sweet, high, haunting melody.

JASPER

One hour later I hand her several pages I doodled. I waited. Her face lost its buoyancy. I think: the game is up, but she says:

WEI

This title is very brave.

JASPER

The title?

WEI

"Mao Zedong's the Long March of 1937 Accompanied by the Right-Thinking Zhou Enlai" *(Suddenly he giggles,)*

JASPER

(About the laughter) What?

WEI
The verb you use suggests they were married – very daring.

JASPER
I... try and push people's buttons.

WEI
You are gay?

JASPER
("No") Uhhhh no. I'm a stock broker.

WEI
I show this to friends.

JASPER
I call in sick to work. Wei has me writing in this take out place on Baxter. She supplies me with dumplings and I doodle all day. Quick effortless strokes from my pen.

He makes strokes in the air.
Ludicrous. The office calls:

DREW
Dude, where are you?

JASPER
Your aunt is crazy.

DREW
She's not my aunt.

JASPER
Whatever,

DREW
Where are you?

JASPER
Chinatown. I'm writing.

DREW
You're not a writer.

JASPER
In Chinese I'm a writer.

(Gentle) Fuck off. DREW

You jealous? JASPER

(He is jealous) I'm hanging up. DREW

Drew hangs up. Straight to:

Good news! Your play, it is a success! WEI

What? JASPER

The play you have written. WEI

(Trying to fake it) About Mao... JASPER

WEI
NOT ABOUT MAO! This play a parable. Still called Long March, not sure why, but very sneaky. A love story between a worker marching ever deeper into a mine in Jiangxi province – maybe not best choice for province – there's a girl who brings the worker water and they kiss one afternoon behind a pile of coal. She becomes covered with soot. Very beautiful scene, but it is okay, no sex, very Chinese. So: the next day girl chooses to protest conditions, the worker stays silent, but in the end– well you know your own play: the toll of modernization. The fear and loneliness. Now tell me:

What? JASPER

WHERE DID YOU LEARN CHINESE? WEI

Wei hits the small gong.

JASPER
(To audience) I write more, and more. One week later – (ridiculous) one week!

WEI
I have bad news. Your play has been shut down in several cities in China.

What? JASPER

WEI
And at one theatre company, people are arrested, the actor who played one of the lovers has been tortured.

Pull the play! JASPER

WEI
We need your voice, your strong voice, for the workers!

I will not have my actors abused! JASPER

There is nothing I can do- WEI

Tell the government I will refuse to write unless the safety of my actors can be assured. JASPER

But that is what they want! WEI

I will not jeopardize- JASPER

WEI
THEY KNEW THE RISKS. (*Beat*) Please. Write.

Beat.

Who was I before? Some asshole middleman on the stock exchange floor- JASPER

I'm afraid you must leave here. WEI

Why? JASPER

WEI

Look.

JASPER

Outside there are 2 men, in suits, sunglasses, casing the joint. *(To Wei)* You don't think they're here causea *me*.

WEI

(Very scared) I have a husband. I want you to leave. I have arranged a place for you to write.

JASPER

But-

WEI

Come back when new work is finished.

To:

DREW

She sent you here?

JASPER

She said you'd help.

DREW

Don't you have an apartment?

JASPER

Not safe there.

DREW

Dude, there's no one following you. There is no play. She's pulling your leg. I couldn't find anything on the internet about it.

JASPER

The internet is censored!

DREW

And they're gonna fire you if you keep calling in sick.

JASPER

I didn't ask for this gift!

DREW

Jesus.

JASPER

You know it's true what they say when you become famous: *you don't change the people around you do.*

DREW

YOU'RE NOT FAMOUS!

JASPER

IN CHINA I'M FAMOUS!

To:

WEI

I read new piece to my uncle in Fujian province...

JASPER

And?

WEI

He cried so much. So much crying. Your scene about the serving of the no-meat dumplings in that rural school made him remember his whole childhood.

JASPER

I had this sense -

SWITCH TO:

DREW

Nice practical joke.

JASPER

What?

DREW

The men following me.

JASPER

No-

DREW

Ooh I'm scared!

JASPER

Leave the apartment.

DREW

This guy came up to me, asked about my plays in Chinese. How much you pay him?

JASPER

Tell them the plays are mine.

DREW

There are no plays. I said it was me. They just walked away.

JASPER

I want you to leave your place immediately. I need you to use the fire escape-

DREW

Dude, relax. I want you out of my apartment.

JASPER

Please, look, I'm sorry I can write in Chinese-

DREW

You can't! An old woman is having a joke with you! Or you are with me, I don't care.

JASPER

You saw the poem on your card!

DREW

I saw chicken scribble on my card.

JASPER

Just please, when they come back, tell them -

DREW

Stop it. I said it was me.
(*Soft, serious.*) I wish it were me.

Beat. Drew starts to play the recorder.

JASPER

And that was the last time I heard from him. Though on his nightstand, he left a pad. Covered in chicken-scratch Chinese. Was it a note to me?

WEI

Have you heard from him?

JASPER

No.

WEI

He knew the risks of being friends with a great Chinese writer.

JASPER

I'm not a great Chinese writer.

WEI

Show me new work!

JASPER

Uh, I've haven't been writing much lately.

WEI

Take break. Breathe. Then work.

JASPER

(To audience) I'm still in his apartment. But the men don't case it anymore. I keep waiting for him to come home. I write now but my hand feels sluggish. Self-conscious.

WEI

Very interesting, but scattered storytelling. And a grief has entered your short stories.

JASPER

They're short stories?

WEI

Of course!

JASPER

I hand her the pad Drew wrote in the night before he left.

WEI

This isn't Chinese.

JASPER

Of course it is.

WEI

It is Chinese-*like* but gibberish. He wrote it. Your friend.

JASPER

I lie: No. It was me.

WEI

You lying!

JASPER

Will he come back?

WEI

Perhaps he left for China. To learn Chinese. Write. Write!

Drew plays the recorder through the final monologue:

JASPER

Where is my buddy? No word. A new guy sits at his desk at work.

And I sit at my desk, day-trading.

I should've just written Happy Birthday.

He's in China, right? I'm living in his apartment, keeping it nice for when he comes home. And at night, I draw dozens of ideograms though I show no one.

I just look at them closely, trying to figure out what they mean.

He makes strokes in the air, as he did earlier. Stares at the empty air.

Drew continues to play the recorder.

Wei hits the small gong.

Lights fade. End of play.