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## 'Rocking the Boat': A conversation with New Zealand playwright, Lynda Chanwai-Earle

### Abstract

Lynda Chanwai-Earle is a New Zealand performance poet, playwright and scriptwriter of Eurasian descent. Born in London in 1965, she lived in Papua New Guinea for a number of years before moving to New Zealand as a teenager. She obtained a Bachelor degree at Elam School of Fine Arts, a Diploma in Drama from the University of Auckland and more recently an MA in scriptwriting from Victoria University's International Institute of Modern Letters.

PALOMA FRESNO CALLEJA

## ‘Rocking the Boat’: A Conversation with New Zealand Playwright, Lynda Chanwai-Earle

Lynda Chanwai-Earle is a New Zealand performance poet, playwright and scriptwriter of Eurasian descent. Born in London in 1965, she lived in Papua New Guinea for a number of years before moving to New Zealand as a teenager. She obtained a Bachelor degree at Elam School of Fine Arts, a Diploma in Drama from the University of Auckland and more recently an MA in scriptwriting from Victoria University’s International Institute of Modern Letters.



Chanwai-Earle’s career as a writer started while she was a student in Auckland. In 1994 she published *Honeypants*, a poetry collection that was short listed for the 1995 Penn Book Awards and the New Zealand Book Awards. The collection includes ‘To Hastings with Love’, a bittersweet reflection of her experiences with the Polynesian community in which she narrates painful experiences of domestic violence and dislocation, while condemning the hypocritical attitudes of a provincial society whose monotony she seeks to escape through anger and rebelliousness. Apart from her poetry, which has appeared in several journals and anthologies, Chanwai-Earle has also performed some of her plays in New Zealand and abroad, and has worked as drama facilitator and script coordinator in prisons around the country (Wellington and Christchurch), and as a journalist for *Asia Down Under*, a weekly TVNZ program about the New Zealand Asian communities.

Chanwai-Earle’s monodrama *Ka Shue (Letters Home)*, which premiered in 1996, was the first play to reflect on the New Zealand Chinese experience. In this solo show performed by herself, Chanwai-Earle fictionalises her family history and looks at the predicaments of three generations of women confronted with

evolving notions of their identity and changing perceptions of China as their ancestral home. In *Foh-Sarn (Fire Mountain)* (2000), Chanwai-Earle creates a tragic love story which unfolds amidst the conflicts affecting the diverse Asian communities living in contemporary urban New Zealand. Both works, which appeared in a 2003 Women's Play Press volume, remain the only published dramatic material about the experiences of Chinese New Zealanders to date. She has also written a play for children, *Monkey*, (based on *The Journey into the West* and *The Monkey King* stories) which premiered at the 2004 International Festival of the Arts and was nominated for two Chapman Tripp Awards.

Apart from reflecting on the historical and contemporary conflicts affecting the Asian communities, Chanwai-Earle's plays present tragic stories of cross-cultural and universal appeal and include characters of diverse backgrounds. In *Alchemy*, a piece of dance theatre choreographed by Merenia Gray which won Best New Work in the 1998 Wellington Fringe Festival, the audience witnesses a tragic story of unrequited love in which Chanwai-Earle interweaves Maori mythology and Western elements. *Box/Role/Dream*, published in the volume of monodramas, *Red Light Means Stop* (2003), and nominated Outstanding New Production for the Chapman Tripp Awards in 2000, is a juxtaposition of three stories of loss and conflict, which affect men and women in different but equally painful ways. Her new play, *HEAT*, which premiered with the STAB Festival at BATS Theatre<sup>1</sup>, November 2008 in Wellington, is set in Antarctica and narrates a love triangle between a man, a woman and a penguin. *HEAT* was nominated for two Chapman Tripp Awards in 2008: Outstanding Composer of the Year and Actor of the Year. Naked, body-painted and with no lines, Brian Hotter won the highly coveted Actor of the Year, for his role as BOB the Emperor penguin in *HEAT*. *HEAT* also made history as New Zealand's first 'off-grid' theatre, with the STAB season performances powered by alternative energy (solar and wind) emulating Antarctic conditions. *HEAT* is looking to tour in New Zealand and overseas from 2010 potentially as a 'world first eco-friendly production', powered entirely by solar and wind.

As a scriptwriter, Chanwai-Earle has co-written the short film, *Chinese Whispers* (MAP Productions, 1996), and co-directed *After* (2003) with Film Director Simon Raby. She recently finished a feature film script, *Little Dragon*, (with development funding from the NZ Film Commission) and among her future projects is the completion of her first novel, *Lotus Hook*. Chanwai-Earle is a pioneer voice and a major representative of the young generation of New Zealand writers of diverse ethnic origins whose works have contributed to the inscription and understanding of New Zealand's multicultural identity. This interview took place in August 2008 in Brooklyn, Wellington, where Lynda currently lives with her partner and two children; and was updated in March 2010.

**PALOMA FRESNO CALLEJA:** *My first question has to do with your professional experience as a poet, a playwright and a scriptwriter. I would like to know in which of these genres or mediums you feel more comfortable.*

**LYNDA CHANWAI-EARLE:** These days I'm most comfortable writing for theatre and for film. I haven't yet had a feature film produced, but I love the feature film format. Theatre for me is the most accessible and it's the one medium where you can have your work produced because it doesn't cost millions of dollars, and it's incredibly rewarding when it does happen, when you get a very good director and the right cast and creative team. It is always a great privilege to see your work lifted off the page. And it's different every time it's performed, which is another reason why I love theatre: it's organic, it's always about the live relationship between the audience and practitioner and actors. It's happening in that space in that moment and its ephemeral, every single performance is going to be slightly different and unique, even though it is still the same play.

But I still love performing my poetry and just haven't had the energy or the time to write a lot of new stuff. I do love the form and towards the end of my Fine Arts degree I did creative writing with Albert Wendt (a Masters paper at Auckland University). It was here that I discovered my love for theatre, and it was because I was trying to find a medium where I could marry — as a visual and multimedia artist — performance, writing and installation art, and theatre was the most logical. I did a Fine Arts degree at Elam in Auckland and that's where a lot of contemporary artists were working, people like Niki Caro<sup>2</sup> who are working now in different fields. Along with many of my contemporaries, I thought that we were going to be visual artists, sculptors or painters, but as time progressed we discovered film making and theatre instead.

**PFC:** *Apart from Ka Shue, have you performed some of your other plays?*

**LC-E:** Yes, I have. In my very early forays into theatre I went from being a performance poet into creating a kind of very experimental theatre with a rambling kind of jazz poetry. The cover of *Honeypants* features one of my characters. Those were the days when I was a lot fitter; I really loved physical theatre but what I wanted to do at the time was wild experimental stuff. I wanted to marry physical theatre with language. I loved extreme physical theatre where actors did acrobatics, but I also wanted to hear them sprouting beautiful language. After endlessly bruising myself on the swinging trapeze, I realised that I wasn't cut out for life in the circus.

**PFC:** *Does your training and experience as an actress determine the way you write?*

- LC-E:** Yes, while I'm writing I definitely try to put myself in the actors' shoes. Probably because I was prepared to do anything in those days, I expect actors to put themselves into my roles, because for me it's about taking risks with the writing but also on the stage, pushing boundaries.
- PFC:** *Can you tell me how your background and upbringing have affected your writing?*
- LC-E:** I was born in London and then my parents travelled back here because they are New Zealanders. Just before I turned six we moved to New Guinea. We did not get back here until I turned thirteen and started my first year of high school. Growing up in New Guinea meant that I was in a very multicultural expatriate community, privileged, because we were expatriates. We were there during independence and my parents were very liberal and they always told me and my sisters to respect the cultures we were living with. We travelled very widely as children around Southeast Asia, Polynesia and Melanesia, so I was very lucky to be exposed to lots of different cultures. I got a huge culture shock when I arrived in New Zealand as a teenager in 1979. We moved to Hawkes Bay. I wasn't expecting to encounter that kind of parochial, very white, very rural, very redneck racist culture back then.
- PFC:** *Many of your characters — not exclusively those of Chinese descent — have similar multiethnic or multicultural origins; the protagonist of *Alchemy* is of Maori and Hungarian descent, and in *Box/Role/Dream* the characters come from a range of backgrounds, like the Greek and Maori protagonist of *Box*, for example. One gets the impression that through these characters you are constantly challenging cultural and gender boundaries.*
- LC-E:** Yes, that's right. But that's really from life. For me, particularly in *Box/Role/Dream*, truth is always stranger than fiction and these scenes were based on real life experiences. I really did meet the man who was talking to me in that kind of way in the public swimming baths; and then the piece, *Role*, did happen. I had actually intervened in a domestic and then got beaten up. In *Dream*<sup>3</sup>, I had been scuba diving down on the *Mikhail Lermontov* (a Russian cruise liner that sunk off Port Gore, Marlborough Sounds in 1986) and I brought up a dress that I found in an old suitcase on the deck. A Russian crew member lost his life during the sinking. His death was a spooky reminder of the fragility of life, as I explored the sunken wreck. I was so inspired by that very physical experience that I went on to write about it. So *Box/Role/Dream* came out of these three very different stories.

- PFC:** *Dream is a story about migration, but a very different one, too. There is a reversal in that the immigrant story is told by a dead person, a man who before dying has planned to dress as a woman in order to escape and start a new life.*
- LC-E:** Yes. That was a lot of fun to write. The central character MAN is lamenting the fact that he's a ghost, stuck on the sunken wreck. This was also a very Chinese thing, too. In the old days, if you died, your bones would be dug up and sent back to China — your last wish to be buried on your homeland, in a lucky spot near family. In Chinese culture the dead are still living in the afterlife, so if your boat sinks with your bones aboard, you are doomed to roam the sea as a ghost, dying a second 'bitter death'. In *Dream* MAN is protesting the pillaging of his graveyard — the sunken wreck — saying: 'what are you doing? You are tearing apart my ship! This is all I have left!'. His big dream of jumping ship dressed as a woman, to live life anonymously in New Zealand, was thwarted by unexpectedly dying. Although *Dream* is based on a real event and a real person's death, I fictionalised it.
- PFC:** *What is the connection between the three pieces?*
- LC-E:** The most obvious connection is me; I am very subtly mentioned in each one — or not subtly — like in the middle piece. In that one I am actually taking the piss out of myself, there is a lot of self-directed irony, to the point where it was quite uncomfortable. The character based on me feels so virtuous because she is trying to save this other woman from domestic violence, but really she is being patronising. So I pushed it as far as I could, having a really hard look at myself. I'm the connection with these three in the fact that it is all based on real life, but fictionalised. On top of that, in each one there is a tragedy and there is the loss of life, loss in a small sense and loss in a big sense, loss for every single one of the characters.
- PFC:** *There is also the common motif of the enclosed spaces, which dominate the three pieces. I find the play very claustrophobic...*
- LC-E:** Yes, that's right. The water, the sauna, the inside of the cupboard that gets smaller and smaller, the bar, the toilet, or the ship. But I didn't want it to be overt. I hope to be able to leave some things to the audience's imagination, to allow some questions to go unanswered, to allow spaces for the writing and story to breathe.
- PFC:** *How comfortable do you feel writing about Maori or Polynesian characters, considering that most non-Maori playwrights do not normally take this challenge?*

**LC-E:** It's not that common, but Dave Armstrong does it in *Niu Sila*<sup>4</sup>, Niki Caro adapted *Whale Rider* to screen and there have been other writers that have included Maori characters in their works. So it definitely happens. I got a lot of support in *Alchemy*, which was directed by Jim Moriarty. Again, *Alchemy* was based on real life experiences: I was camping at Mahia (near Gisborne) and this local man was telling me about his family history. He inspired me. The story came to me, and I fictionalised it.

With respect to your question, definitely I've been challenged. When I wrote *Monkey* I wanted the two bullies to be Polynesian, and the Polynesian actors at the time asked why. It was because there are certain parts of my experience running through, but at the same time those bully characters redeem themselves. I did get challenged by the Maori actor in *Alchemy*, asking 'why are you making him a drunk?', and I said 'because he is grieving and he is angry and he is enraged and remorseful because he killed his brother and had an affair with his sister-in-law. Wouldn't you hit the bottle?' For me, this is very important. I think this applies to all my characters, no matter their ethnicity: I refuse to sanitise a story just to please a section of the audience because I'm frightened I might offend them. I refuse to do that because that's not real life.

On the other hand, in *Box/Role/Dream* and in *Honeypants* there are elements of *Once Were Warriors*. Actually, I published 'To Hastings with Love' before *Once Were Warriors* was published.<sup>5</sup> And yes, there's anger and there's grief, and so on, but there's also a lot of love and respect for the communities and also, I think, a very open-eyed view of why this dysfunction happens, not just a victimised kind of blind blame. So for me that's really important.

As for Chinese characters, in *Ka Shue* the grandfather hits his daughter. He is suffocating in a way that's unhealthy and it did offend some of the most conservative members of the Chinese community when it was originally performed. With *Fire Mountain* ironically, sometimes, I offended liberal intellectuals because maybe they saw my themes as politically incorrect. My Asian characters were gambling and involved in abortion and other sensitive issues. I was challenged by a Chinese student in Witi Ihimaera's New Zealand literature class at Auckland University, (where they were studying my two plays). He asked me, 'Don't you think that you are actually reinforcing the negative stereotype by having all these negative things happen?' My reply: you don't ask the same thing of a European writer. You never challenge a European writer over the same kind of material. But you will challenge an Asian writer because you want a rosy-coloured view of the world and positive reflection of the Asian communities. In reality bad things happen. There's a high rate of abortion among young Asian women, just like there's a whole range of issues around the high prevalence of domestic abuse among Polynesian

communities. I understand artistic responsibility but is it racist to create characters of different ethnicities that are flawed and negative? Or are you really being racist when you write sanitised versions of history and reality?

**PFC:** *In fact, other New Zealand artists of Chinese descent have often talked about the negative reactions they get when they do not fulfil the expectations of their communities in creating works which offer positive portraits of their culture...*

**LC-E:** And if they don't then it is as if you are letting your community down, bringing shame or embarrassment to the family, embarrassing other people and that's not the point. In fact, *Ka Shue* was written with a huge amount of love for the community and for my family. Yes, my Chinese grandparents would turn in their graves if they read it and, in fact, the Pakeha ones would too! But it's done with love; everything I write is done with love.

Incidentally, I did take 'To Hastings with Love' back to the family that it was about and back to the boy that was depicted in it. Ten years after I'd written this he came looking for me, he wanted to apologise, which was really good. He'd been the first major relationship in my life, I met him when I was fifteen and was with him until I turned nineteen. It was a very confrontational experience, but I survived it without losing my optimism in life. So I read it to him and then I took it to his parents and read it to them and they accepted it and I made peace with him.

**PFC:** *You have already mentioned some of the negative reactions to Ka Shue, how about the positive responses?*

**LC-E:** For some Chinese audiences it was the opposite, which was absolutely wonderful. There were women of my mother's generation and also younger, sometimes men as well, in tears after performances saying, 'that was my story you were telling!' I also had a young woman coming up to me and saying, 'I saw your play in Christchurch and it changed my life and my sister's. We are both Eurasian and we never had anything to do with our Paw Paw, she spoke Cantonese and we could not understand her. But I saw your play and I was really moved and we really made an effort to speak to her'. That was great! It cannot get much better than that. And when I say that I don't mean it in an egocentric way, I have had hot and cold reviews; I've had fantastically positive feedback and the negative reactions of people walking out.

**PFC:** *Have you performed the play outside New Zealand?*

**LC-E:** Yes, I took it to the University of Hawai'i. I have also done readings and short performances in Ireland, Australia, the Philippines, Hong Kong and in China. In China, there have been very positive reactions. They

were fascinated with the fact that it was a diasporic view of old Chinese culture.

**PFC:** *Does it bother you that the labels 'Chinese New Zealander' or 'ethnic' are often employed to define you? Have these labels limited you as a writer?*

**LC-E:** Tusiata Avia<sup>6</sup> and I talk about becoming flavour of the month, being trendy because you are Samoan or because you're Chinese, but then it'll pass and then you'll be forgotten. That's very annoying for us because it is categorising and marginalising. When I worked at *Asia Down Under*, one of my colleagues had a lovely way of putting it: 'Us Asians! First we are marginalised, then we are scrutinised, then we are ghettoised!'

I'm a writer first and foremost and I write all sorts of things, and I write across genders, across cultural boundaries. That's what I hope I'm doing and it can be quite hard when you're trying to get from these issues to a play about Antarctic scientists as in *HEAT*, but there is the challenge and the enjoyment. On the other hand, yes my ethnicity does politicise my work. You can't help being informed or politicised by your personal experience, especially if you are of mixed ethnicity or if you have experienced racism. Having said that, the limit of your imagination is the limit of your writing, so for me it is about pushing boundaries.

**PFC:** *Ka Shue is obviously a reflection on your family history but the play has also acquired a wider communal dimension, as the first work ever to tackle the history of the Chinese community in New Zealand. Were you conscious of this when you started writing the play?*

**LC-E:** No, at the time I didn't realise that. The more I researched for it, the more people I talked to, the more I realised I was uncovering the lid of a big can of worms here. It was pre-poll tax apology<sup>7</sup>, I didn't even know what the poll tax was myself, neither did my mother at the time. Then she said, 'yes I remember now! Your grandfather had to pay a poll tax, but I don't know very much about it. You have to go and talk to Esther Fung'. He is a very wise and knowledgeable person in the Chinese community and Esther said to me, 'you need to know about your history. We all had to pay a poll tax. You're a poll tax descendant. Do you know what it was all about?'. And I said, 'no'.

I have here an archival photograph of my grandfather's poll tax certificate. It's almost the actual size. It's slightly larger than this and his thumbprint would have been on the other side. He went from Canton to Vancouver to Auckland. His first name was Chanwai and his surname was Dong, and immigration got it wrong and hence a whole branch of Chanwais came out of the Dong claim. It's like saying 'Mr Lynda', so there's a whole lot of Mr and Mrs Chanwais. When I published

*Honeypants* in 1994, it came out under Lynda Earle. But in continuing to embrace my Chinese history, I adopted Chanwai-Earle (my mother's maiden surname) for further writing.

Only the Chinese were asked to pay the poll tax and that was in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. But New Zealand was particularly bad at the time, because they raised it from £10 to £100 as part of the Asiatic Restriction Bill that Prime Minister Richard Seddon wanted to pass. Chinese were counted like cattle; you were only allowed to have a certain number of people per tons of cargo. It was really alienating.<sup>8</sup>

**PFC:** *There are very interesting connections to be made between the experiences of the Chinese community in New Zealand as reflected in Ka Shue, and those of Chinese communities in other countries. Has the work of other Chinese American, Chinese Canadian or Chinese Australian writers influenced you?*

**LC-E:** Yes, definitely. First and foremost, I'd say William Yang, the Australian Chinese playwright and photographer inspired me. He wrote *Sadness*, a solo show about being gay Chinese and growing up in Queensland; he also talks about being a banana - yellow on the outside and white on the inside — something I can identify with.

I know the obvious link with *Ka Shue* is Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, because of the intergenerational story and the ways in which she canvasses the personal drama against the backdrop of the World War and the Japanese Invasion, very much like I do in *Ka Shue*. Amy Tan was a huge influence and I read her way before I even thought about theatre, back in 1989, while I was doing my final year at Art School and doing creative writing. There's the connection with the ghost world, our ancestors being imprisoned and living with us, which is also a Maori thing as well. But I think I am quite a different author, I've taken a different step in looking at Tiananmen Square and my writing style is very different.

One of the big influences for my poetry, which also got me into theatre, is a Los Angeles poet called Pamala Karol, 'La Loca'. And Tom Waits, I love his lyrics and music. And of course there are twentieth-century playwrights from Jean Genet to Tennessee Williams; Sam Shepard is one of my favourite authors. I'd say that some of my latest work, like *Box/Role/Dream*, is a little bit more like Sam Shepard's. I love his white trash characters. Jean Genet was a huge influence at the particular time that I was writing *Honeypants*: his life on the edge with marginalised people — a huge part of that appealed to me and influenced my writing. I love New Zealand artists as well: Briar Grace-Smith, Hone Kouka, my Masters tutor, Ken Duncum — I have a huge respect for his work. I really like Dave Armstrong's writing. There's all sorts of people whose work I enjoy, I can relate to and I've been inspired by.

**PFC:** *Why did you decide to make Ka Shue a monodrama?*

**LC-E:** At the time in 1995 when I first started researching *Ka Shue* I went to my friend James Littlewood, who directed it and he said, 'why don't you write a play and use your mother's story?'. Then I started researching it. At the time, to the best of my knowledge, there were no other mainstream New Zealand Chinese theatre pieces. The only few Chinese actors I knew were people like Helene Wong who had worked (as a script co-ordinator) in *Illustrious Energy*.<sup>9</sup> There were a couple of male actors, who ended up not working in New Zealand. So there were no actors and I could not have afforded to put it up with a full cast. So I decided to perform all five characters myself. For me it was a practical reason.

I'd also just seen Jim Moriarty play *Michael James Mania*<sup>10</sup> and had been working with Miranda Harcourt and Stuart McKenzie co-writing the short film *Chinese Whispers*. So I was very inspired by Miranda Harcourt as solo performers. Seeing Jim Moriarty perform with nothing but an armchair was inspiring, and watching Miranda Harcourt perform *Verbatim*<sup>11</sup> with nothing but a few props and just simply turning round to become another character, that's where it started. I had so much to learn! It was extremely ambitious at the time. I did not have any classic training in acting. I'd done Murray Edmond's one-year post-grad diploma in drama course in 1993, which covered all the bases from writing to performance, which was fantastic and I'd learnt a lot, but the acting — I had to learn it the hard way. I owe *Ka Shue* to two key people: James Littlewood for coming up with the idea and initiating it, but also Jim Moriarty for really training me as an actor at the time and really reshaping it for touring.

**PFC:** *There have also been other solo shows in New Zealand, like Jacob Rajan's Krishnan's Dairy, that have also been essential in this process of inscribing the voices and experiences of different ethnic communities.*

**LC-E:** Jacob Rajan<sup>12</sup> and I were both doing the writing and developing our shows at the same time, pretty much within months of each other. That was extraordinary, and then they both ended up being the first of their kind in New Zealand.

**PFC:** *Both Ka Shue and Fire Mountain use the events in Tiananmen Square as a point of departure, one of them going backwards and the other moving forwards. Was this a planned connection?*

**LC-E:** It became something as I was researching and writing *Fire Mountain* because initially I wanted to write a tragic love story, and that still remains, but the more I wrote it and the more I researched it, the more I thought I could bring Tiananmen back into it. *Fire Mountain*, like *HEAT* now, was really ambitious for me at the time because I was trying to cover

a lot of different things, I was trying to look at the way media perceives the Asian communities, I was trying to create a tragic love story, I was trying to do the immigrant drama as well. In the performance of it I was blessed with some of New Zealand's most talented creatives. We had a Chinese choreographer who was really amazing in training actors to do the movements based on the old-style theatre. I was trying to marry quite a few things ambitiously, very old-style stuff with very contemporary realistic film images. For me, those two plays do suit each other being published back to back, the old Chinese story and the new Asian New Zealand story. They belong together.

I've been criticised for *Fire Mountain* for playing on negative stereotypes. I think that as long as there is a strong reaction, that's good. Because it means it's pressing buttons and if somebody gets offended and walks out, well, they'll be thinking about the play, won't they? They'll be probably quite cross about it as well, cross enough to criticise it, and that's better than just having lukewarm reactions.

- PFC:** *It is very interesting that the actress playing the role of Mei Ling in that first production was Roseanne Liang who actually became the protagonist of her own cross-cultural love story, as narrated in her documentary, Banana in a Nutshell.*<sup>13</sup>
- LC-E:** Yes, at the time when she was performing *Fire Mountain*, she and her husband were secretly seeing each other. The only drawback for her performing that lead character was that the boyfriend was played by Derek Ng, who is actually her cousin. They couldn't bring themselves to kiss each other! So we stylised the love-making scenes. But, in every other sense, they were really brave. Apart from Helene Wong, many of the Asian actors in *Fire Mountain* had very little acting experience; they hadn't been in a professional production until then.
- PFC:** *In the introduction you mention that Fire Mountain was inspired by Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare's play also served Oscar Kightley as the basis of his comedy Romeo and Tusi*<sup>14</sup>, *which also portrays a cross-cultural love story and similar inter-ethnic conflicts.*
- LC-E:** Yes, the same kind of element... It's archetypal, isn't it? *Romeo and Juliet* is about two warring families, but also in New Zealand we have the two warring cultures, and in *Fire Mountain* Taiwan and China, the good boy and the bad boy, the good family and the bad family...
- PFC:** *Would you say that you are you more influenced by tragedy than by comedy?*

**LC-E:** Yes, but I like black comedy, which is why I love Sam Shepard and a lot of New Zealand writers like Oscar Kightley and Dave Armstrong. I love the comedy because I think it is really important to find a way to make an audience laugh, before you make them cry.

**PFC:** *In Fire Mountain you use Cantonese and Mandarin; the characters juggle several languages and because they come from different areas they cannot always understand each other. How was this linguistic variety translated into the performance of the play?*

**LC-E:** The actors all had to learn some Cantonese and Mandarin, and they were all fantastic. I don't speak Cantonese myself. I am struggling to learn alongside my little girl, who is two-and-a-half, by taking her to Cantonese Kindergarten, once a week. She's actually doing better than me. My mother was too ashamed to teach us because she thought that her Cantonese was very rustic. Every time she spoke Cantonese around new Immigrant Hong Kong Chinese they just laughed at her, so she just stopped using it and she did not want to teach us. But I am learning it because it's part of my cultural heritage, and language being at the heart of culture, it is incredibly important for me to try and understand it. Therein lies the frustration of the language barrier for me particularly with Chinese characters I need the language to put myself in the shoes of those characters.

**PFC:** *Why is mythology such an important element in your plays?*

**LC-E:** Not in every play. *Box/Role/Dream* does not have mythology in it and *HEAT* doesn't either. *HEAT* is hyperrealistic. We are recreating the interior of an Antarctic hut where scientists, a husband and wife, winter over. The whole hut is recreated inside the theatre and so we leave the whole of Antarctica to your imagination outside the concealed entrance of the hut.

To answer your question, I don't always bring mythology into my plays, but I try to find other ways of having it there subtly. In *HEAT* it is very subtle; there is the sense of a ghost, because the couple are haunted by the loss of a child. But it's a love triangle inspired by Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* which is about a man, a woman and a dwarf. It's a classic love-hate triangle. The woman loves the dwarf, the dwarf loves the man, the man loves the woman. The woman hates the man, the man hates the dwarf, the dwarf hates the woman. Mine is a man, a woman and a penguin.

**PFC:** *And why Antarctica?*

**LC-E:** I asked myself the same question. My friend Chris Orsman, who was the inaugural Antarctic fellow in 1997<sup>15</sup>, said to me 'why don't you go

there?’ and I said, ‘Why on earth would I?’ But the more I thought about it, the more it really grew on me, the more obsessed I became about it. I haven’t been there yet, but there are so many people that I know who have been there. Gareth Farr who is doing the music for *HEAT* is another Antarctica Fellow. It’s such an extraordinary place!

**PFC:** *Can you tell me about your future projects?*

**LC-E:** I am also working on *Little Dragon*, a feature film. This is my third feature script. It’s had development funding from the New Zealand Film Commission and we are in the process of applying for more development funding. It has just been pitched at the Shanghai Film Festival.

**PFC:** *And what about a novel?*

**LC-E:** I have a first draft not quite finished but I just need to make the time to go back to it. It’s called *Lotus Hook*. There are a lot of elements of *Ka Shue* in it. It’s about a little pair of Chinese feet that travel the world — concubine’s bound feet, encased in gold. It’s got quite a lot of autobiographical stuff in it; there is a section set in Papua New Guinea. It’s one of these projects I’ll come back to and I know I’ll want to rewrite it from scratch. Alison Wong<sup>16</sup> has published her first novel and it is the first major historical New Zealand Chinese novel, which is fantastic.

**PFC:** *There have been a large number of historical novels, mainly by European or Pakeha writers, published in New Zealand recently which include Chinese characters, but always presented from outsiders’ perspectives.*

**LC-E:** Yes, that’s right. So it’ll be high time to have Alison’s novel come out. My novel is extremely different writing, some of it is historical, and it is probably going to be more of a leap of faith in that I am taking a lot more artistic licence. I love fantasy.

**PFC:** *Do you see this as a way in which so called ‘ethnic writers’ can escape from traditional historical or autobiographical approaches to their stories, embracing less conventional formats or genres?*

**LC-E:** Yes, absolutely! I’ve written a three-hander about a man a woman and a penguin! And the two human characters are Pakeha and that has nothing to do with my ethnicity, so it is a huge branch away for me. Challenge yourself. Writing outside your comfort zone is vital.

**PFC:** *How do you see the future of New Zealand literature in connection to the changing face of the country?*

**LC-E:** I think already we can see it depicted in a lot of literature, films, and theatre, a lot of Pacific Island and young Asian voices that are coming

through in very different genres, formats and arenas. The face of New Zealand has changed. My personal opinion is that New Zealand was always a multicultural society; it's only that New Zealanders didn't see it that way. In the past they saw it as bicultural; white and Maori. New Zealanders needed to open their eyes. The white people themselves were made up of many different cultures and the Chinese were here too, but they were just ignored.

**PFC:** *Why do you think it has taken so long for these multicultural voices to appear?*

**LC-E:** It takes a while for mainstream culture and the dominant groups to recognise where they may have gone wrong in the past and to acknowledge that. Sometimes these histories are buried for a long time. There are people like the artist Guy Ngan who have been working for a long time. They were visionaries in their own time and some people wouldn't take him seriously because he was Chinese, and the Chinese community wouldn't take him seriously because he should have been working in the family business (being an artist was not seen as a valid occupation). It does take a while, not only for these artists, but also for people of my mother's generation and even for me and my generation to step out of the square and rock the boat.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> BATS is an acronym for the Bane and Austin Touring Society (named after Rodney Bane and David Austin, the founding members of BATS). In 1995 BATS Theatre created a commission specifically designed to allow theatre artists to experiment in a supportive environment. It has since built to be an essential part of the BATS annual programme. The STAB commission can be accessed by all performance media — dance, theatre, opera, music, film, magic, interactive media.
- <sup>2</sup> Niki Caro is a New Zealand filmmaker whose film version of Witi Ihimaera's 1987 novel, *Whale Rider* (released in 2001), has been widely acclaimed both in New Zealand and internationally.
- <sup>3</sup> The play fictionalises the accident of the Russian cruise liner, *Mikhail Lermontov*, which sank off the New Zealand coast in 1986 and still lies at the bottom of the sea. The only casualty of the accident was a 33-year-old engineer crew member on which Chanwai-Earle based her character. The protagonist appears on stage dressed as a woman, the way in which he had planned to abandon ship and start a new life before the accident. This event is also the subject of her poem 'Gasp'.
- <sup>4</sup> Co-written by Dave Armstrong and Oscar Kightley, *Niu Sila*, is a comedy about the friendship between a Pakeha and a Polynesian kid, growing up together in Auckland.
- <sup>5</sup> The publication of Alan Duff's novel, *Once Were Warriors* (Auckland: Tandem Press, 1990), which Lee Tamahori adapted to the screen in 1994, was surrounded by controversy because of its unprecedented portrayal of urban Maori culture, gang violence and domestic abuse. These are all topics which appear in 'To Hastings with Love' included in Chanwai-Earle's collection of poetry *Honeypants*.

- <sup>6</sup> Tusiata Avia is a New Zealand poet and performer of Samoan descent. She is the author of two poetry collections: *Wild Dogs Under My Skirt* and *Bloodclot*. In an interview recorded for the New Zealand Book Council in 2006, Avia and Chanwai-Earle reject the restrictive use of the ethnic label.
- <sup>7</sup> In February 2002, the New Zealand government offered a formal apology to the descendants of the Chinese migrants who were required to pay a Poll Tax before entering the country. Helen Clark's speech regretted the unfair treatment historically inflicted upon Chinese people and acknowledged the contribution of the Chinese community to the country's economy and cultural heritage since the 19th century.
- <sup>8</sup> In 1881 the Chinese Immigration Restriction Act imposed a £10 poll tax on Chinese migrants, limiting the number of entries to one person per 10 tons of cargo. Richard Seddon promoted further anti-Asiatic restrictions as soon as he became Prime Minister and in 1896 the poll tax was raised to £100.
- <sup>9</sup> *Illustrious Energy* is a 1988 New Zealand film directed by Leon Narbey which tells the story of two Chinese goldminers in the Otago area.
- <sup>10</sup> *Michael James Manaia* is a monodrama by James Broughton.
- <sup>11</sup> *Verbatim* is a solo performance by William Brandt.
- <sup>12</sup> Racob Rajan's monodrama, *Krishnan's Dairy*, which premiered in 1999, was the first play to reflect the experience of the Indian community in New Zealand by dramatising the struggle of a couple running the local dairy shop. Together with *The Candlestick Maker* and *The Pickle King*, the play was published in the volume, *Indian Ink*.
- <sup>13</sup> Roseanne Liang is a New Zealand filmmaker who has written and directed several short films. Her most widely acclaimed work to date, the documentary *Banana in a Nutshell*, narrates her decision to marry a Pakeha man and her struggle to convince her Chinese parents to accept this relationship.
- <sup>14</sup> The unpublished comedy *Romeo and Tusi*, co-written by Oscar Kightley and Erolia Ifopo, premiered in 1997 and deals with the love story of a Maori boy and a Samoan girl.
- <sup>15</sup> The Artists to Antarctica Programme was established in 1996 to allow New Zealand artists to travel to Antarctica and reflect their experiences in their works, thus promoting knowledge of the area among New Zealanders.
- <sup>16</sup> Alison Wong's novel, *As the Earth Turns Silver*, is the first work of its kind to have been published by a New Zealander of Chinese descent.

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