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FRENCHTOWN

A DRAMA ABOUT SHANGHAI, P.R.C.

Canada Council
for the Arts

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Finalist

Governor General's
Literary Awards

Lawrence Jeffery



No. 225

www.ExileEditions.com

FRENCHTOWN

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EXILE
e d i t i o n s

*Publishers of Fiction, Poetry, Non-fiction, Drama, Translations and Graphic
Books*

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Jeffery, Lawrence, 1953–

Frenchtown : a drama about Shanghai, P.R.C. / Lawrence Jeffery.

ISBN 978-1-55096-302-1

I. Title.

PS8569.E44F74 2012

C812'.54

C2012-906212-X

eBooks

978-1-55096-332-8 (epub)

978-1-55096-333-5 (mobi)

978-1-55096-331-1 (PDF)

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Cover Painting (The Legend of Warloads – detail) by Lui Liu

Published by Exile Editions Ltd ~ www.ExileEditions.com
144483 Southgate Road 14 – GD, Holstein, Ontario, N0G 2A0
PDF, ePUB and MOBI versions by Melissa Campos Mendivil
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We gratefully acknowledge, for their support toward our publishing activities, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Ontario Media Development Corporation.



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for
Anson Chan Fang On-sang
with gratitude
and abiding affection

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ACT I

ACT II

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FRENCHTOWN

SHANGHAI, P.R.C. – 1995

CHARACTERS

- KATE** Born in the USA. Caucasian. In her 70s.
- DJ** Born in Canada. Caucasian. In his early 40s.
- CAT** Born in the P.R.C. Chinese. In her late 20s.
- HONGYONG** (Grand & Courageous) CAT's son. He is 10.
- SAM*** Born in the P.R.C. Chinese. In his early 30s.
- JAMES** Born in Canada. Caucasian. In his late 70s.
- RONGJI*** (Solid Foundation) Born in the P.R.C. Chinese.
He is 45.

*RONGJI and SAM can be played by the same actor.

ACT I SCENE I

The sitting room of a flat on the second floor of a three-storey apartment building in Shanghai's former French Concession. The building was built in the 1920s. The ceilings are high. The walls are grey. The room is dark. The room is cluttered with dusty Chinese antiques—rolled-up carpets, cabinets, screens, tables and lamps. Some objects are rare and precious, others are oddly common, tattered and cheap. Nothing is done to draw attention to the objects. All are displayed as if possessing equal rarity or beauty. It is difficult to understand the logic behind the collection. Is this a sophisticated collector or a compulsive collector who happens—from time to time—to stumble upon a real treasure?

Nothing in the flat works properly. Lamps must be turned on or off by screwing or unscrewing the light bulb. Some telephones work better than others—all are battered and old. And their plugs are in constant danger of disconnection. The heating comes on or turns off according to its own logic.

KATE is in her mid 70s, tall and strong. She was born in the USA. She speaks with a hybrid accent—modified by the foreign languages she speaks and the decades she has spent living outside the United States. To her left is a dog basket covered in a blanket. RUBY, her ancient Shih Tzu sleeps under the blanket. The only source of heat is an electrical unit high up on the wall to her left. When the heat comes on it blows warm air across the top of the room. Red ribbons are attached to the unit. They float out and flutter on the warm air. There is a large oval oeil-de-boeuf window behind KATE's right shoulder. Through the window we see a patch of sky, the edge of a roof and the white wall of the building across the alley. Oddly, it seems as if the sky, the roof and the building wall seen through the window are in colour while the interior of the flat is in black and white.

KATE sits on a large sofa centre stage facing the audience. She is wrapped in a blanket against the cold. A lamp arches over her shoulder illuminating a book she reads. She wears glasses and holds a magnifying glass. She wears gloves with the tips of the fingers cut off. Books litter the sofa and spill onto the floor.

(A buzzer sounds once—harsh and aggressive)

SILENCE

(The buzzer sounds again)

SILENCE

(The buzzer sounds. The note is held for five seconds. KATE looks up from her book, she reaches over and picks up the telephone)

KATE: Wei? Ni-hao. Hello? *(She hangs up the telephone. The buzzer sounds twice—two short bursts of noise. KATE rises from the sofa—throwing off the blanket as she goes. She goes to the oeil-de-boeuf window, unlatches it, swings it out and open, leans out and shouts)* Hey! Up here! *(She takes some keys from the windowsill and throws them into the alley)* Catch... It's the red one... Got it?

SHORT PAUSE. (KATE shuts the window and returns to her place on the sofa)

(There is knocking on door stage right off. KATE in a light voice) Come in. (Knocking again. Annoyed, she bellows) It's open!

(Dj staggers into the flat, breathless)

Welcome.

(Dj nods)

You found us.

(Dj nods)

What's wrong with you? Out of breath?

(Dj nods his head 'yes')

You can't smoke here. If that's what it is... If you're a smoker?...

SHORT PAUSE

Catch your breath then.

SHORT PAUSE

Where's the key? (*DJ holds up the key. She takes the key from him and hangs it on a book in the window frame*) Don't want to lose it. I'd spend time and money getting it replaced—and I have precious little of either...

SHORT PAUSE

(*DJ is looking at a painting on the wall. He puts on a pair of eyeglasses to examine the painting closely*) I'm sorry, it's dark. It's also cold. And damp. I'd offer to take your coat but you'll want to keep it on. Welcome to winter in Shanghai. I'm accustomed to it. A lot like winter in Paris. Rain, damp, cold. You know Paris? (*DJ is looking at a piece of furniture near the dog's bed*) Mind the dog. (*DJ turns and looks at KATE*) Ruby. She's sleeping. She likes the blanket over her. Eleven years old now. Probably my last dog. (*DJ looks over the bookshelves*) My books are going to the Hoover Institute. Stanford University. California. I've read all of them... Some twice.

SHORT PAUSE

Enough about me. Who *are* you?

DJ: I met David Carlson in Beijing. He said I should meet you. He said you knew Shanghai better than anyone alive.

KATE: Carlson? Oh, yes... I got a fax... You're a writer.

DJ: Yes.

KATE: A journalist?

DJ: No. I'm not a journalist. I make my living writing non-fiction. Books on China. Hong Kong... Asia.

KATE: Travel books?

DJ: I'll write anything they pay me to write.

KATE: Freelance... Don't envy you... You make any money?

DJ: Never enough. But it's good work.

SHORT PAUSE

KATE: Do you like dogs?

DJ: Yes. *(He points at Ruby's bed)* Is it friendly?

KATE: She. Her. Yes, most of the time... *(She watches Dj approach the dog)* 'Course, she doesn't like men...

DJ: Oh. *(He reaches out cautiously and pets the blanket)*

KATE: She likes you... Isn't that a kick?

SHORT PAUSE

I'm not a writer... I don't pretend to be a writer. I came to it too late... Like Chinese. I started learning the language when I was 49. A disaster...

DJ: You've produced some wonderful books. I have all of them. Except one.

KATE: Which one?

DJ: *Frenchtown.*

KATE: You want *Frenchtown*?

DJ: Please.

KATE: It's 40 U.S. Three-fifty koi. (*She digs into her pockets*) I've got change... But I'm not a writer... Now, if you want to pay cash—U.S dollar cash—I'll do something on the price. How's 35?

DJ: Great. (*He digs into his pocket. He gives her the money. She retrieves the book from a box amongst a stack of boxes of books piled against the wall*)

KATE: Architecture is my thing. My passion... Truth be told, I write captions—that's all. Captions to pictures. Most of the buildings in that book are now gone.

DJ: Gone?

KATE: Demolished. For the almighty dollar. Or the raging renminbi... Shanghai *is* the culture of commerce. That's its politics. The only place that seems safe from the wrecker's ball is the Bund. The riverfront. The old bank buildings. The honggs... They say they want to preserve it. That's what they say. 'Course, for the right price they'll say whatever you want—and sell you whatever you want. It's all capitalist rubbish to them. They've got 5,000 years of history—what do they care for a piffling century of colonial architecture?... They've got a point, you know. Why should they care? *(The phone rings once. KATE picks it up) Wei? (She listens. A BRIEF PAUSE and then she hangs up. She stares at the phone and then picks up the receiver again. She listens. She hangs it up again)* Nothing. Not even a wrong number—just nothing. Silence...

SILENCE

Coffee?

DJ: Yes... Thank you.

KATE: It'll be instant.... I don't cook...

DJ: Fine with me...

KATE: Black?

DJ: Please.

(KATE exits. The heater comes on in the room. DJ looks up at the fluttering red ribbons. We hear KATE speaking Chinese to CAT off stage. KATE re-enters)

KATE: Heat.

DJ: Yes.

KATE: At least that's what the landlord calls it.

SHORT PAUSE

How long are you staying?

DJ: I don't know.

KATE: What, a week, a month, years?

DJ: A couple of months... I've got some time.

KATE: Your first time in Shanghai?

DJ: No.

KATE: Where are you staying?