

## AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER CHEN

MITCH MLLER/Willamette Week: Are any of the three main Chinese characters — Lin Bo, Wang Min or Yu Rong — based on specific real figures?

CHRISTOPHER CHEN: Not directly, but there are elements of Ai WeiWei, Tehching Hsieh, Marina Abramovic and Lawrence Weiner.

MM: What do you think audiences have experienced by the end of the show? What do you think is their surprising take away?

CC: My hope is that the audience comes away both discombobulated and inspired. That is, I hope they leave with a sense that they have more permission to question things than when they came in. The play is ultimately advocating for an alert and questioning state of mind when dealing with social issues. There's trickery involved in the play, but what I've been heartened by is that audiences have taken these sleights of hand as exciting challenges rather than turn-offs. I want them to be delighted in much the same way as you make a pact with a magician, saying you want to be fooled; you are game for their illusions. The play purposefully shifts its point of view, including any solid notion of its ultimate purpose is, so that the audience is ultimately unmoored from any consistent mind frame they can rest in, relax in. The idea is that this challenges the audience to really come to grips with what their *own* opinions and preconceptions are, as the subject matters unfurl before them. The experience is then what I call a 50/50 experience. The play offers one half of the experience, the conversation, and the audience needs to meet it and provide the other fifty percent of the experience. This is perhaps a higher ratio than normal. So I hope the audience meets the play with this spirit. Another idea is that the play isn't over once the audience leaves the theater. Talking and thinking afterwards is essential too, whether they liked it or not!

MM: When did you start writing the play? When did you finish? The play references Mike Daisey's story on *This American Life*, which came out in 2012. Since then, especially in the Trump era, fake news has gained much more mainstream awareness. How did the ideas about fake news evolve between when you started writing *Caught* and when you finished it?

CC: I started writing the play around 2013, and probably kept tweaking it until its premiere in 2016. One of my favorite quotes from a review said that the play demonstrates how there is a "frame around every fact." Of course, we've always had shaky relationships with truth, and the internet creates a whole new set of issues like the "filter bubble." And I think Trump really exploded these dynamics that have always been there. We've always lived in isolated bubbles, and this isolation has now become weaponized, and it's turned into a war between bubbles. In an alternate history, the plethora of points of view on the internet could have expanded our consciousness, making us able to see the contours of the bubbles we live in, but we've seen a sharp slide in the opposite direction under Trump. He's taken an idea that in its essence is a noble one: to always question facts, and has, again, weaponized it by morphing it into a cynical relativism and a receptacle for hateful ideas and blind rage.

MM: There are numerous examples, the play mentions, of white Americans who were caught lying or plagiarizing (Daisey, Jonah Lehrer, James Frey). Why did you choose to write about Chinese and Chinese-American characters? What do you think the play gains by examining this phenomenon through a Chinese lens?

CC: This is mainly due to my own mixed cultural identity. I am half Chinese and half White, but am a consumer of largely White American news, so the examples above are the ones that were in my consciousness. But, as the play addresses, sometimes it takes an outside eye to look at what's going on. An outside eye might find it ironic that we carve out these little battlefields over truth in certain areas, but ignore larger areas of hypocrisy if we pull back the lens a bit more, which we are often loathe to do. For example, the way Donald Trump is often able to dictate the little mini-battlefields on which fights over truth take place, as a means of deflecting from a bigger picture. But going back to China, I've always been interested in the love-hate/push-pull relationship between our two countries on the geopolitical level. And there is still something perpetually "foreign" and "exotic" about China in the American consciousness, so that opaqueness and mysteriousness is something I took advantage of in this play.

*\*Interview conducted by Mitch Miller for the Willamette Week Fall Arts Guide, September 2017. Reprinted with permission from Willamette Week.*