Letters to Mei Lanfang

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LETTERS TO MEI LANFANG

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Fine Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Alexandra Dare Norman

*****

Western Kentucky University
2017

CE/T Committee:

Professor Michelle Dvoskin
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Approved by

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Department of Theatre & Dance
ABSTRACT

As a male actor of female Dan characters, Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) is known throughout the world as the most representative performer of Chinese opera – particularly for his performance of Concubine Yu in the Peking opera Farewell My Concubine. A feminist analysis of his work in this opera reveals a series of assumptions about the definition of “Woman” in both theatre and life. This project is solo performance piece formatted in a series of open letters to Mei Lanfang, interspersed with personal stories investigating what it truly means to be a Woman – as an actor, a Christian, a feminist, a traveler, and a human being – in this increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: Theatre, Feminism, Christianity, Mei Lanfang, Peking Opera, Solo Performance
To Dori

For completely understanding
and for walking through the spider-webs first.

 ผมรักคุณ

我爱你

♥
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Perhaps an unintended side effect in the completion of any elaborate project is this overwhelming, humbling realization: I could never have accomplished any of this on my own. As early as 2011, I remember sitting in the office of Dr. Craig T. Cobane and hearing his promise that no dream was too big for the Western Kentucky University Honors College. This promise, to my amazement, would be confirmed again and again over the following five years. So my first thank you is to my family connected with the WKU Honors College and WKU Chinese Flagship Program, especially Dr. Melinda Grimsley-Smith, Dr. Jianjun He, Dr. Ching-Hsuan Wu, Sara Moody, Melinda Edgerton, Stephanie Hammons, Professor Yang Liu, Professor Tony Liang, Zhu Lin, my “surname sister” Meng Kanglei, and of course Dr. Craig T. Cobane, for the constant intellectual, spiritual, and financial support. A special thank-you goes as well to Dr. Jennifer Markin, my advisor, encourager, tissue-provider and friend at every stage.

From my first fearful attempts in the Gordon Wilson Lab Theatre to my first increasingly confident moments in theatres around the world, the WKU Theatre [Ampersand] Dance Department has truly been to me yet another circle of family complete with hugs, dinosaur gummies, constructively-thrown shade, multiple over-turnings of the table, Don’t Make Things Harder accountability groups, a rich diversity of personal expression, and ultimately, a wild and inspiring creative environment. So, a
ginormous group hug goes to my WKU Theatre & Dance department family: To my first reader Dr. Michelle Dvoskin, a huge thank you for both literal and figurative York mints, for sharing your time and your ideas and your cats, and for your unwavering faith in me. To my second reader Shura Pollatsek, thank you for putting me in sturdy golden slippers when I haven’t quite decided which direction I’m going but wherever it is I’m all “full speed ahead!” and then end up skidding face-down several feet across the stage. Thanks go also to Dr. David Young, Scott Stroot, Carol Jordan, Ellen Glatman, Meghen McKinley, Lindsey Eastman, Doris Patrick, Dr. Julie Lyn Barber, and Dr. Amelia Rollings for building a professional, welcoming environment for the development and staging of my ideas.

Without my family, I’d have no foundation, much less stories to tell. So thank you, Mom, for spreading the world with joy, fun and the right amount of raspberry jelly. Thank you, Dad, for sharing with me your appreciation for literature, tea in fine china, and rose gardening. More than anything: thank you both for loving God, for living your faith and shining that light so my six-year-old heart, even my twenty-four-year-old heart, recognizes the truth. To my brother and sisters: you will always find the comic relief.

Finally, I would like to thank that pioneer group of friends who stayed late one night to watch me perform Seven and A Story for the first time. Until that reading, I did not trust my work. I was scared, discouraged, and deeply convinced that I was an “imposter” about to be found out. But you stayed. You believed in me. In this, your perfect burst of confidence in a moment of frozen panic, I will forever draw warmth, strength, and hope.
VITA

November 11, 1992............................................Born in Bedford, Virginia

2011.................................................................Bowling Green High School, Bowling Green, Kentucky

2012....................................................................Indiana University Flagship Chinese Institute, Summer 2012 Graduate

2012....................................................................China Educational Tours (CET) Intensive Chinese Language in Harbin, Fall 2012 Graduate

2013....................................................................Critical Language Scholarship, Summer 2013 Recipient (Qingdao, China)

2014....................................................................WKU International Faculty-Undergraduate Student Engagement Grant Recipient

2015....................................................................Kentucky Honors Roundtable, Project Presentation

2016....................................................................Chinese Flagship Program: Capstone Year in Nanjing, China

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Performance Art (Musical Theatre)
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Dear Reader,

*Letters to Mei Lanfang* was performed for the first time on December 9th, 2015. The Gordon Wilson Hall Lab Theatre was filled on one side of the thrust stage, teeming with peers already enthused after seeing a series of shorter solo works written and performed by my classmates.

Those closest to me were not there; I want that to be remembered. Not as an accusation, nor as a whimper of self-pity, but rather as a testament to my freedom that night. Those people that were the true soul of my piece were present in the room only as the caricature my words framed them to be. In this way, I feel to some degree that my work is incomplete (for now).

Reading this piece today fills me with a curious mixture of pride, empowerment, and embarrassment, especially after six weeks of allowing the pages to settle nicely in that file at the back of my mind. Much has changed in six weeks. I expect that’s a recurring theme in my life, and in everyone’s, really: change. So it is with a new set of lenses that I examine that moment and the words with which I filled it.

I spoke that night of fear and of bravery, how the two are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, become stronger as the other persists. This tension was embodied in my very
willingness to speak. I spoke of femininity and the power of self-expression, but I also spoke of social value placement and the challenge of learning how to react. I spoke of complicated relationships – of love, loss, hurt, and the unexpected healing one can feel despite the reality that nothing externally has been mended.

In other words: I said a lot of things! I’m still surprised by how much I learned can be said through simple, specific, personal stories. If the whole universe of human ideas, philosophies, and allocations of meaning could be scatter-plotted on a graph, the regression lines would, I think, be narratives of human life. Therein lies the power of performance art.

Interestingly, the stories that floated to the surface of my consciousness seemed at first so disjointed. Sunday School does not connect to “Tai Shan Mountain.” Feminism does not converge with faith. Where is all of this coming from, and why? In the beginning stages, my work was riddled with the fear that none of it made any sense to anyone, not even me.

Enter my advisors and confidantes. While I enjoy so much the privacy of personal writing, I found, ironically, that my greatest ally in the struggle to free my ideas was this team of “third eyes.” I remember cowering protectively over my laptop, apologizing profusely, panicking almost to tears before my reader had even looked at a single draft. More than once during my first reading aloud, I felt my throat catch, my heart stop, my stomach flip. Each time I would hear a gentle, “Keep going.” So I did.

In this space of perfect safety, surrounded by people I love who love me, my voice was freed. I discovered some courage, some hopeful confidence, and one powerful conviction that my words are precious. My ideas are valuable. And my perspective,
exposed in my own voice, on my own body, matters.

So, it’s with a full heart, happy tears, and overwhelming gratitude that I recount the story of how this story – the current but ever-changing tale of one young woman, Christian, American, artist, student, language-enthusiast, dress-wearer – came to be.

Love always,

February 3, 2016
CHAPTER TWO

~ How to Create a Solo Performance and Not Die: A Process Plot ~

Step One: Discover

My first years at WKU were spent voraciously gathering all the information that I could. I had no coherent plan, except that I wanted to do everything and understand the whole world. It was a bit ambitious. But no one was making fun of me yet, so I figured I was heading in the right direction. Wherever that was.

I began to study Chinese, and I remember feeling like I was 16 again and barely learning to drive: I can’t do this, I will never know how to do this, there are too many new things, I’m going to accidentally ruin everything and especially Sino-American relations.

I studied anthropology, which by definition covers any topic that involves people, so it was a perfect Exploratory freshman fit. In retrospect, my anthropology studies formed the foundation for my understanding of the broader world - how and why we interpret information the way we do, our allocation of semi-arbitrary cultural value, the effect this has on the physical operation of the world. Now, anthropology frames the backbone of my thinking.

In the fall semester of 2012, I traveled to China for the first time. Living in Harbin, Heilongjiang for four months taught me to be adaptable, adventurous, and self-motivated, and it was during this time that I rediscovered performance art. When words
failed me, I could sing (literally, because tones aren’t observed as meticulously in sung Mandarin). When language trapped me, dance and physical expression could perfectly articulate my feelings. Furthermore, when the politics of being an American in China tempted attitudes of distrust, arrogance, and cold severity, humble story-telling evoked a healing, bonding kind of magic.

Taunting the fallacies of a generalized education system or the harmful impact of industrialization on the environment is very convenient when your country boasts a relatively low population density. Sharing personal stories, however, inherently establishes that special fellowship which grows out of diversity. It says, “I am an individual with my perspective, in my place in life, which is unique; only I have these stories.” It acknowledges that our experiences are different, our philosophies deserving of respect if not agreement. Then, as we expose our specific truths, we knit our community, blanketing one another with faith, hope, and loyalty as cooperative players in the story of the human race.

This is what I discovered. Almost magically, my dearest friendships in China were born not with eloquent speeches or irrefutable logic; rather, they grew through the clumsiness of heartfelt language, the acknowledged contradictions of mind and body and heart, and the freedom to safely entrust it all to a welcoming audience.

Step Two: Read. A lot.

What had come as a complete revelation to me has, apparently, been active in the minds of people much smarter than I for a very, very long time. It began showing up everywhere: in movies, in class discussions, in magazine articles, in the way that one
person looked at me as I verbally admonished the self-checkout machine at Kroger.

Everything started to connect, and all I wanted to do was write about it. I did, eventually - but first I had to earn my piece of the conversation. My perspective and my words matter most when they contribute, not repeat, and it would be false to claim intellectual property of an idea that isn’t mine alone. Especially when maybe no ideas belong to anyone alone.

So I joined the conversation. I started by listening, which means reading, watching, observing, thinking. Processing. I took notes as I read, and I asked questions. I found answers, which led to more questions. Which led to more reading. More listening.

In the annotated script, I’ve included much of the conversation. But really, it’s ongoing.

*Step Three: Write Something Awful.*

For several months after the moment I told myself I would start writing now, I was self-diagnosed with an unsurmountable case of Writer’s Block. I consulted a literary expert, my reader and friend Dr. Michelle Dvoskin, and her cure was simple:

“Let yourself write badly.”

She was right. I avoided writing because I only permitted perfection. Newly immersed in the beautifully articulate, scholastic conversations, I accepted nothing less of myself, and for a long time that meant accepting nothing. Which meant writing nothing.

That afternoon I drove to my favorite coffee shop and ordered my favorite drink extra hot, to last longer. In the style of Natalie Goldberg, I wrote for two hours: the beginning of a mandatory, routine discipline. I wrote a truly terrible piece. But I was
writing.

In December of 2013, I tested my determination by submitting a highly-edited version of the terrible piece to the first WKU New Works Festival. Miraculously, it was accepted. The piece underwent several massive changes after its acceptance and even more after I returned from New York, where I had hoped to answer the newly ubiquitous question: how on earth do I tell this story?

To further complicate matters, I debated what story it was, exactly, that I was trying to tell. Something inside me was stirring to be shared, especially with my newfound discovery that performance art builds community! I wanted to build a community, and a diverse international one, too. I just wasn’t sure how.

These were the circumstances under which You Hear Me Speak (你听我说) was created.

Honestly, the New Works Festival taught me more about creating a show than I ever could have theorized. Tight deadlines forced material to be written. Out of necessity, I learned to be decisive, only rarely at the expense of the final product. Collaboration became my favorite word - how else would anything have been completed? Katie Knight was not only my sound designer and composer, she was also my motivator, my encourager, and my first pair of “third eyes.” My actors crafted my story with more life than even I had.

In retrospect, if I had stuck with my original plan to do everything on my own without confiding in anyone and therefore protecting the imperfection of my work, the entire piece would have been a failure. I owe its success to my collaborators, their faith in me, and their willingness to make something beautiful and inspiring out of my genuinely-
written but premature first play.

*Step Four: Rediscover.*

I continued my writing routine. It was pivotal that I wrote every day, because it was during this season that so much of my personal life changed.

Of course, life always changes, and I know this better now than ever before, but on occasion life sends you through a series of rapid-fire, dramatic changes that leave you feeling blindsided and deeply, deeply frightened.

I also felt at fault for a lot of what was happening, which was true. I needed to take some ownership for the direction my life was taking, because I believe myself to have at least some degree of free will. As directors so often remind us, “Acting is reacting.”

In this way, writing was therapeutic. The intangible worries that swirled like smoke in my mind could be visualized in words. They could be enumerated, parsed out. They could even be deleted. Sometimes, there was nothing quite as satisfying as typing out a horrible, haunting memory, reading it over, and then slowly, systematically deleting it letter by letter, as if the act of erasing it from my sight also eliminated it from my brain.

As I wrote, I began to sort things out: *Some things are my fault. I need to be brave and accept that. But I am not evil because I made a choice that made a change that made someone I care about unhappy. I am not horrible. I do not deserve to die, or even to live unhappy, beating myself up constantly. I made a choice. I get to make choices. And people are allowed to be unhappy about it.*

I guess I learned how to let people not like me and how to free myself from the
obligation of keeping others happy always. I learned somewhat of a difference between being selfish and being a doormat. I learned how to be bold and to accept the consequences.

It permeated my life. Discussions in my feminist theatre history class were about plays, but also about me and my relationships and my life. Church sermons were about feminism, too, and about faith that transcends international boundaries, and about complicated love, and about unanswered questions. Musical rehearsals were about making difficult choices, about sharing the weight of our wishes, about carrying the consequences together, and also about quiet, underrated strength. Once again, I realized that these specific narratives were reaching deeper into my soul and connecting everything. With truth.

*Step Five: Make It Personal.*

The problem, I realized, was that I felt so safe constructing a vague, impersonal story that would teach people something they needed to know about their lives. I had given them nothing to connect to. How could I expect my audience to open their hearts to me, if I was not first offering my own?

Panic ensued. I knew now what my story was. I had just spent the past four months writing it. And deleting it, letter by letter.

I spent some time on the Joyce Meyer rocking chair of anxiety. As long as those stories were untold, they didn’t exist. Yet, they were still a part of me, and I knew they were crucial points on the great linear regression of my life. To not include them would be to smooth the line, but the result would not be the line of best fit.
At the advice of a friend, I found a sort of compromise. To satisfy my need to be Academic, Objective and Scholarly, I identified and researched the perfect muse: the renowned Peking opera artist Mei Lanfang.

As a Chinese performance artist and female impersonator, Mei Lanfang had intrigued me even in the early stages of my Chinese language study. In fact, I had recently conducted a feminist analysis of his work in the opera *Farewell My Concubine*, so his character and my questions were both fresh in my mind. It seemed at first like a bit of a long-shot, but I felt more comfortable writing personal albeit random letters to a deceased stranger than I did sharing my still-smarting memories with an audience.

“Let yourself write badly,” I constantly reminded myself. And the more I allowed myself to speak freely, to pretend that Mei Lanfang and I were best friends, to imagine that he completely understood me, the more I wrote. I had so much to tell him. Nothing connected, but somehow it did, and besides it didn’t matter because I was just having a heart-to-heart with my pal Mei Lanfang.

When I brought the results to my reader, she laughed and smiled and - amazingly - believed that it made sense. It wasn’t just my fictional Mei Lanfang; she understood me, too. That gave me confidence.

Seven letters later, I felt my stories coming to completion…except for one. I had said almost everything I could think of, but I was still afraid to share the one story that really did bring them all together, the one that had been most on my heart, the one with no safe distance, because it was my present dilemma, and it involved all of the people I cared most about.

This is the very last story. Originally, I told it first from second-person
perspective, and later I realized (again with the help of “third eyes”) that my choice of an indirect voice was yet another self-defense mechanism. It was subsequently edited.

I’ve also wrestled with the fact that I wrote the final story to be somewhat cryptic. After much deliberation, I’ve decided that its puzzling nature is less about protecting myself - I honestly say everything that needs to be said, and even in its present state it’s difficult for me to perform - and more about protecting the integrity of the story and the people involved. Were the story more obvious, it would read like a gossip column. My audience would be distracted by the juicy content of my dramatic little life and not attentive to the deeper emotions and ideas weaving through it. My thinking runs a little like that, anyway, and I think my expression of the memory using my own stream of consciousness is all the more compelling and powerful. I share less of the specific plot and more of my internal reactions to it, because I spent more time pondering the spiritual repercussions of my actions than reminiscing the specific turn of events.

Finally, I had to say farewell to Mei Lanfang. Early on, my goodbye letter to him was the final act of my performance, but it made the piece feel diminished. Like a 50 cent greeting card or the end of The Nutcracker. Plus, I realized that everything I had written to Mei Lanfang suggested the final story; his friendship simply grew in me the confidence to tell the actual, final story myself. It felt a bit like a break-up, even as I wrote it. But we’re still friends. I assume.

I remember standing from my table during the staged reading, walking center stage straight into the light, and seeing shadowy faces on the other side. I relished it, but my core still fills with butterflies at the memory. Standing tall, alone on the stage. Every ear attentive. My own voice, my own story, given presence. Resonating with people.
Hearing applause and tears, receiving hugs. Eavesdropping as people talk about it days later. They still remember it.

It’s special. It’s magical. Knowing that for a brief moment in time, I found that connection. And it’s changed everything; I will never forget it. Forever after, in every story that I tell, I will look for that unifying enchantment, the one that affirms our connection to everyone else and reminds us that we are each crucial characters in an incredible story: life.
CHAPTER THREE

The Annotated

Letters to Mei Lanfang

Written and performed by Dare Norman

This piece premiered at Western Kentucky University in the Gordon Wilson Hall Lab Theatre on December 9th, 2015.

One

Dear Mei Lanfang¹,

Hello. My name’s Dare. You’ve never met me before, and you maybe never will, because I think you’ve died already – yep, on August 8, 1961. That’s… 31 years before I was born…I’m so sorry for your loss. I’m also sorry that I wasn’t aware of it, and I’m sorry that I mistook your gender for a long time – Sir.

While I’m at it, I apologize, too, for everything that I am and everything that may or may not be to your liking in the next thirty minutes.

Formalities aside.²

What’s up? I don’t get the floor very often. I’m one of those people that makes friends by listening³ and nodding and saying, “I understand,” even when I’m actually still sort of not understanding them, and then about three months after meeting the person I realize I know all about them and their life, and I’m accustomed to the rhythm of their thoughts and emotions, and I’ve discovered I really quite love them

and then they call me an Amoeba⁴, and I realize that I’m really good at one-sided relationships.

It’s weird being the other side of the one-side. I feel a little selfish about it. But
don’t worry. I will never call you an Amoeba. Or a single-celled organism of any kind. I promise.

I’ve known of you for a really long time. You were often brought up when I tried to explain my line of work – “I’m a performer! I sing and dance.” “Oh, like Mei Lanfang?” “Yeah!”

The correct answer to that question was No. I realize that now.

Peking opera is a really complicated performance art form.

Actually, no, it’s not complicated. It’s just like…learning Chinese. When I tell people I speak Mandarin Chinese, they often go – “You must have a natural gift for languages! Chinese is one of the most difficult languages in the world!”

And I often go, “Well, not if you’re Chinese. Also we are both Homo sapiens, so our brains have evolved with a capacity for language acquisition (at the expense of important survival mechanisms like a protected jugular vein, but whatever, Nature)⁵. So thank you for your compliment! I just don’t know what to do with it.”

Anyway, Peking opera is not a complicated performance art form.

Or, okay, it is intricate. It’s highly codified, nuanced and detailed.⁶ In this way, it’s complex and inspiring.

BUT Peking opera is not “complicated” simply because it’s Chinese. That, well, simplifies it. It exists for a beautiful, multi-faceted purpose that doesn’t include entertaining Exoticism⁷.

So it’s…complicated. Especially for one white female American Christian trying to figure it out. Once, I laughed my way through a Peking opera excerpt because I couldn’t get past how funny it was to hear this Chinese man sing a whole aria in a high-pitched lady voice⁸.

Which was very rude and also unfair, because I love the Bee Gees.⁹

Love always,

Dare.

Sunday School

Hi, guys! Welcome to the 5th grade girls Wednesday Night Bible Study! We can come up with a better name for it soon. My name is Dare, and I’m not your regular teacher actually, Ms. Leslie can’t be here tonight though, so it’s just you guys and me! Yay!

So, let’s open our Bibles to Genesis. None of you have them with you. That’s okay, I can just read it aloud. And here’s our handy dandy teaching outline!

Question 1: What were the consequences of Adam and Eve’s Sin? See Gen
3…Okay…Um “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life,” that’s to Adam, and then to Eve he says, “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth…your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

Question 2: What does this mean for us today?

Well, (reading from outline) all men are designed only to work at a job to make money and all women are designed only to stay home and raise children and make happy homes. These are the jobs God assigned us WE CALL THEM FIXED GENDER ROLES Sorry I added that part (reads again) and this is God’s natural order.

(Puts down outline) I think what the outline is trying to say is: the consequence of Adam and Eve’s disobedience is that gender roles were inflicted on the Earth. We often call it The Curse.

You see, originally, God designed men and women to help each other in taking care of the Garden of Eden. But after their disobedience, gender roles were assigned as a…punishment.

(Reading from outline) Because Eve tried to play the leader, she failed and led Adam and the whole world and forever after into sin.

See that seems so backwards. Eve may have led Adam to make a poor decision, but she did lead. From the start it was her natural tendency. The snake even acknowledged this by approaching her first - if Eve were so weak and gullible, would Adam have followed her?

That day, Eve and perhaps all women were cursed against their natural leadership role to hear historically broken-record messages of Silence and Submission and Service - none of which are inherently bad qualities, but so intensely directed at this one group of female people who are also gifted with hearts. And ears. And moldable minds…

Perhaps this explains why this whole feminist movement exists entirely. It’s an anti-Curse movement that may never be solved, but it still acknowledges God’s original order in which female leadership was natural, not some 20th century cultural phenomenon. In the beginning, gender roles did not exist!

(beat)

Let’s close in prayer.

Two

Dear Mei Lanfang,

Let’s talk about Feminism for a second or two or three thousand.
I’m a new Feminist. Which, like becoming a Christian or purchasing a first gym membership, means I’m super enthusiastic and less-than-super experienced.

I know things like – there are “three waves” of feminism, the first being Women’s Suffrage, the second being the 1960’s “Girls Can Do Whatever Guys Can Do” Marcia Brady movement, and the third being Tina Fey.

And, historical categories are fun, and all - but for practical purposes - I’m still sort of lost. I guess I still feel outside of The Movements. I do get annoyed by personal experiences, like hearing jokes in high school, even from my friends, about Make Me a Sandwich, Woman.

Or like receiving this genuine compliment: “Wow! You are dressed so nicely! And in a non-slutty way, which is rare around here.”

My blouse was actually sort of see-through that day, I noticed later. Maybe I should have said something. “Wait, come back! You didn’t scrutinize me carefully. I actually am a slut?”

Other “I Might Be a Feminist” moments include:

“LOOK what she’s EATING! It’s soooooo unFAIR. I can’t believe you eat that and still manage to look like that. I’m so jealous.”

And also


I’m sorry if this is boring for you…I’m told it’s better in my spangled-y leotard.

In another instance, my friend explained that she had attended a Bible study and home-making class christened, “The Keepers.” Because if she’s a Proverbs 31 Woman, she’s A Keeper.

So I think I’m a Feminist. BUT also I’m a little nervous to assert that I might be a Feminist in case you (or one of my audience members, hi) in case somebody listening actually is A Feminist and then we get stuck in what could become a covert but bloodthirsty Feminist catfight.

And while all catfights are created equally – male, female, feline – I equally avoid all of them.

Therefore, Mei Lanfang, I must confess that I’m maybe sort of at least mostly pro-Feminist.

THAT BEING SAID: I really enjoyed your work in Farewell My Concubine, and I think you are an amazing artist. THAT BEING SAID: You worked the gender system. Maybe you didn’t know about it. But you might have accidentally reinforced some really harmful ideas.

But like I said before – great job! You are incredibly gifted. I could never do what you did. Because I’ve never trained in Peking Opera. And because I’m a woman. And
you, my dear friend, are not one.

Love always,

Dare.

The Perfect Qipao 1

A clothing rack with many empty hangers. On one end a hanger holds a tiny white embroidered qipao. DARE browses the empty rack. Takes time in examining all of the “clothes” on the empty hangers. Gets to the qipao, smiles, “A-ha! Just what I was looking for!” Runs off to try it on.

The Perfect Qipao 2

DARE enters disheveled and frowning, with the qipao unceremoniously wedged as best as she can manage over her clothes. It’s obviously way too small. The mirror is the audience. Sticks out her tongue at it, exits.

Three

(DARE is wearing a dress. Paints on lipstick, looking into a small handheld mirror. There is a bit of a struggle; her hair is too long and sticking to her face. DARE puts mirror on the table, holds hair back, leans forward to look into the mirror and put lipstick on one-handed, facing down, altogether quite unabashedly awkwardly. She sits back up, throwing her hair back, examining her handiwork as if it were expertly done.)

Dear Mei Lanfang,

How do I look? Am I a lipstick kind of person? You make me think of that iconic moment in - not to be racist or stereotypical or whatever, I promise - that moment in Disney’s Mulan? Where half of her face is covered with white cream, powdered with pink, and her eyes are lined in liquid ink, and her lips are bright, glossy red. Half of her face. 25

Why did you decide to wear makeup? As far as I understand, dan (female character) actors in Peking opera before you didn’t emphasize elaborate make-up, beaded headdresses, or embroidered silk gowns\textsuperscript{26}…

I can just imagine, as best as I can with my imagination:

You’re sitting backstage, getting ready for your first big performance, and you think one of two things.

One: “I really should have been cast as the Emperor. Why do I always have to be the girl? What can I do to make people…pay attention to me anyway?”\textsuperscript{27}
Or two, you might have thought: “I am honored to play Concubine Yu. It is my duty as an artist to *truly live the part*. I will *become* woman.”

Whether out of a need for attention or a genuine desire to inhabit “Woman” - you decided to wear makeup.

Since then, people across the world have claimed that “even the most beautiful of women pale in comparison to [you].” You were certainly a skilled makeup artist.

Wait, that could sound insulting…. And I don’t mean to be, but, don’t you see how it’s sort of insulting to me, kind of calling me *ugly* if – one, as a woman, I won’t be noticed unless my facial features are highlighted to stunning unrealistic perfection, or two, as a woman, my natural inner spirit requires that I look a certain way, which is not the way I naturally look.

You are beautiful, Mei Lanfang. But I am, too.

Love always,

Dare.

*Story Time!*

有眼不识泰山

*To Fail to See the Great Tai Shan Mountain*

Once upon a time, in a faraway kingdom, there was a magic sparkle princess from Bowling Green, Kentucky. She was visiting this faraway kingdom for an intensive language immersion program – in the kingdom of *China* – and she was excited but also having a bit of an identity crisis.

One day, the princess’s fairy study abroad coordinator announced that she and her woodland creature friends would be going on an unexpected journey

**TO TAI SHAN MOUNTAIN!**

The princess had heard of Tai Shan Mountain. It was said that One Was Not Truly Chinese until She Had Climbed Tai Shan Mountain. Which was good for the princess, because she was not Chinese.

Tai Shan Mountain, which in English is Tai Mountain Mountain, was legendary. It was over 5,000 feet tall and divided into 3’by 1’ rectangular stairs carved solid into the rock.

On the morning of the quest, it decided to rain. But for the crew of Nat Geo quality expeditioners - there was no going back.

Especially for the princess, because it was on this morning that she decided she needed to impress someone. We’re still investigating who.

The princess had abandoned her usual attire for something more practical for the occasion – but also something that screamed I AM A MOUNTAINEER HEAR ME
ROAR.

She was not a mountaineer. She was a singer. But she was also an actor! So she thought she could swing the gig.

“KENTUCKY IS ALL MOUNTAINS I CLIMB THEM ALL THE TIME I ROCK CLIMB.”

We’re also investigating her mental timeline? The current debate centers around the exact moment she began to think lying was a good plan.

At fifteen minutes into the climb, the princess decided she did not very enjoy stairs.

At twenty minutes, she decided the architecture of the mountain was a little silly.

At thirty minutes, she was soaked, and she began to regret not thinking of a Mountaineer Raincoat.

At forty minutes, she was not having fun anymore.

At one hour, she was a quarter of the way up Tai Shan. It dawned on her that she did not like this mountain. And she did not like whoever was running the weather, either.

At ninety minutes, the princess had an epiphany. The faster I go, she thought, the faster it will be over!

At ninety minutes, she picked up speed.

At one hundred and eighty minutes, she was still going strong.

At two hundred minutes, the princess was halfway up the mountain. Vomiting.

The rain came down. Lightning flashed. The princess reexamined her life choices.

A few minutes and a sad pop song later, her woodland friends appeared to escort her down the mountain. They loaded the bus. The princess was disappointed and felt bad about herself, which aggravated her identity crisis. So she wrote a story about it and shared it with lots of people.

She’s still not sure what this story means. Part of her thinks it might mean she sucks at mountain climbing in a metaphorical way. “Stay away from the mountains, dear, you’ll never make it.”

Part of her thinks it might mean she just needs to try harder! “If I can’t climb, I’ll die trying!”

And part of her thinks it means she sucks at mountain-climbing in a metaphorical way, because, you know, she’s a singer. And a devout dress-wearer. And a story-teller.

And maybe she’s a better story-teller now that she’s got one about vomiting on Tai Shan.

Anyway. We’re still investigating.
Dear Mei Lanfang,

You have put me in a very uncomfortable situation.

I just watched *Farewell my Concubine* again, and you really are spectacular to watch. And all of the Peking opera scholars out there agree with me - or, I guess, I agree with them. Your Concubine is enthrallingly beautiful. Her movements are like - a Barbie doll, now that I think about it.

Okay, so I played with Barbies until I was fifteen. I still have a pretty extensive Barbie collection - and I mean the *Collectible* Barbies, too, with the special stickers. That I misplaced when I opened each box. So that I could feel the sparkly fabrics and customize their outfits and hairstyles and pose them on bookshelves.

This Christmas I’m asking Santa for the Mattel Cinderella Barbie with the Sandy Powell dress. So there.

It is with some confidence that I describe your movements as Barbie-like. Your slight, lightweight tilts of the head; your slow, careful turns; your methodic, almost robotic gestures. Like you are hovering above the stage, your limbs filled with air, swaying in a playful breeze but secured with balloon strings.

Your outfit - the colors, the jewels, the thick, shining layers of expensive silk. The shimmering embroidery. The glittering headdress, the unusual and majestic face paint.

And you are heartbreakingly loyal to the Emperor. Patient, gentle, kind, with a strength that shines in your stalwart, loving devotion even to death.

You are spectacular. In image, in movement, and in spirit.

And all that was great! Yeah! Whoo! Until your theatre critic friends said this thing, and then made this thing a Thing.

The thing is, people consider your version of Concubine Yu to be…well… that you play the role of a woman so convincingly that even WOMEN can’t compete.

And you’ve got all these scholars raving about the “identification” concept of *dan* performance, which is a just bunch of loaded textbook jargon, loosely translated as:

“I’m not just going to be what I think *this* woman in *this* situation at *this* time period *could be*; NO SIR, I’m going to - through one character and a small set of very specific choices - ENCOMPASS THE ENTIRE IDEA OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A WOMAN.

Also I’m a man by the way. Hi, there, and No Girls Allowed.”

This is where my predicament begins. All of a sudden - which is actually not all that all of a sudden or completely your fault, because it’s been for centuries and it’s not
Dear Mei Lanfang,

I changed my mind. I’m not finished yet.

My very first lead role ever was Kim MacAfee in my high school’s production of *Bye Bye, Birdie*. Actually I lied, before that I played Mary the Mother of Jesus in the children’s Nativity Scene at church.

I was Cosette right before college. Then I was the Kind-hearted, Sweater-Wearing Best Friend in a staged-reading. Then I was Barbarina with a polka-dot bow. Now I’m Cinderella.

I guess you could say I’m an ingénue. A tall brunette ingénue.

Yearbook notes and thank-you letters always describe me as, “The sweetest person I know!” “So kind, a true angel on Earth,” and “An Actual Disney Princess.”

To which one should reply - Aw! Thanks! That’s so nice! - Right?

I’m not sure when I started hating this, or even when I realized I hated it.

Maybe it was when I was a cry-baby little girl and constantly criticized for being too sensitive. Maybe it was when I said I “hated running” that one time in junior high gym class - when really I was just lazy and wanted to read instead - and then I was then dubbed “Weenie” for the rest of the year. Maybe it was when somebody, somewhere, that one time, said something like

“You’re so princess-y, don’t like to get your hands dirty; what makes you think you want to do that?”

Something like

“You want to change the world, that is so…cute.”

And something shifted suddenly inside me and I couldn’t stand to be a Princess anymore. I hid my Barbies, stopped wearing dresses, starting liking math just to hear “Dare likes math, she’ll do something great with her life.”

Well, here we are.

Is there something wrong with crying easily? Am I sensitive in a way that reinforces a harmful gender stereotype? Do I need to just man up, for Feminist’s sake?
Or what about smiling? What’s wrong with ‘cute’ if, maybe that’s your default? A survival instinct - *I certainly can’t outrun the bear or win a bear fight, but maybe it’ll go for a hug...*?[^45]

And how do you prevent yourself from making stupidly general comments of good cheer when you’re in an awkward situation and just want to make sure that everyone is at least doing okay because you would feel even more awkward if they weren’t?

And how do you not hate yourself when you can’t stop yourself from being a lot of maybe what society created you to be but also maybe a lot of who you simply are as a reactive human being?

It’s a complicated pendulum, my dear friend. You contributed to a system that expected - no, *required* - women to become a certain “type.” An ingénue. At the same time, you made it impossible for them to achieve that unrealistic, male-constructed standard.

Consequently, and, I would argue, rightfully, women retaliated, creating a new system in which all kinds of women were accepted - except, now, for the ones that resemble the previous culturally-promoted types of women[^46]

I promise, my Dad didn’t decide that I like to wear dresses. I did. I like to wear them all the time and even when it’s impractical, but I’m learning to deal with that in a mannerly fashion.

And my Mom didn’t determine that her second-born should be a sensitive soul. In fact, I would probably annoy her a lot less if I just didn’t *feel* so much.

Some of the qualities you standardized for Women are qualities that I happen to have, for whatever reason. I like Barbies. That’s okay. And not every female likes Barbies. That’s okay, too.

We can’t be reduced to ‘ingenues.’ But maybe ingenues shouldn’t be reduced, either[^47] And when it wasn’t expected of me to be above-and-beyond what I am, I was then taunted to become something entirely different.

And I really just want something in between[^48]

Love always,
Dare.

*An Ode to Trying to Meet Assumed Expectations*

*[in the style of Bob][^49]*

Beat.

I’m fine, thank you.

Five

Dear Mei Lanfang,

I want to be everything when I grow up. It’s overwhelming. Like reading about Emma Watson.\textsuperscript{50} And thinking: Two years from now, if you are anything less than that, you are a failure.

LET’S DO THIS!!!!!

You start to receive greetings like, “Are you okay?” and you realize you’ve been writing a very normal email with an unusually strained expression on your face that looks like AGONY.

And you think, why not get married? Why not buy one of those small gingerbread cottages on State Street and start an herb garden in the window box? You’d have time to paint again, except for when you were working part-time or making dinner or doing laundry or waiting for your toenails to dry while watching Netflix. Or taking care of your child.

You could have your own dog! One that would sleep in your bed and be snuggly and well-behaved at the Bark Park. You could wear a white baseball cap and sunglasses and be an athlete with a dog and an herb garden and a gingerbread cottage.

And there would be NO interruptions! No unwanted phone calls. No mass-emails. NONE! My time would be MINE. ALL MINE!

And my husband’s. And my child’s. And my dog’s.

I think…I might be confused about what “being married” means.

I’m supposed to want companionship, right? If I shut everyone out of my life – which I don’t\textsuperscript{always want}\textsuperscript{51} – would I even do all that I expect I would? I’d be just as stressed out. I’m stressing myself out just thinking about it.

God seems to say that He loves us how we are. Individually. With our individual hopes and dreams.

It says this somewhere. I don’t know exactly where. I would look up the specific reference.\textsuperscript{52} But.

I guess, I don’t, like the way I am, currently. I’m complicated and confusing and I think something is wrong with me. And maybe that is an insult to God. He likes me! Why don’t I like me?

Because, I’m tall. I bite my nails when I think. And I think a lot. So my nails are
terrible and I look like I’m suffering from caffeine-withdrawal. And sometimes I am.

BUT I’m OPTIMISTIC. If I were a pessimist, that would be where the story ends. But I have HOPE!

“You are ugly. But if you wake up when your alarm goes off at 5:00, you can go to the gym and be skinny and healthy and shower and shave and wear makeup and style your hair in a way that won’t look terrible after being crushed under a helmet when you drive your sexy moped to class – and THEN you’ll be beautiful.”

“You are ignorant. But if you read everything that anyone has ever written ever by Tuesday – THEN you’ll be an informed, intelligent member of the world.”

I can see all that I hope for. And at the same time I doubt it and reconfigure it to meet expectations. And then I amplify it because I want to be everything when I grow up - what I want and what they want and what He wants and what you want - And I won’t reject any of it, because there are people who seem to have successfully done everything!

You’ve done everything. You were a star internationally, praised for being beautiful, intelligent, and innovative. I know about you and all you’ve achieved, and you…don’t know me at all. Even if you were alive today, you wouldn’t know me, because, I’m not _______ enough for you to know.

This hurts my feelings. In a very motivational way.

Love always,
Dare.

_Interpretation of the Proverbs 31 Woman_55

( _Donning a Great Gold Sparkly Plastic Hat._ )

Come one, come all! Come see the one and only God-fearing woman! She not only loves the Lord with all her heart, but she also loves her husband and her children and her parents and her friends and her community and everybody and YOU and YOU and even you, you, right there way in the back. You probably walked in late, didn’t you?

NOT THIS WOMAN! This woman is NOT only not judging you for being late to her show, she is also ALWAYS on time herself. Timely, organized, prepared, well-kempt – she would never wear her pajamas to class!

She not only wakes up early to accomplish all of those things and go to the gym and eat a healthy breakfast and read her Bible for thirty minutes (because DID I MENTION HOW MUCH SHE LOVES GOD) and chat kindly with her family before leisurely hand-filling her moped tank, hitting the carb with a hammer a few times, and classily riding to school.

ALL WITHOUT SMELLING LIKE EXHAUST!
She has class all day, meetings in her free time, emails, assignments, rehearsals, AND FRIENDS and mental and emotional stability, all in a day’s work with a good night’s sleep because she comes with 7 extra hours in the day! Ha ha, just kidding. She doesn’t need more time! She doesn’t even complain about not having time! She’s invinci—

Wait, what? Does she not amaze you? Isn’t she achieving the seemingly impossible? Isn’t she…?

I guess it is pretty selfish of her to take up your time. And, she didn’t mean to brag, really. Really, it’s not a big deal, she just does her job, that’s all… She’s, she’s really embarrassed now, and very sorry, and she hopes she hasn’t offended you, and that you have a good day. I’m sorry.

Six

Dear Mei Lanfang,

I should probably preface this by saying: I don’t know why I’m telling you this. It doesn’t really have anything to do with you, except it does, I just don’t know what exactly.

I was six years old when I accepted Jesus into my heart, but it hasn’t been until the past few years that I’ve really re-examined my relationship with God.

People get scared of “re-examining” things, especially Christians. Because asking questions sounds like Doubt. And no one wants to be Thomas.

I feel bad for him. He got so much criticism for wanting things to be explained logically.

“Excuse me, guys? I don’t mean to be rude…but…we keep talking about Jesus like he’s up and breathing, and, yeah, I miss him, too, I get it…but I’m like 99% sure that crucifixion is…fatal…”

And even Jesus didn’t just dismiss him – Thomas, Stop Doubting and Believe – although he did say that, but only after He said, “Put your finger here; see my hands”.54 Jesus was willing to meet Thomas where he was. And he’s willing to meet me where I am.

I don’t know for sure, but I think God questions are okay.

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” 55

This doesn’t make natural, scientific sense – would you break your own physical laws? Is carbon-dating really inaccurate or are we mistranslating the original Hebrew word for “day” or are we simply stuck in a wearisome battle of proving who’s smarter?

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” 56
Why do bad things happen to good people? You are strong enough to save us, so why haven’t you done anything?

“When am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

Who do You think I am, God, that you’re compelling me to talk sensitive in a world that would really rather I just shut up and move props?

I don’t think I should be silent. I don’t think I have to quell my questions. I guess I believe God is guiding my steps. The path is more winding and curved than I would have guessed, but He has to be in all of this. I trust that.

I think – you taught me that. I understand now. Our relationship has consisted of question after question after question - and it’s making me question things to the very core of my being, things that… I also won’t reject. I can never reject.

But I will forever ask my questions.

Love always,
Dare.

*How to Write a Thesis and Not Die*

Step One: Construct an Elaborate and Impossible Plan That Somehow Feels Safer Than Making It Personal.

So. Michelle. I want to write my own full-length Musical Theatre Peking Opera Performance Piece, including costume and dance and songs with orchestra accompaniment. In Chinese. And English. It will be five days long.

Step Two: Make A Different Choice.

Hi, guys! Happy First Rehearsal of *You Hear Me Speak* - let’s play some acting games and learn some Chinese and use the New Works Festival to tell a story that sort of resembles my own struggle to communicate internationally but doesn’t actually assert anything too openly because that would be scary.

Step Three: Make a Scary Choice, and Realize You Will Be Okay.

Step Four: Fall in Love.

From my *Omphaloskepsis*: I became a performing artist because I wanted to be good at something that I am in love with and terrified by. I do this now because it’s what I can do better than anything else - I can empathize. And I can share that empathy with others.

Step Five: Share.
Dear Mei Lanfang,

I know what I want now. Or at least, I finally know what I want at this moment. And I know that it’s subject to change, because, things always change, and that’s good. It’s just movement. When something stops moving, you usually check its pulse. So movement, then, is life.

We’ve both moved things. Your life moved Peking Opera into the international limelight. Your life rattled people’s ideas about China, about performance art, about women, and about life. You’ve rattled my ideas about life.

And, again, I don’t even know you. I only have a personal concept of who you could have been, so maybe it’s not fair to act like we’re friends. Because, again, here I am doing all of the talking.

I never meant to make this all about me, I hope you know. You’ve been a huge part of it. What you’ve taught me, all the ideas and meaning that your life encompasses, how your life connects to mine in its own way…

We’re kind of friends. Somehow in the universe, in some transcendent way, Dare and Mei Lanfang are connected, and we are good friends. I hope we stay friends.

But I know what I want now, and I want to thank you.

You have made me a different person. It’s amazing, you don’t even know it, but you’ve changed my direction. Maybe slightly. Maybe a lot. And not to go all contemporary musical theatre on you, but who knows if I’ve been changed for the better, but I’ve been changed for good.

And I think our story is complete. Thank you for your patience in dealing with my inconsistent feelings, my contradictory ideas, the whole complicated process of figuring that I can’t figure things out.

But I can do this now. I want to do this myself.

A Story

You’re a girl.

You’re 18, and you’ve already fallen in love and out of love and in love again, and this time it’s unrequited and miserably romantic.

It’s a one-sided relationship.

You’re on a bus and it’s raining, on your way to a camp you disliked so much you probably shouldn’t talk about it, determined to have a miserable time, really, because you’re miserably in love, and life cannot go on.
But life, as it tends to, proceeds.

It’s November and it’s your least favorite day of the year - your birthday. It always rains on your birthday. Except for the years it doesn’t, which you never remember. This year your birthday was remembered by three people. And your birthday cake fell on the driveway.

Valentine’s Day comes and you remember that you were once in love. You had become so actively miserable you forgot you were in love. You sort of hate him now. It’s cold and it’s dark and it’s Valentine’s Day when you notice the card and the socks and the heart-shaped vanilla sprinkle cookies left by a friend. A friend.

Then you are a writer. You devise memoirs of teenage glory and lust after those days you were the star of the high school musical. You feel very pathetic. But you are writing.

Your stories change. It’s November again and your birthday was remembered. You remember this birthday because you are twenty and your parents are 7000 miles away and you almost accidentally got two specially-ordered birthday cakes and it did not rain. It snowed.

You’re back home and it’s like putting on your old favorite shoes. A welcome-home party is hosted for you and your best friend. Best friend.


It’s someone else’s birthday this time. A sea of balloons. They are red, white, and blue. There’s excited whispering, then SURPRISE! And we are happy. We. Us.

You don’t exactly understand what happens in between. You are in one thousand equally-happy places. And you are happy at the radio station, doing your regular shift, when a tragedy happens. It isn’t your tragedy, but it is, because her pain is yours.

You’re at the service. You feel pathetic and helpless and foolish. And you forget your lyrics. You embarrass yourself. You ruin a memory. They thank you graciously with the kindest gesture, another treasure, but your heart, for a time, stops.

And life, as it tends to, proceeds.

It’s February and it’s your grandfather and you think - again?

Then it’s May and it’s your best friend and you think - seriously, again?

Then it’s you. You have discovered something about yourself. Something dangerous and powerful. Something paralyzing and invigorating.

You have a choice to make.

I have a choice to make.
I pretend like it isn’t mine, but it is mine.
I know that now.
I make my choice.

My dear friend: I love him, and I’m allowed to. You hate this. And you’re allowed to.

And life, as it tends to, proceeds.

It’s November and it’s my birthday and it’s raining. He gives me marshmallows and an old sewing machine as birthday presents, which is weird and delightful and disconcerting all at once. There is no birthday party.

I can’t because I have rehearsal again, which isn’t at all unpleasant.

I can’t because I have rehearsal again, which is sometimes unpleasant.

I take my carefully collected memory treasures and I cry over them from time to time. *Did I make the right choice?*

No, I didn’t. My relationships are new and complicated.

Yes, I did. My relationships are new and complicated.

It’s February and it’s snowing. And snowing. And snowing. And I am snowing. I am cold and flurrying and quiet, and at times I really sparkle.

I write because I breathe, now. My stories have changed again. I have begun to notice a pattern in things. I write the patterns. I craft my map. Like a cartographer, I observe each direction. Like a mariner, I track my currents.

My stories start to swell a bit, too. They are sporadically released as tears or overwhelming bursts of laughter. And I notice all that I am learning. I notice all that I am noticing. I think often of all the times except the present.

It’s September. I want to be present. I am a new person and the same person at every moment. My memories and hopes and conclusions draw me to show up unexpectedly at a new friend party, but not before casually walking past twice to make sure it’s the right house.

My heart is pounding. It almost stops. But there’s a captivating tension between feeling about to die and feeling the most alive. I open the door. And for one peculiar, passing moment⁶⁶, on that funny tightrope between who I am and who I am, I find a balance.
This additional and perhaps odd-one-out piece is not intended to be enacted as part of the solo performance *Letters to Mei Lanfang*. Its inclusion as part of this published document, however, is important to understanding the cartographic journey I began in *Letters*, developed for ten months in Nanjing, China, and continue tracking to this very day. An inevitable part of this journey is the creation of something confusing and seemingly nonsensical, something oozing with self-conscious artistic pomp, something to seriously consider printing out as kindling over which to toast marshmallow Peeps.

This Epilogue was written on November 11, 2016 in a tiny coffee shop in the southern Jiangning district of Nanjing. At the time, I worked six days a week at a theatre and media arts company surrounded by Jiangsu’s artistic elite, for whom I would pour tea and write press releases. I was 7,000 miles and a firewall away from either 1980 Washington or 1933 Berlin depending who was on Skype. And I just celebrated my 24th birthday with a new community of people I love who love me: a homemade calligraphy card, treasured black forest cake, and no rain.
Neither excuses nor apologies, these were the circumstances of this second reading and response to *Letters to Mei Lanfang*, a conversation I’m realizing has no end. Remarkably like ninth-grade yearbook photos, the poem that follows is a less-than-flattering but still undeniably crucial snapshot of that moment in my life and the lens through which I reviewed the world, my research, and my own writing.

Most of my disappointment with this piece is its obvious regression to the vague and impersonal style that weakened *You Hear Me Speak* in 2014. I continually realize the importance of vulnerability, for frightened but brave honesty, and this poem itself does little to un-make the Great Wall of my heart. Yet I cannot deny this Epilogue its place in my artistic, academic journey, and therefore must include it in publication. If not the writing itself, this, then, is my act of brave honesty.

*(The Mandarin Chinese translation was accomplished in partnership with Liu Zhenghao. Thank you for putting words to my abstract concepts and for your pine-tree friendship.)*
Epilogue
A Poem by Dare Norman

Today is my birthday. That’s a given. And that’s a choice.

（今天是我的生日。这没得选择。但又是一个选择。）

Today I celebrate 24 years of continuous breathing. My heart occasionally stops. But it hasn’t yet remained dead.

（今天我庆祝二四年来一直不断地呼吸。我的心有时会停止跳动。但是它还没有死亡。）

24 autumns. 96 predictable rhythms of cold, then hot, then back, and then the syncopated change in seasons of years which still, in its way, creates music.

（二十四个秋天。九十六个可以预知的冷热相继，四季轮回。而在人生的季节中，切分音的变化一直在用它自己的方式创作着生活的乐章。）

24. One year for each hour it takes between one dawn and the next.

（二十四。每年对应着一天中的一个小时，在黎明和下一个黎明之间，二十四岁的时光悄然而逝。）

A glowing orb hovers, humming, over the black silhouette of Earth. Is it dawn? Or am I misreading dusk?

（一个闪光的球体漂浮着，低吟着，在地球黑色的身影之上，这是黎明吗？或者是误读了薄暮？）

For 24 hours God froze the sun’s faithful trek across the sky. I, too, at sudden symmetry lose my direction.

（上帝冷冻住了太阳在天空中忠实的长途跋涉，二十四个小时的停滞。我也，因为瞬间的平衡失去了我的方向。）
How did I get here?
（我是如何到这儿的？）
Was it to learn how to talk to people? To give voice to my inner quiet?
（是来学习怎么和人交流吗？是想给我内在的沉默一个声音吗？）
Was it to tell stories? Or to fail, and then start again?
（是来讲故事的吗？或者遭遇失败，然后重新开始？）
Was it to fall in love?
（是因为爱情吗？）

Here I pause, quietly suspended by gossamer thread, spinning like a frosted leaf in this thick evening stillness.
（我在这里停顿，安静地被游丝悬挂着，像一片覆霜的叶子在夜晚厚重的静谧中打转。）

I see February, iced, sparkling, and solitary. And deep beneath layers of knit and velvet, my soul stirs.
（我看见了二月，冰冻着，闪耀着，独自一人。在深层的布料和天鹅绒下，我的灵魂在微动。）

From my perch at the wide open window, I see April’s darkness melt ombre into the earliest untouched light of May.
（我站在高处，从视野广阔的窗户，我看到四月的黑暗逐渐地融化成五月最初的未曾触摸的光明。）

I see July, a hazy fever dream: suffocating, stifling, fringed with red fear of everything before and after.
（我看见七月，一个模糊发烧的梦：沉闷的，窒息的，装饰着对前后所有事情极度恐惧的流苏。）

Then October, with silken footsteps, whispers along. Smoke floats silently in its wake. The air is seeped with salt, and I am weightless. Numb. And deep beneath layers of coal dust and callous, my soul stirs.
（然后是十月，伴随着丝绸般的脚步，低声的诉说。烟雾在其身后安静地漂浮。空气中渗出带盐水汽，而我失去了重量。麻木。在深层的煤尘和老茧之下，我的灵魂在微动。）
It’s November. And today is my birthday.
（十一月了，而今天是我的生日。）
That’s a given. And that’s a choice.
（我没得选择，而这又是一个选择。）
Today, I fan a new flame.
（今天，我煽动了一个新的火焰。）
I coddle that slumbering stir from its summer hibernation
（我将那个梦乡的微动从夏季的沉睡中轻轻叫醒。）
And light a sparkler.
（点燃一簇烟火。）
It glitters alive, and those tiniest bright stars burst into the electric fizz of a winter storm. Rusted leaves fling to the sky, whipping hair stinging and heart exploding. And I am thrown
（它闪耀着生命的气息，那些微小明亮的火星爆裂成冬季暴风雪中跳动着的嘶嘶电流。腐朽的树叶飘向天空，头发在面颊上鞭打出刺痛的感觉，心脏爆炸的粉碎。而我被抛却）
I throw myself
（我抛却了自我）
from my carefully-crafted web into the unknown whirling crescendo.
（从我精心制作的网到达未知旋转的渐强音。）
Where am I?
（我在哪里？）
I open my eyes and am blind, save for one lantern glow ahead and the unfamiliar certainty that
I am not alone.
（我睁开了眼睛却什么都看不见，只有在前面的一盏发光的灯笼和不熟悉的确定性——我不孤独。）
We are not alone.
（我们不孤独。）
We open our eyes and are blind
(我们睁开了眼睛却什么都看不见)
Save for one inexplicable hope and the faint recognition of dark canvas
(只有一个不能解释的希望和一个关于黑色帆布的模糊感知——)
Awaiting that stain of light.
(在等待光明给它染色。)
And here we are. In the room where it happens.
(而我们在这里。在事情发生的那个房间。)
Where we speak. Where we consider. Where connect. Where we isolate. Where we act. Where we refuse.
(我们说话的地方，我们思考的地方，我们相连的地方，我们分离的地方。我们行动的地方，我们拒绝的地方。)
Where we choose.
(我们选择的地方。)
Today is our birthday.
(今天是我们的生日。)
History is melted and poured from a height, a sticky sheet folding on itself, flicking back and forth, cooling and hardening, striped vibrant in wild color.
(历史被融化了，从高处倾下，流动、粘稠的薄膜层层叠加其上，向前向后波动，变冷变硬，明亮的条纹呈现出疯狂的颜色。)
Visible waves.
可见的波浪。
Time, like sound and light, is composed of waves. Moments, days, seasons of years lap in layers, frothing and fading, dissolving in steam and raining from the clouds, splashing in friendly return. The ship rocks and we rock back. We cycle and spark, our own circuit, our own switch. Someday, we will replace solar panels.
(时间，就像声音和光，由波构成。时时刻刻，日日夜夜，人生的季节覆盖在图层上，起泡褪色，在蒸汽和云雨中消溶，泼洒，友好地返还。船在海中颠簸，我们以摇晃回应。我们旋转并闪光，我们自己的电路，我们自己的开关。改天，我们会更换太阳能面板。)

Today is our birthday. That’s a given. And that’s a choice.
（今天是我的生日。这没得选择。而这又是一个选择。）

Today we continue. Today we begin.
（今天我们继续。今天我们开始。）

We are the perfect storm.
（我们是完美的风暴。）

And this is the fourth wave.
（而且，这是第四次浪潮。）
Dear Mei Lanfang,

Ten months is the longest that I’ve been away from home. Especially when “away” is Nanjing, China, which is also the furthest distance I’ve been from home. Writing to you again from this depth of time and space is certainly surreal.

Which is...silly...because Nanjing is actually significantly closer to your hometown, as opposed to writing from Kentucky several thousand miles away...and if I’m writing to 1956 you, what difference does it make really if I’m writing from 2015 or 2016?

It just does, I guess. One year does make a difference.

Since arriving in Nanjing on February 16, I negotiated my first grown-up housing contract, joined the Nanjing University dance company as a guest dancer, audited elective classes like Contemporary Chinese Gender and Women’s Studies, attended weekly Baiju (traditional Nankinese folk performance) lessons, defended a report on Disney’s localization in China, worked as assistant producer on a William Shakespeare-Meets-Tang Xianzu “new concept” Kun opera, taught cartoon mime classes for migrant workers’ children, and produced a modern American comedy at the Confucius Temple.

In the whirlwind of to-do lists and projects and plans, I forgot how it all changed me. And now writing to you out of nowhere again, I feel a tangible difference – a canyon replacing a river. Or how if a spelunker so much as touches a stalactite, the fingerprint stamps the limestone forever.

Reading these year-old monologues, I can see the inches add up in marks on the corner wall: Dare, 23, 5’7 and growing; Dare, 24, 5’9 and growing. I have echoes of feeling and hazy shadows where once burned vivid, piercing realities. What mattered so much after Woods closed, after making the graduation walk, just before flying 14 hours to Pudong International Airport have, since then, been injected with a kind of numbing bittersweet. Circumstances remain almost exactly as I left them last winter; my perspective alone has changed. Returning home, then, becomes like analyzing someone else’s dream: objective, clear, and weirdly detached.

Until, of course, I unpack.

Reality shifts in loads of laundry. It smells familiar, feels familiar in a sweater I
haven’t seen since last November. There’s 4:00 coffee as usual, except it hasn’t been usual for 317 days. A book on the nightstand is still marked to one page, and I pick it up as if I put it down yesterday. Only, I can’t recall the past forty pages.

We’ll have to start over, I guess. And over, and over, and over. Every day. And every time I try to write to you. While my hands know the English keyboard, the words are always going to be written, and read, and rewritten, by someone new.

But also by me. Because although one year does make a difference, it doesn’t make an Epitome, nor does it make an End. Even the mechanics of forgetting to boil water before drinking or remembering to order food like an American are reminders that life is a story of learning and unlearning and relearning, and at least trying to maintain enough bravery to keep facing the old letters.

My letters. My letters to you, Mei Lanfang. We’ll face them again soon, I’m sure, but until then...

Love always,

Dare.
1 Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) was a world-famous Chinese opera performer known for his performances of the Dan female-lead characters, particularly Concubine Yu in the Peking opera *Farewell My Concubine* and Du Liniang in the Kun opera *Peony Pavilion*.


3 “We have two ears and one mouth and we should use them proportionally.” Susan Cain. *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*. Crown Publishing Group, 2012.

4 *This* is an amoeba. It is a single-celled organism in the Kingdom Protista.
“All attempts to connect particular types of linguistic morphology with certain correlated stages of cultural development are vain. Rightly understood, such correlations are rubbish.” Edward Sapir. *Language*. 1921.

“Some people consider other languages ugly or “primitive sounding” if the languages make use of sounds or sound combinations they find indistinct or “inarticulate” because the sounds are greatly different from those of the languages they themselves speak. Such a view is based on the ethnocentric attitude that the characteristics of one’s own language are obviously superior. But words that seem unpronounceable to speakers of one language...are easily acquired by even the youngest native speakers of the language in which they occur.” Zdenek Salzmann. “Modern Myths Concerning Languages.” *Language, Culture & Society: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*. Westview Press, 1998.

I continually encounter what I feel is undeserved congratulations for having learned a second language, while many of my Chinese friends are habitually criticized and dismissed for even minor English mistakes. This is a hugely unfair double-standard. English is not inherently easy, just as Chinese is not inherently difficult. The transition has the same level of difficulty in both directions, so both sides should be recognized with the same respect.


Elements of performance in Chinese opera are incredibly specific – for example, costuming with “water sleeves,” properties like fans or hand-held weapons, movement and ‘poses,’ etc. Because of this, Chinese opera training is truly a life-long process.
7 “Mei’s refined elegance and feminine beauty invited curious gazes from Western audiences...In all likelihood, Mei’s photo images in America show a predilection for accentuating his effeminate physicality, be it presented and perceived as an artistic object of admiration, or as an exotic fascination with spectacle.”

8 “[This] oxymoronic headline of the article in the Literary Digest (1924) provokes public curiosity about Mei’s sexuality.”


8 An excerpt for the interested:

9 “Here in your arms I found my paradise
My only chance for happiness
And if I lose you now I think I would die...
...More than a woman
More than a woman to me” (The Bee Gees. Saturday Night Fever. “More Than a Woman.” 1977.)
I love this song and also have a problem with it. Forget, for a moment, the song’s groovy-ness and notice that its singers are elevating this poor girl to a height she can’t possibly maintain. She is Woman; she can’t be any more than (or less than) Woman. Furthermore, forcing the responsibility of one’s ability to be happy and even live on the shoulders of another person, as romantic as that sounds, is an incredible and also unwarranted load to bear. Chill out please, Mr. Gibb.

10 Genesis 3:17 (NIV)

11 Genesis 3:16 (NIV)

Having grown up with Southern Baptist churches, I’ve learned a lot about what middle-class white Bible Belt Americans interpret as the standard of a Christian life. There are lots of less-than-subliminal messages like the division of Bible studies into Singles and Couples ministries, fellowship events designed like speed-dating, even mid-Sunday-School encounters that leave me feeling like the philosophies I just expressed got reduced to “Christian, Female, Single, Breathing.” Scripture like the verses above get quoted as qualifications for these man-made requirements, but I can’t help thinking maybe we’ve oversimplified God’s words by taking them out of their original context, neglecting the rest of the Bible, and ignoring lessons from life experience in a constantly changing world.

12 “There is neither explicit nor implicit mention of any authority or leadership role of the man over the woman, except as the sad result of their sin in the fall and their ensuing judgments. Even then, such hierarchy is not presented as an ideal, but rather as a reality of human history like that of the weeds that spring from the earth.” Richard S. Hess. “Equality with and Without Innocence: Genesis 1-3.” Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementary Without Hierarchy. 94-95. InterVarsity: Downers Grove, IL. 2004.

13 “Some theologians believe that there was something in the way Eve was created that made her more vulnerable to deception. Others suggest that Satan may have approached her first in an attempt to overthrow God’s created order by getting her to take the leadership that belonged to her husband.” DeMoss, Nancy Leigh and Dannah Gresh. Lies Young Women Believe: And the Truth that Sets Them Free. “The Deceiver: Where Do Lies Come From?” 24. Moody Publishers: Chicago. 2008.

14 “The serpent’s attack represents a subversion of God’s pattern of leadership. As we’ve seen, there is a clear ordering of authority in Genesis 2: God > Man > Woman. God speaks to the man, and the man speaks to the woman. The serpent, then, subverts this order God has established...he approaches the woman so that God’s order is reversed: Serpent > Woman > Man. The serpent speaks to the woman, the woman speaks to the man, and the man evades God. And now the attack on God’s rule begins from the bottom up by overthrowing the order. In fact, Paul indicates that the undoing of this order was the basis for humanity’s fall into sin (1 Tim. 2:13-14).” Denny Burk. “5 Evidences of Complementarian Gender Roles in Genesis 1-2.” The Gospel Coalition. 2014 Mar 5. www.thegospelcoalition.org. Accessed 2016 3 Nov.
“For reasons we cannot fully understand, Satan chose to target a woman for his first deception in the garden of Eden...Satan obviously targeted Eve, perhaps thinking that if he could get her to buy into his deception, she would influence her husband to eat the forbidden fruit with her – which is exactly what happened.” DeMoss, Nancy Leigh and Dannah Gresh. *Lies Young Women Believe: And the Truth that Sets Them Free.* “The Deceiver: Where Do Lies Come From?” 24. Moody Publishers: Chicago. 2008.

“Wives, submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” Ephesians 5:22-24

These two sentences, directed to married women regarding the husband-wife relationship, are so often quoted by men in general to undermine women in general. However, Ephesians 5 actually continues for another nine verses to reprimand married men: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the world, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself...Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.” Ephesians 5:25-33

This is clearly a punchline, but actually I do have a prayer:

*Dear God, Thank you for your love. Thank you for giving us these daily opportunities to love you and to love one another, and please let this love be both warm and illuminating to the world around me. God, please give me wisdom. I’m learning more and more how much words matter. I realize that deciphering your words and writing my own are a crucial conversation that influence others’ understanding of who you are. I want to be truthful, Lord, and I want to honor you. And I truly want to understand how to live in this world, not only as a Christian, but as a woman, and also as myself. Please guide my steps and open my eyes to all that you are teaching me. I love you so much, God. Talk to you later. Amen.*


“So, my unsolicited advice to women in the workplace is this. When faced with sexism, or ageism, or lookism, or even really aggressive Buddhism, ask yourself the following question: “Is this person in between me and what I want to do?” If the answer is no, ignore it and move on. Your energy is better used doing your work and outpacing people that way. Then, when you’re in charge, don’t hire the people who were jerky to you.” Tina Fey. *Bossypants.*

*Pumpkin Whoopie Pies* (an October Norman Family tradition)

2 cups brown sugar · 1 cup vegetable oil · 1½ cups cooked, mashed pumpkin · 2
eggs · 3 cups flour · 1 tsp salt · 1 tsp baking powder · 1 tsp baking soda · 1 tsp vanilla · 1 1/2 Tbsp cinnamon · 1/2 Tbsp ginger · 1/2 Tbsp ground cloves


**Filling**

2 egg whites, beaten · 4 Tbsp milk · 2 tsp vanilla (+ gingerbread syrup to taste) · 2 cups confectionary sugar · 1 1/2 cups shortening

Mix together egg whites, milk, vanilla, and 2 cups of confectionary sugar. Then beat in shortening and remaining 2 cups of confectionary sugar. Spread dab of filling on flat side of cooled cookie. Top with another cookie to form a sandwich pie.

Makes 3 dozen sandwich pies to eat freely and happily and then share with people you love.

(Original recipe can be found in *The Best of Amish Cooking* (1996) by Phyllis Pellman Good.)

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21 This is in reference to one summer stock job I had as an illusionist’s assistant. That summer was so fun and I learned so much! But at the same time, I encountered a discomforting amount of implicit sexism in the traditional magic show format: a pretty, slim female embellished in sequins, with the wave of a caped male’s hand, is suddenly “hypnotized,” thus transferring credit of any subsequent amazing illusions from the actively performing assistant to the comparatively idle hypnotist.

22 Like Ephesians 5, Proverb 31 “The Wife of Noble Character” is often cited to women as a list of characteristics required by God and enforced by the Church. However, while verses 10-30 do describe a wife of noble character, she is described in the grammatical third person, as “she”; it is not even addressed to the wife. Closer examination of the Proverb’s final verse shows the true audience to be everyone else, revealing the entire piece as not a to-do list for wives and mothers to be policed by Christian society, but rather a detailed acknowledgement of all that a noble wife and mother already does for her family, without being asked, and an emphatic reminder for everyone else to respect and commend her:

“Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.” (Proverb 31:30-31)

23 I remember feeling uncomfortable saying this line, and feeling a slight gasp in the audience when it came out. Perhaps it read the wrong way, until the comment landed after it – I meant to point out the silly randomness of the phrase rather than support its usage.

24 In the 1930s, Mei Lanfang travelled North America and Europe, becoming the first person to spread Chinese opera to the West. Interestingly, on his travels he became friends with other famous performers of the day, including Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford. He continued to travel internationally throughout his life.
Disney’s *Mulan*, one of my childhood favorites, premiered in China in 1998 and met with mixed reactions as a cartoon re-telling of the traditional Chinese Hua Mulan legend. Americans welcomed the independent, self-motivated female Asian main character as a feminist turning point in Disney’s creative history:

“If Prince Charming did show up, she’d probably find him a bore...She doesn’t look like a Barbie doll this time...I think that fact alone will make her a lot more accessible...That and the fact that nobody will mistake her for a princess.” (Glen Whipp. “Mulan Breaks the Mold with Girl Power; Newest Heroine Isn’t Typical Disney Damsel Waiting for Her Prince to come.” *Los Angeles Daily News*. TheFreeLibrary.com. 1998 June 19. Accessed 2016 7 Nov)

“Based on a Chinese legend, Mulan tells of a girl who’s a failure at all the maidenly arts...She doesn’t look like a Barbie doll, she doesn’t dream about a prince...” “You’re the man!” says Ping’s sidekick admiringly. But, glory hallelujah, she isn’t.” (Corie Brown, Laura Shapiro. “Woman Warrior.” *Newsweek*. HighBeam Research. 1998 8 Jun. Accessed 2016 7 Nov.)

However, Chinese audiences were unimpressed:

“Filmgoers occasionally refer to the cinematic heroine as “Yang Mulan,” or “Foreign Mulan” in Chinese – while complaining that she looks either Korean or Western. Others say her character does not exhibit the same depth of filial piety as her literary predecessor. “She’s too individualistic,” says a 45-year-old theatre ticket-taker...” Americans don’t know enough about Chinese culture.” (Frank Langfitt. “Disney magic fails ‘Mulan’ in China.” *The Baltimore Sun*. 1999 5 March. Accessed 2016 7 Nov.)

“The cartoon closed in Hunan province after taking just $30,000 at the box office in three weeks, China’s official Xinhua news agency said. The agency described the legendary heroine as “foreign-looking” in her Disney incarnation and said the heroine’s mannerisms were too different from the Mulan of Chinese folklore for viewers to recognize.” (“Chinese unimpressed with Disney’s Mulan.” BBC. 1999 19 March. Accessed 2016 7 Nov.)

The difference in culture – particularly in regard to femininity – is particularly evident in the film’s clear deviation from the theme and character of the Chinese legend, preserved in literature as the Northern Dynasties’ (北朝) 《木兰辞》 *Mulan Poem*. First, the poem opens with Mulan sitting at home, quietly weaving: “唧唧复唧唧，木兰当户织”. There is no mention of a distaste for the traditionally feminine activity nor any clumsy inability to handle a loom, as would be the case with Disney’s characterization of Mulan. Second, the fifteen-line poem dedicates a mere three lines to her career as a war general and the remaining twelve to vivid descriptions of her leaving and returning home, while the 88-minute Disney film dedicates nearly the entire film to her bootcamp training and victory against the Hun army. Finally, Disney’s Mulan returns home a changed woman, her once-painted, traditionally-female reflection finally showing the skilled military general she is inside. However, the legendary Mulan’s homecoming signifies a returning to her old life, removing her battle armor and again donning her old clothes: “脱战时袍，著旧时裳.” Her army venture was not one of self-discovery (and abandonment of traditional femininity), rather one of filial piety: of love, honor, and loyalty to her father.
Such a drastic cultural misinterpretation – or even active re-interpretation – of the original legend I find somewhat unsettling, particularly because many American viewers believed this film to be an accurate representation of the original Chinese legend, “designed to show gender equality” (“Fa Mulan” Featured Article. The Disney Wiki. disney.wikia.com. Accessed 2016 7 Nov). This seems to indicate a general American value association with traditional femininity – Barbies, Princesses, sewing – declared “untrue to oneself,” bad and restricting while tom-boyishness is encouraged as truly honest, good, and ultimately “equal,” a personality standard somewhat novel in 1998 but widely propagated today.

26 “The makeup used by previous Dan performers was simple. Their hair was flat. Their lips were a speckle of red. The makeup was simple. Mei improved the makeup. He wore lipstick and his eyebrows were lifted. His hair was crimped. These made the Dan roles even more beautiful...His costumes were not made in clothes shops. He designed the costumes himself. The phoenix on the costume and the Ruyi Coronet of Concubine Yu were designed by him.” ~ Mei Shaowu, Mei Lanfang’s son.


27 Two things: I should first note that at this point in Mei Lanfang’s career, he was already widely recognized as a successful Dan performer. It was in 1915 during a performance of Goddess Chang‘E Flying to the Moon that he began to break the conventions of traditional Dan roles and add new elements like ribbon dancing and updated makeup that the audience welcomed with enthusiasm. By the 1922 ‘revival’ of Farewell My Concubine starring Mei Lanfang, he had already gained so much popularity that in this version, Mei’s Concubine Yu took the lead over Emperor Xiang Yu – the first time that the Dan female character overshadowed the Sheng male character as the leading role. Makeup updates may have contributed, but are certainly not the only explanation, for Mei’s success.

My second but main point can best be made, per usual, with a story. Last October I was invited to see a new production by a promising young Chinese playwright, and I was sent an English script to review before watching the performance in Mandarin Chinese. The text was clearly feminist in intention – mostly female leads, primarily female dialogue, a lot of girl-power-esque content – the “Dan finally overshadowing the Sheng,” if you will. Yet on opening night, I was unsettled by certain directorial choices. Nearly every lengthy monologue delivered by a female lead was accompanied by some kind of suggestive movement sequence – crawling on a mattress, writhing on a table, caressing the back flats. And except for one nanny-nurse character, most female actors were made to work in extreme club-level high heels, exposed bare legs, exaggerated eyelashes and some kind of glorified lingerie.

This is not to say that these choices are inherently un-feminist. Many could make arguments for sexual freedom and physical confidence, and that’s a great conversation to be had over a different pot of coffee. What concerns me here is not the rightness or wrongness of makeup alterations or ribbon dancing or skin exposure or gyration for no reason...it’s the ‘for no reason’ part that bugs me, because there’s always a reason. If
I’m delivering a speech on Gender Equality at a Freemason Pancake Breakfast and some supervisor suggests that I add a bikini-hula-hooping number during the section on equal pay for equal work, my hesitation is probably less “But it’s December and I’m struggling with convictions about the sinfulness of hula-hooping” and more “Why can’t they just listen to me?”

28 “When [Mei Lanfang] stood on the stage, he was not Mei Lanfang, he was the person in the play.”
“To some extent, old-fashioned makeup had hindered the development of Dan roles. Mei Lanfang began to improve the makeup in Dan roles. He looked at traditional portraits of beautiful women [painted by men] and got to know the features of these women. He abandoned the image of a small red mouth and began to wear lipstick. This made the overall image more natural.”
“These beautiful images [new makeup designs based on traditional paintings] were consistent with people’s aesthetic standards at that time and allowed performers to interpret the roles more deliberately.”

29 “再漂亮的的女人站在他旁边都不觉得漂亮”
“Even the most beautiful women pale in comparison to him.”

30 The first lie: “You are not interesting or authentic enough to be a Woman.”

31 This is a Chinese idiom: “To have eyes but fail to see Mount Tai-shan,” to have only narrow information, or to not recognize people of high rank or high ability. To underestimate or be myopic.
In retrospect this only kind of works in the context. But making puns with Chinese idioms has become this determined, unfortunate hobby of mine. So just bear with me.
And you thought I was kidding, didn’t you?

(Santa wins.

(Photo: personal, 2015 Dec 25)

Santa wins.)
For the full 1956 film of Mei Lanfang’s *Farewell My Concubine* to see what I’m talking about, watch it here: “梅兰芳《霸王别姬》（全剧字幕）”
http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjA0MDAwMDky.html.

Mei Lanfang as Concubine Yu (right) and Yang Xiaolou as Emperor Xiang Yu

《霸王别姬》*Farewell My Concubine* tells the story of Western Chu Emperor Xiang Yu’s defeat in the battle against Liu Bang, the opposing general who went on to establish the Han dynasty in China. As Xiang Yu is close to defeat, he retreats to his palace to bid farewell to his beloved Concubine Yu. As the two are in the palace together, they hear Chu songs being sung outside, misleading them into thinking they have won the war. When the singers turn out to be Liu Bang’s Han army, surrounding them on all sides, Concubine Yu commits suicide in order to die by Xiang Yu’s side.

“Artistically, the performance of actresses was perceived as inferior to that of female impersonators...actresses as apprentices had to learn the art of female impersonation from their male masters, who defined and represented women predominantly from a male perspective...Underlying this rationale is the assumption that male artists are considered capable of presenting women in a more idealized and artistic manner.”

...identification is, paradoxically, one of the cornerstones of performance – and it is stressed even more in the art of female impersonation precisely because of the prescribed necessity of dissolving the disparity between the [male] actor and his female role. Tang Xianzu (1550-1616), the most outstanding playwright of the Ming dynasty, maintained that “the performer who plays the female role should constantly imagine himself to be a woman” ... a male Dan was asked to talk about his experience of performance. He had this to say: “Taking my body as a female, I have to transform my heart into that of a female, and then my tender feelings and charming postures can become truthful and lifelike” ... Mei Lanfang claimed that identification is “the highest realm” of the art of female impersonation and traditional Chinese performing art in general... paramount importance was given to the representation of the male dan’s or the omnagata’s representation of a woman’s essence or spirit. What exactly is this essence or spirit? What kind of woman is represented in the first place?”


In one of the important nanxi (southern drama) plays, Zhang Xie Zhuangyuan (Scholar Zhang Xie), a metatheatrical remark by the jing role indicates that the dan role of the play is acted by a man:

Jing: You are a fake woman.

Dan: I am a real woman.

Jing: As a woman, then, why did you not bind your feet?

Mo: You should look upwards.

In ancient China, a pair of bound feet was one of the definitive female features. Despite the female attire on his upper body, the actor’s unbound feet betray his true identity.”


Because of the prevalence of Confucian social ethics, Female singers and dancers were forbidden to perform throughout most of China’s history, and female impersonation became an acceptable alternative.

In Elizabethan England, Juliet would have been played by a boy.

The second lie: “Not only are you not appealing or authentic enough, but the very fact that you are a woman means you are not a good enough Woman.”

Cast as Cinderella in WKU’s 2015 production of Into the Woods, I was originally disappointed. It seemed I had (once again) been given the simple, naïve, sweet character devoid of strength, depth, or variation. This casting coincided with a spell of self-hatred like I’d never experienced before. I eventually realized this emotional attack was based on the same lie that kept me from connecting to Sondheim and Lapine’s Cinderella: that kindness, mildness, and quiet deliberation, qualities central to who I am, are not only
anti-feminist but also incurable personality flaws.

My stature – I’m 5’9” – has been yet another source of great anxiety, especially since I’ve spent a lot of my undergraduate career in Asia. I’ve heard that my tallness would be an obstacle in finding a husband. I’ve experienced the embarrassment of height-matching in auditions when considered as the female half of a heterosexual romantic couple. I’ve also been told that no Chinese person would ever find me attractive. So naturally, when first referred to in Mandarin as “大美女,” (directly translated as “Big Beautiful Woman,” with “美女 Beautiful Woman” being a polite form of address for unfamiliar females, like “Ma’am” or “Lady.” When I heard “大美女,” my mind equivocated: “Big Lady.”), I literally cringed, making best efforts to appear small. I spent four years cringing before my tutor told me: “In saying “大美女,” they don’t mean you are Big; it means your beauty is big. That you are Very Beautiful.”

I debated between “cute” and “attractive” here, because I noticed that after sharing my dreams and discoveries with others, particularly males, I’m so often met with one of two responses: either that I’m “cute” and naïve for believing in such impossibilities like an adorable bright-eyed six-year-old, or I’m “attractive,” that my passion and braininess indicate a sexually-appealing brag-worthy mate. Both reactions are insults in disguise, because if my audience is busy distracting themselves with their superiority over my amusing “baby-talk” or with enticing romantic fantasies, then they are. Not. Listening.
This is a diagram from Dr. David Young’s Performing Arts Career Seminar class, which all B.F.A. students are required to take. It was meant to be an illustration of perspective: “While running through life, you can either focus on the bear chasing behind you or on the door of opportunity in front of you.” A commendable idea, which quickly dissolved into nightmarish speculation: “Guess what? The door is locked.” “Surprise! There’s another bear behind the door!”

With the rise of feminism, American culture has taken yet another extreme swing in its standardization of female identity. In this chapter, I find I’m belting more than singing my natural soprano for auditions. The home-making small groups of my childhood have been replaced with ministries like “Wild Outdoor Women.” *Pitch Perfect* is one in an entire trend of popular movies encouraging this sneaky new brand of “female empowerment” – which in this case means remixing traditional femininity into something more “equal” and “competitive” with male groups, which is to say trading a traditionally feminine sound for something exactly like the sound of the male groups, which further is to say that one female character actually does even lose her female soprano voice for a male bass one, and the whole thing is treated in a very bad-turns-good transformation rather than an uncharged preference shift.

I call this “empowerment” sneaky because it is degenderization in disguise, and other attempts to completely eliminate gender (for example, in the beginnings of Communist China) really only eliminated femininity, the new standard becoming the traditionally male.

What culture calls “strengthening” and “empowerment” is often an incredibly narrow definition. In our frustration with imposed gender roles, we demand that Hollywood give us more female heroes, and they comply with the provision of almost exclusively tough, fighting, kick-ass, ‘traditionally masculine’ heroines. Where Cinderella was once the standard, now she has absolutely no footing, and in some cases is openly shamed. Then truly no progress is made. We are still labeling, requiring, and limiting just as we did before.

And the biggest danger: this bondage is masquerading as “freedom.”

The third lie: “You’re not even Man enough to be a Woman.”


52 Emma Watson was born on April 15, 1990. I was born on November 11, 1992.

53 “This is one of the greatest misconceptions about introversion. We are not anti-social; we’re differently social. I can’t live without my family and close friends, but I also crave solitude…I also believe that introversion is my greatest strength. I have such a strong inner life that I’m never bored and only occasionally lonely. No matter what mayhem is happening around me, I know I can always turn inward. In our culture, snails are not considered valiant animals – we are constantly exhorting people to “come out of their shells” – but there’s a lot to be said for taking your home with you wherever you go.” Susan Cain, interview with Gareth Cook. (Cook, Gareth. “The Power of Introverts: A Manifesto for Quiet Brilliance.” *Scientific American*. 2012 Jan 24.)


56 John 20:27

57 Luke 1:34

58 Matthew 27:46

59 Exodus 3:11

58 “We learn and grow, and the world around us shifts, and the Christian faith is alive only when it is listening, morphing, innovating, letting go of whatever has gotten in the way of Jesus and embracing whatever will help us be more and more the people God wants us to be.” Bell, Rob. *Velvet Elvis*. “Welcome to My Velvet Elvis,” 11. Zondervan, 2005.

60 Of course this is my first reader, academic advisor and friend Dr. Michelle Dvoskin, WKU Theatre & Dance Department.

61 This is a quote by everyone in the WKU Theatre & Dance Department. It should be on a button, along with – “We’re panicking! It’s fine. It’s fine? WE’RE PANICKING!”

61 Part of Bravery is getting embarrassed. Writing terrible songs and giving performances that haunt you later: “eeeyugh why did I DO that?” Still, I’d rather be brave and look foolish than be timid and never remarkable.
This is a project required by professor Scott Stroot of all seniors in Performing Arts Career Seminar, WKU Theatre & Dance department.


I’ve always been concerned that putting myself into the work makes it less academic and more of a diary; but in fact this is the most compelling part of any work of art or piece of literature: telling your own stories, letting your life interact with your research and learning instead of choosing one over the other. This has been the most important lifestyle choice for me.
