

SHANGHAI
A play
By
Chris Collins

CONTEMPORARY SHANGHAI: Late at night.

(Just off the Bund. There's a restaurant with a sign in Chinese. It's a small place and nearly empty except for 4 customers. The sidewalk outside can be seen. In the restaurant Mei li, Lili, Ling Chi and George are eating, drinking beers and tea around a table. George is reviewing a script. A Sony Camcorder sits on a table near him. Ling Chi sips tea and lounges with the air of a rogue. He is handsome with the flamboyant appearance of a young Ezra Pound with high rakish hair, thin mustache, and gripping a fancy cane. Lili and Mei li, both dressed stylishly, sit leaning into each other in confidence. George is tapping out a phone number...waits... and taps the phone off.)

George. No answer. *(in Chinese)* I guess she won't be dancing tomorrow.

Mei li. *(in Chinese)* We can shoot around her.

Lili. *(in Chinese)* She can do her dance scene some other time.

George. *(in Chinese)* My Aunt Ai ling is smothering her.

Mei li. *(in Chinese)* She's only sixteen. Poor girl's parents died. Her aunt is protective.

George *(in Chinese)* *(fiddling with the camera)* Two years ago. It's time Aunt Ai ling stopped reminding her of it...*(in English)* I think it's turned into a kidnapping and hostage situation.

Lili. She's shy. Maybe she doesn't want to do it. Maybe she just told you yes so she wouldn't disappoint you. She looks up to you. Your approval means a lot.

Ling Chi. *(Tapping his cane on the floor. In English heavily accented.)* Impossible! Impossible! No human can resist George's Hollywood charm.

George. She'll do it. She takes dancing lessons for Christ's sake. Doesn't that mean you should dance? She'll love it. I'll call her in the morning. If she doesn't show up, yes...we'll have to work around her, I guess...Shit. Do all of you know your parts?

Ling Chi. *(Standing up suddenly)* *(in Chinese)* I always know my role. Oh, when will these Mongol troops be conquered, and I go back to my beloved wife. Oh, look at her! Her face has been kissed. She has betrayed me with an enemy invader. How often have you pierced

my heart? Now, it is your turn. *(sword- fights with his cane and pretends to stab Mei li in the heart.)*

(Mei li grabs her chest as though stricken. George ignores his antics and begins marking up the script...very seriously.)

Outside, Paul looks lost, peering at his cell phone, then at a piece of paper and then looking through the restaurant window as Ling Chi performs. George notices him when Paul cautiously opens the door to the restaurant. Paul waits for someone at the counter, but no one shows up. Paul turns to leave, but George moves forward stopping him before he exits.)

George. They're in the back. The place is kinda closed.

Paul. Oh...thanks, thanks. I'm trying to get back to my place. But, the cab drivers can't read English and can't read this Chinese.*(pulls out a piece of paper)* I called my parents, but they're asleep I guess.

George. *(takes his paper and looks at it).* Who wrote this? It doesn't make sense. But it looks like where you are staying is in the Luwan District. *(hands the paper back).* I can re-write the address in Chinese, correctly, if you want. You American? *(writes out the address and hands it back to Paul)*

Paul. *(taking the paper)* Thanks. Yeah...live in LA

George. So do I...well...close by...in San Gabriel.

Paul. Really! We live in Studio City.

George. I'm George.

(They shake hands)

Paul. Paul.

George. What're you doing in Shanghai?

Paul. My parents are here trying to get business...something about selling teacups and dishes. I'm here till they finish a deal then I'll go back to school.

George. What college?

Paul. No...high school...senior year.

George. High school? Young?

Paul. What are you doing here?

George. Visiting family for the summer. I was born here. Went to America when I was nine. *(moves toward the table)* Come on. *(Paul follows him.)* I'm directing a short movie piece for college. This is my rogue gallery of actors. That's Mei li and Lili. Mei li and Lili live in Arcadia, but we're all from Shanghai. Lili and I go to Pasadena Junior College. That's Ling Chi. He still lives in Shanghai *(moves toward the table and signals to Paul.)*

(Ling Chi, who had been standing, bows to Paul saluting with his cane as though it were a sword.)

Mei li. *(re: Paul. In Chinese)* He looks so sad, doesn't he?

Lili: *(in Chinese)* Well, he's lost. Being lost can be sad, can't it?

Paul. *(smiling at the women's remarks)* What?

George. Everybody, this is Paul. A fellow Californian in need of assistance....and a beer *(grabs a beer from the table and hands it to Paul. Paul hesitates.)* It's ok. It's legal...drink up. *(to others, in Chinese)* He needs to get back to the Luwan District.

Ling Chi. An American lost in Shanghai. *(in Chinese)* There's a movie title for you.

Lili. *(to Paul)* Do you play American football?

Paul. *(drinking beer)* No.

Mei li. Do you surf?

Paul. No. I mean, I go to the beach sometimes.

Ling Chi. Have a girlfriend who's blond?

Paul. *(talking softly)* Well, no..I...I like a girl...Yeah, she's blond.

Ling Chi. I thought so.

Mei li. *(to Lili. In Chinese)* What did he say?

Lili. *(in Chinese)* He said he likes a girl.

Mei li. So, your girlfriend is in LA.

Paul. Well, she's not my girlfriend...well...yeah....she's in LA.

Lili. *(in Chinese)* He's in love. He's so in love that he can't even admit it, because she doesn't love him back...am I right?

Ling Chi. *(in Chinese)* There's the sadness, ladies; the girl he likes is in LA. And he is stranded in Shanghai...and she is shining with sunlight on the golden beaches of California... with all those boys looking and wanting her.

George. *(in Chinese)* Leave him alone.

Ling Chi. *(in Chinese)* Does he understand Chinese?

Mei li. Do you have a picture of this girl?

(Paul pulls out his phone and shows it to Mei li...Lili looks too.)

Lili. She's pretty. What's her name?

Paul. Sarah.

Lili. Sarah...with blue eyes...like yours.

Mei li. *(Chinese)*. Oh, I like blue eyes. Blue as a sky.

Ling Chi. *(Has been pacing restlessly playing with his cane like Charlie Chaplin and then strolling with it like a sophisticated gentleman.) (to George, In Chinese)* Do you have a place for a blue-eyed boy in your movie? With a tremendous effort, he pried open the dungeon door with his sword and rescued the trembling blond *(in English)* surfer girl...

Lili. You must miss her.

Ling Chi. *(in Chinese)* ...As he held her, he found the rush of desire he thought he had had lost the night when she was sent to the tower by her evil uncle who had killed her father as he slept in the dining hall after too much wine and pressed the fragile lily flower of his sleep because...

Mei li. *(in Chinese)* Ling Chi...stop.

Paul. I try to talk to her. *(Finishing his beer, Ling Chi immediately gives him another.)*

George. *(abstracted looking at the script. In Chinese)* Ling Chi, I want to change the discovery scene where you're with Lili so that you're sitting down and not walking. Then, you get up and the camera will follow you and Mei li. That's it. The camera...*(noting the script)*

Ling Chi. *(moves to glance at the script with George. In Chinese)* Where do we sit?

George *(in Chinese)* There's a bench in People's Park next to the pond.

Mei li. *(to Paul)* You love her and she doesn't feel the same?

Paul. I wouldn't say...

Mei li. Oh, that's hard to take. I know.

Lili. You need a Chinese girlfriend.

George. *(to Paul)* Don't listen to them. Have another beer.

(While Paul moves to the table to grab another bottle, Lili notices there's a book sticking out of his back pocket that falls out. She grabs it. Paul swiftly pats his now empty back pocket and turns.)

Lili. *(reading the title slowly)* "Love poems...e.e. Cummings." *(to Mei li, in Chinese)* These are love poems. I think he wants this girl very bad. He thinks of her and reads the poems.

Mei li. *(in Chinese)* Maybe he can read a love poem. I hope I won't cry.

(Paul looks around curiously at George)

George. The ladies want you to read a poem *(gestures to the book in Lili's hand. to Lili)* Give him his book back.

Lili. *(handing the book back to Paul)*. I'm sorry. I'm happy when I see a boy in love so much he wants to read poetry. Do you write poetry?

Ling Chi. *(to Paul)* Can I have the book? I have to get my English better. I will read from it.

Paul. *(Paul hands it to Ling Chi)* I've tried.

Mei li. *(in Chinese to Ling Chi)* It's too late when someone has to remind a boy to read love poetry to a girl. It has to be impulsive...from the heart...like with Paul here.

George had been preoccupied again with the script and pencils-in lines. He looks up.

George. Lili...I'm going to have you and Ling Chi on the bench. But I won't have any dialogue. I'll shoot you from a distance from where Mei li is spying. *(in Chinese)* That's good, don't you think?

Lili. *(in Chinese)* It's too bad Rose can't come. The mood of the scene will be better if Rose has danced in front of the pond.

George. (*in Chinese*). Why are reminding me of that when you know she's probably not showing up? Why cause more problems...why make me upset again?

Lili. Sorry. I thought...

Ling Chi. (*begins reciting an e.e. Cummings' poem in halting English*) "i carry your heart with me (*i carry it in my heart*) i am never without it (anywhere you go i go my dear; whatever is done by only me is your doing, my darling." (*Hands the book back to Paul.*)

Paul. This was my grandfather's book. I took it from a box in the garage. He wrote poetry himself and read in a coffee house. He met my grandma there.

Mei li. That is so romantic. Your grandfather read the poems to your grandmother. That's wonderful. Many men talk about poetry and even read poetry but don't feel anything. Do you write poetry to your girlfriend?

Paul. (*drinking beer*) Well, I've been trying. I really just try to talk to her. But, she's far away and either at the beach or asleep, so it's hard to reach her. So, I text her. I send her photos of China.

Lili. She should at least answer you.

Paul. Yeah...well.

Lili. George's movie is about love.

Mei li. And jealousy.

Paul. (*abstracted*) She likes the beach...lives near it. There are guys at the beach...so I worry. She was nice to me. She took my hand when I said I had to go to China for the summer. I guess when you do that you must like that guy...must think of that guy more than someone else...if you take his hand.

Mei li. Did she kiss you?

George. (*looking up from the script, in Chinese*) He looks like he might cry. Don't egg him on about spurned by love.

(*Paul points to his cheek and shrugs with a grin of resignation.*)

Mei li. That's ok. A kiss on the cheek can be more meaningful than one on the lips.

Ling Chi. (*in Chinese*) Have you noticed how many more Americans there are in China? That's what money does for China...profits are up and so are the amount of American tourists. I love Americans. I will look coldly at people who say bad things about Americans.

George. I'm American. Of course no one really knows I'm an American here unless they see

my passport.

Ling Chi. *(in Chinese)* No, you dress like an American...and walk like an American now...a little rock-and-roll...swagger.

Mei li. *(to Lili in Chinese re: Ling Chi)* Do you see how Ling Chi changes the subject? Chinese tourism!! He's a coward when it comes to talking about love. He wants to joke about love and will never be serious.

Paul. I guess there are Americans like my parents looking for business here. I thought it was Ling Chird when I was walking on The Bund... people wanted to take my photo or take a photo with me. I felt very popular. At first I thought someone was trying to steal my wallet.

George. You're still exotic to some of the visiting farmers.

Ling Chi. *(to Mei li, in Chinese)* Your family does not want their daughter to be with an actor and an artist. But, I can play an engineer or an accountant if that will help. Watch this.

Mei li. *(in Chinese)* See everybody, he cannot stop joking.

(Ling Chi sits at the table, grabs George's pen and script from his hands, and places his face close to the paper on the desk. He freezes for a few seconds and then looks quickly to the right and to the left, and then down at the paper again. He then pretends to add numbers on a calculator.)

Ling Chi. 1 plus 1 is a sweet kiss. A sweet kiss plus a kiss is sex. Sex plus sex is a baby. A baby plus a baby is crying and crying and crying...

Paul. *(to Lili...getting tipsy from the beer)* I'd like to talk to her few times. If you think about someone a lot there must be something in it...that she must feel it in someway even at a distance. Don't you think?

Lili. You're handsome and you're missing out if you keep looking for someone who is not waiting for you. You can find another quickly when you stop worrying about this girl.

Paul. *(drinking more beer)* But she is beautiful. And when she plays volleyball on the beach and hits the ball, her arms become wings. ***(tries to demonstrate and almost trips)***

George. Watch it, kid. I don't want your parents pissed at us for corrupting you.

Lili. Maybe you need to eat something before drinking anymore. There's chicken there. A few dumplings left.

Mei li. *(in Chinese)* He's in love. Don't scold him. Don't be as hard hearted as this one. *(pointing to Ling Chi)*

Paul. (*looks at the food and thinks about it*) No, it's okay. I already ate.

Ling Chi. (*in Chinese to Mei li*) What would happen if I moved to America and showed up at your suburban door and said to you parents...I want to marry your daughter. (in English) Don't shoot me, Dad, I won't dirty your daughter. (in Chinese) I may inspire her, but I won't make her rich.

Mei li. (*in Chinese*) You like to keep telling yourself that don't you? Convincing yourself that it can never work out. Why are you afraid to say you love or hate me.

Ling Chi. (*in Chinese*) I do love you, sweetest Mei li.

Mei li. Bullshit.

George. (*to Paul*) I tell you what...We're all going to a night club on Saturday night. Why not meet us there? I'll write it down in Chinese and you can give it to the cab driver.

Paul. A nightclub? You think it's ok?

Ling Chi. You drink like you've been in one before.

Lili. That's a wonderful idea. Please come. We can all dance.

Paul. Are you sure it's ok? Thanks...thanks a lot.

(*He gulps down more beer and trips when he tries to move to shake George's friend. Lili helps him.*)

Lili. Oh my! Watch yourself.

George. Your parents must be worried about you.

Paul. Oh, well. They're very busy...and very scared. I've never seen them scared like they were in the last year. They lost their flower business. I guess people weren't buying flowers.

Mei li. That's too bad.

Ling Chi. Flowers. Everybody loves flowers. (*in Chinese*) A man with flowers comes into a room and he is a favorite.

Paul. (*collapsing on the chair*) Well, when times are bad I guess people don't think about roses or daisies.

George. (*helping Paul up*) Come on, I'll find you a cab and give the driver directions. And it

shouldn't cost any more than 100 yen. Don't pay anymore.

(Paul gulps his beer and leaves money on the table. George scoops up the money and puts it back in Paul's pocket.)

LIGHTS OUT

LIGHTS UP

(Paul's Apartment: The stage is dark except for streetlights coming through a balcony window. Outside the window other balconies are seen with pale clothes hanging on lines. It is an apartment in the French Concession area of Shanghai. The door opens and Paul walks in...drunk. He turns on the light. It is the small living room of the apartment. It is sparsely but neatly furnished with the only things peculiarly Chinese being two traditional scroll landscapes of high mountains with clinging trees. There is a desk with a laptop and papers scattered on it. He stands motionless, closing his eyes, as though both tired and bothered by the light. In a few seconds, Paul loses his balance and knocks against a table, making a racket. He collapses his butt on the couch. He pulls out his cell phone. He looks at a photo on the screen. He clicks the phone and puts it to his ear.)

Paul: *(slurring)* Oh, Sarah...please text me or call me or sing to me or fly to me. *(laughs. He taps out a phone number)* Hi, Sarah. This is Paul...in China...yeah...still here. I sent some photos....ok...uh...text me if you can...uh, uh,...not sure of the time difference...maybe it's too early...or late. Anyway, thanks. *(tosses the phone on the other end of the couch. Suddenly he feels the book of poems in his back pocket and slides it out...placing on the coffee table.)* You idiot! ***(falls asleep)***

(Christine enters cinching her bathrobe. She turns on the light.)

Christine. *(sighing)* My God, Paul! *(leans over and touches him.)* Paul, Paul...

Paul moves, moans, and turns on his side. Christine smells him. At the same time, Dan, enters in boxer shorts and T-shirt.

Dan. What's this?

Christine. He's drunk.

(Dan grunts and looks at his son. He takes up the book of e.e. Cummings love poems from the coffee table and flips through it...and shakes his head.)

Dan. *(putting the book down)* I hate to tell you, but he's been drunk before.

Christine. So that makes it okay?

Dan. No. *(begins to take off Paul's shoe)*. But, we'll just have to live with it for now.

Christine. What are you doing?

Dan. Just let him sleep it off here. Get a blanket. *(Christine exits and returns with a blanket while Dan pulls off his son's other shoe and pants. Christine covers him with the blanket while Dan sits at a table with a laptop and papers. He picks up some papers and drops them.)* This new business better work. Shit, we need this contract. I hate to say we're belly-up without it. But...

Christine. I think he's unhappy here.

Dan. Of course, he's unhappy. The girl he likes is back home and he hates the food here. Hell, I hate the food here. Remember in the restaurant yesterday? I bring up the food to my mouth and I'm staring at a pigeon's skull. Look, if you want to feel sorry for someone feel sorry for us. Think this proposal will work tomorrow?

Christine: Maybe we should have left him home.

Dan. You didn't want it. He could have stayed with your sister.

Christine. I know. I know. It was selfish. I'd miss him. *(pause)* Do you think we should say "ni hao" at the meeting tomorrow or... "Zao uh, uh..."? Oh, I can't remember...let's just say, "Ni hao"...it's easier.

Dan. Whatever we do, we better make it work. We don't have money to spend here.

Christine. I know, sweetheart. You keep saying that. Please stop saying the obvious. We'll work it out. *(looks at Paul)*. Where do you think he was? We shouldn't let him go out on his own.