



CAUGHT

BY
CHRISTOPHER CHEN



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



CAUGHT
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The world premiere of CAUGHT was presented at InterAct Theatre (Seth Rozin, Founding & Producing Artistic Director; Annelise Van Arsdale, Managing Director) in 2014. It was directed by Rick Shiomi, the sound designer was Elizabeth Atkinson, the costume designer was Rachel Coon, the set designer was Mellie Katakalos, the lighting designer was Peter Whinnery, the visual designer was Bill Ng, the dramaturg was Kittson O’Neill, and the assistant dramaturg was Erin Washburn. The cast was as follows:

LIN BO Justin Jain
JOYCE Jessica DalCanton
CURATOR Christie Parker
BOB Ames Adamson
WANG MIN Bi Jean Ngo

The New York Premiere of CAUGHT was presented by the Play Company (Kate Loewald, Artistic Director; Robert Bradshaw, Managing Director) in 2016. It was directed by Lee Sunday Evans, the set designer was Arnulfo Maldonado, the costume designer was Junghyun Georgia Lee, the lighting designer was Barbara Samuels, the sound designer was Jeremy S. Bloom, the art installation concept was by Miao Jiaxin, the production stage manager was Megan Schwarz Dickert, and the production manager was Ian Paul Guzzone. The cast was as follows:

LIN BO Louis Ozawa Changchien
JOYCE/CURATOR Leslie Fray
BOB Murphy Guyer
WANG MIN Jennifer Lim

CAUGHT was developed, in part, at the 2014 Sundance Institute Theatre Lab at the Sundance Resort.

CHARACTERS

LIN BO. An artist. Chinese. Male.

JOYCE/CURATOR. A journalist./A curator.
Caucasian. female.

BOB. An editor. Caucasian. Male.

WANG MIN. An artist. Chinese. Female.

SETTING

An art gallery with a podium and folding chairs set up for a talk. Throughout the gallery there should be distinctive installation pieces or a single piece inspired by the text of the play. Ideally the piece or pieces should have something to do with the intersection of China and the West, be subversive and sly in nature, and be visually bold.

NOTE

/ indicates overlapping lines.

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1.

The art installation is in full effect when audience enters the gallery. All house lights up for the duration of this scene. Audience should engage with the art as they would in a real gallery. It should not be clear when they are supposed to sit down in the chairs. When it feels appropriate, a member of the theater's staff should say a few words of introduction ("Thank you for being here," etc.) and conclude with: "...and now, I want to welcome the artist himself, Lin Bo." Applause. Lin Bo takes the podium. He has a typed speech he reads from throughout. It is strongly suggested that a slide show is employed throughout. He speaks with a Chinese accent.

LIN BO. Firstly I would like to thank [Insert any name that makes sense for the context of the show] from [Insert name of producing company], and the Xiong Gallery for hosting my work in this pop-up gallery here. After this profile of me in the *New Yorker* magazine, I have almost felt I am this...symbol of...all Chinese suffering. So I am grateful when I get to be an artist (*Indicates gallery around him.*), which is what I am.

Usually my work is not displayed in art galleries. Usually it occurs directly in the real world. Here in [Insert name of producing city], and before this in Beijing. It is my work in Beijing that I will talk about tonight.

For those who have read this *New Yorker* article about me, some things I will say, you will know. But there is more. And I will have a memoir out next May for an even more complete story so anticipate that. Not that I am attempting to sell anything. But some of this I am taking from my book.

So I will begin. My name is Lin Bo, and I am an artist. And I know this sounds like an Alcohol Anonymous phrase, but in China it is not too different. Because in China it is not too easy to say you are an artist. Take myself as an example. I was imprisoned in a Chinese Detention Center for two years...because of a single work of art.

I will first try to say a few words about Chinese contemporary art. I say “try” because when I think about the China contemporary art scene, I cannot seem to see it clearly. What was contemporary for me three years ago will not be contemporary now, and in China, three years may render any community unrecognizable.

This...fluidness...will be familiar to anyone who knows modern China. In Beijing the most distinctive landscape feature is the construction site. Buildings are erected at the same rate they are demolished. A site of rubble represents something coming up or going down, or maybe both. It is the cycle of life and death compressed.

This pattern—of the city enfolding and eating itself—appears in the art world too. Take, for example, 798 Art District in Beijing—an art movement that transformed completely, from the inside out.

For those of you who do not know, 798 Art District is this miniature city within the city devoted solely to contemporary art. At first look it seems a miracle. In the heart of China’s capital to see galleries upon galleries brimming with provocation: Distorted sculptures of Mao, murals mocking the Cultural Revolution. But take a closer look, and things are not as they first appear.

Is this *really* provocative art? The answer...is no. In truth, these provocations are smoke screens. In truth, it is *not* dangerous to poke fun at Mao in this manner anymore. It is in the official government-sanctioned history that “mistakes were made” in the Cultural Revolution. This is “subversion-lite” art. The *real* subversive artists, the original founders of 798, have long been evicted. In truth, 798 Art District is now a major, government-sanctioned tourist attraction.

In the end this is classic Mao. The appropriation of subversion to suffocate true subversion from within. Already there are plans for a Las Vegas makeover, with Cirque du Soleil style acrobatics. When this happens, the transformation will be complete.

I took in this fluidness around me and decided to create a *transient* art that reflected it. I painted calligraphy on buildings scheduled to be destroyed. I made sculptures from found objects in busy urban centers. If there was flux I wanted to move with it. If things were destroyed, I would be the one to set in motion their destruction. I did not document any of it. They were to disappear completely.

In time, I wanted to simplify even more. I began imagining art that not only existed to disappear, but art that never existed in the tangible world at all. I thought back to one of my influences: Lawrence Weiner, who wrote statements rather than made things. Instructions for art that could be made by others but was not required. The idea itself was the art. For example, one statement: A GLACIER VANDALIZED. Another: AN APPLE MOLESTED.

I know what you are thinking. But stop and think of the possibilities. If a work of art is initiated by a giver (the artist) but fully realized by the receiver (the audience), then what hypothetical art does is simply remove the middleman. The experience is condensed, pure intention and pure reception. The perfect vessel in which to send art through the tangled censorship forests of China.

Almost every act of modern suppression can be traced back to the June 4th Incident, the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 in which hundreds of student protestors were killed. “No more protests,” the government said, and tightened its grip like a vice. Textbooks and websites are now monitored, and activists cannot move an inch within their lives.

So what can an activist artist do? Well, Lawrence Weiner made “imaginary art.” I decided to make an imaginary protest.

The primary symbol of my protest would be a logo. I would appropriate the Chinese signature chop, which would read, in big red calligraphy: “Rally. June 4th. 7 P.M. Commemorate the Dead.” I would spread the logo through my networks: bloggers, graffiti artists. I would tell them to cover the city with the same image, the same call: “Rally. June 4th. 7 P.M. Commemorate the Dead.”

Rumors of a mass protest would spread far and wide. Everyone would be waiting to go, unaware of one crucial problem: Inside the

logo, no location would be mentioned.

And so. On June 4th, at 7 P.M., if all went according to plan, hundreds, thousands of people would be glued to their computers, to underground websites looking for evidence of a mass protest. And so at the same time, across China, across the world, people would be thinking about Tiananmen in unison. Guards might be dispatched to the Square, not knowing we protestors had already joined together, that the protest had already commenced.

The logo went viral. On June 1st, three days to the anniversary, it spread through the activist blogosphere like lightning. I began seeing it everywhere. Posters plastered on buildings. Stenciled on sidewalks. There were even rumors the government had taken notice. But I was not yet afraid; there was no real protest. There was nothing we could be caught for.

Then, on June 3rd, 10 P.M., a knock on my door. I looked through the peephole and saw a young, anxious man. "Help! I'm in danger!" he said. I opened the door a crack. I should not have done that.

I was taken to a "preliminary examination" room at the Beijing Bureau. A tired, middle-aged man sat before me. His name was Inspector Gao. He questioned me without emotion, like this was one of a hundred daily chores.

He seemed to have difficulty grasping this was art. *Was it a real protest or not? A protest pretending to be art pretending to be a protest? How many people were involved?*

Then, the danger zone. Gao started asking about my activist associations. And after a time he came to a person I did know: Yu Rong, a dissident artist. A legend. He had been arrested, harassed, beaten. So was Yu Rong the true target all along? I said I did not know him. Gao stared at me coldly then moved on.

At four in the morning, Gao suddenly yawned and stood up. He said: "We are drawing up a warrant for your arrest. You will be detained until further notice."

I lived in a cell with murderers, rapists, drug dealers, some on death row, some with five kilogram shackles on their ankles. Some wore handcuffs too, chained to these ankle cuffs, forcing them to stoop so their spines curled like shrimps.

Breakfast was watery milk powder with a rock-hard piece of corn bread. Lunch and dinner was oily cabbage soup topped with a single boiled vegetable. Sometimes I did not have bowel movements for a week. Sometimes we poured food down the toilet and heard rats in the piping, feasting. They lived off our discards and screamed if they didn't come, sometimes crawling through the toilet and we would chase them back inside.

We shared the cell with roaches, and other large bugs I could not name. They would fly in from above because half the roof was in open air. During storms we would get drenched.

There were beatings and interrogations. Every month. The same questions, the same circles. Names, names, names which I could not give because there had never been a plot. I was hit with a bamboo switch and sometimes an electrified club which would leave large scars that never healed.

One time after a questioning, my tormentor sat before me, smoking a cigarette serenely. And said to me then, in a calm, relaxed manner: "Of course we know you are innocent."

"Of course we know you are innocent," he said. "We know you are not connected to Yu Rong. But you see, I must do this. Even though we are all alone in our little hidden corner of the world. Why? Because of ritual. Because you had an idea of action, and so I must act accordingly. This is the ritual. The order of the country turns on it. Even if no one ever knows you are here, the ritual must be practiced. Because somewhere, somebody must be the keeper of truth. Truth that ideas are founded on something real."

This happened near the eight month mark. At this point still no warrant, no conviction. Still a hypothetical criminal. I have no way of knowing if these days of ritual will last forever. I will have sixteen more months to go.

And I will stop here. Thank you for your time.

Applause. He moves away from the podium.

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by Christopher Chen

2M, 2W

An art gallery hosts a retrospective of the work of a legendary Chinese dissident artist who was imprisoned in a Chinese detention center for a single work of art. Recently profiled in the *New Yorker*, the artist himself is present, and shares with patrons the details of an ordeal that defies belief. A labyrinthine exploration of truth, art, social justice, and cultural appropriation, where nothing is as it first appears.

"...[an] intricately constructed, unrelentingly destabilizing puzzle of a play about the anatomy of truth and the provocative power of illusion..."
—**The New York Times**

"...boundary-pushing...Chen gleefully pokes fun at the myriad fallacies that presently reign over American art and media: the sanctity of identity, the disdain for 'appropriation,' and the belief that journalists can and should report a perfectly objective truth."
—**TheaterMania.com**

"...one of the smartest, most cynical, heart-wrenching, brain-teasing comedies I've seen in a long while...The only truth this play has to offer is that truth is unknowable. ...a clever, highly theatrical comedy, a spectacular con."
—**The Philadelphia Inquirer**

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