

An Extraordinary Life



Claire Conceison holds her book, *Voices Carry: Behind Bars and Backstage during China's Revolution and Reform*.

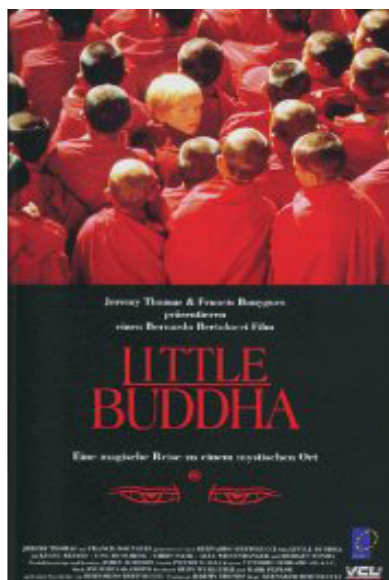
By Judy Buswick

When the producer of a television mini-series titled *Marco Polo* needed an English-speaking actor to play Kublai Khan, renowned playwright Arthur Miller knew just the Asian man to suggest. Success in that role led the stage actor to featured parts in Bernardo Bertolucci's films *The Last Emperor* and *Little Buddha*. These screen roles made China's Ying Ruocheng an international star. He toured the US and Europe as an actor/director, a visiting scholar, and cultural ambassador.

With the help of Lexington native Claire Conceison, Ying embarked upon writing a memoir of his life and career in 2001. The book, *Voices Carry: Behind Bars and Backstage during China's Revolution and Reform* (Rowman & Littlefield), is a newly released collaborative autobiography told to Conceison in English by Ying. She transcribed and arranged the parts of his life that Ying selected to share. She provided more information in an introduction and copious endnotes that enhance the book.

Ying's autobiography includes his partnership with Miller in bringing *Death of a Salesman* to China in 1983. Ying had translated the drama into Chinese and then played the lead role of Willy Loman. He recalled this production as the peak of his professional career and "one of our greatest moments in the [Chinese] theatre."

Ying's role in *The Last Emperor* came about because he was visiting Bertolucci's set in the Forbidden City. The director recognized Ying from his Kublai Khan role and asked him to play the part of the governor of the prison, even though Ying was no longer acting but then a government official. His sympathetic character as the old Lama in *Little Buddha* was his last major role before he became



ill and was hospitalized. But just as significant as his acting career, Ying was a writer, a translator, and a stage director. He was a founding member of the Beijing People's Art Theatre. He was a high-ranking politician, the vice minister of culture from 1986 to 1990. Evidence after his death proved he was also a spy.

Indicative of his personality, Ying begins his story by writing, "The most interesting part of my life, I'm afraid, is when I was arrested in 1968 and imprisoned for three years." He and his actress/translator wife Wu Shiliang were both imprisoned during the tumultuous times of the Cultural Revolution. Unlike other books delineating the hardships endured in Chinese prisons, Ying tells how he learned about the lives and careers of other prisoners and "about China's true state of affairs." He used his creativity and personality to influence guards and make prison life somewhat easier for himself and for other prisoners. Upon his release, he returned to the theatre and adapted to the new regime.

Voices Carry is told in the actor's own words and gives the reader insight into the Chinese experience. Conceison points out that "Ying's story is the history of twentieth century China," since he had before him the role models of his scholarly father and grandfather who helped shape the nation after the end of the Qing dynasty. Ying and then his son Ying Da became major theatre and television celebrities, influencing the cultural scene in modern China.

Over the years studying Chinese theatre arts, bi-lingual Conceison traveled regularly to China. Her first classes in Chinese language were at



Several of Ruocheng's well-known projects: *Little Buddha*, *Marco Polo* and *The Last Emperor*.

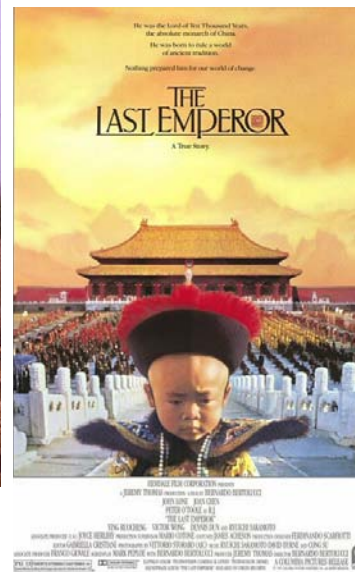


A Chinese postcard honoring Ying Roucheng as "a famous modern drama actor."

Lexington High School; she continued her language study at Wesleyan and Harvard Universities, as well as at Peking University and Fudan University in Shanghai. She explains that in Beijing in 1991 during a technical rehearsal of George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* (which Ying translated and directed), she requested an introduction and then for two hours "had a chance to talk with and get to know Ying."

In 1996 he first told her he wanted "to tell his story" and had written much of his early prison experience, but he soon became ill and was eventually hospitalized for three years. Suffering from cirrhosis of the liver, Ying seemed on a downward spiral until "supposedly the PLA [People's Liberation Army] developed a new drug – a softening pill." Conceison recognizes there is "medically no way to soften the liver," but the fact is that Ying "improved and gained weight. He looked better," she said. He experienced some relief from his symptoms and in 2001 was able to begin his oral history. With a grant to write his story, Conceison, now an Associate Professor at Tufts University in the Drama and Dance Department, visited Ying in the hospital at the Peking Union Medical College each summer day for a month or two from 2001-2003. "He talked – speaking in English – and I recorded his words," she recounts. The next summer she "would try to draw him out on events" to fill in the gaps.

In one of their sessions, Ying



Voices Carry: Behind Bars and Backstage during China's Revolution



Salesman Cast, 1983. Courtesy of Claire Conceison.



Willy, Biff and Happy — Ying and cast members for *Death of A Salesman*, 1983. Courtesy of Claire Conceison.



Arthur Miller with Ying Roucheng in Beijing in 1983.

reported that Stella was still living in the States.

Conceison asked, "Which state?" Massachusetts.

She asked, "Where in Massachusetts?" Lexington.

She asked, "What street?" She knew the location and was amazed at the serendipitous coincidence of this being the town where she'd grown up.

On returning to the Lexington, Conceison phoned Stella Shen and was greeted warmly. Ms. Shen recounted how years ago she had known that Ying Roucheng was traveling in the West. She managed to track him down by phone and introduced herself to him. She began to cry and he had no idea what the Chinese woman on the phone meant by, "I'm your sister." At that point he didn't know that his father had mentored her and that she called his father "Uncle." Eventually Ying visited his "adopted sister" and "she showed him pictures of his father and told about his and her lives. They were friends for life, after that," says Conceison.

Shen was accommodating to Conceison, as well, and shared letters and photographs with her, as she worked on the book. Ying visited Shen in Lexington several times in the years after their telephone meeting, up until his illness. Conceison saw him for the last time in August, 2003, four months before his death.

As a side note, Conceison reports that Stella Shen raised her children in Lexington. She worked as a librarian at the Robbins Library in Arlington and built up their collection of Chinese material.

In *Voices Carry*, Ying recounts something of his childhood, growing up in a family of academics with certain privileges. His family lived in Peking for seven years in the abandoned palace



Stella Shen's house — Ying visited Lexington several times. Here he is on a bicycle at 71 Hancock Street. Courtesy of Claire Conceison.

mentioned that in 1948 his father Ying Qianli, who had escaped to Taiwan (or been taken unwillingly), had left behind his wife and seven surviving children, never to see them again. As Ying Qianli "rose to a prominent position in Taiwan's Ministry of Education and at National Taiwan University, he lived alone in university housing and became a patron to a child of neighbors," says Conceison. She assumes he must have been lonely without his family and took comfort in helping Stella Shen. Ying's father paid for her education in the United States. During one summer interview in 2002, Ying Roucheng

Ying Roucheng and Claire in 2001 at Ying's home in China.



of Prince Qing, which was “just beside Furen University, the university my grandfather had helped to create, where my father was a professor,” said Ying. He had Western friends from his years in Catholic missionary schools, where he had learned English. Many other foreign friends developed from his career in the theatre. The Communist government asked him to report what happened during his dinners with friends and travels abroad.

Conceison writes that “Ying did not want to publish anything in print that might cause problems for anyone,” so details of this information sharing was not included in Ying’s account of his life. Conceison writes that Ying loved China and saw it as his duty “to foster understanding between China and the West – through theatre, translation, and politics – by staying in China and not leaving when things got tough.”

Other aspects of his personal life, besides being an informant, were skimmed over, as well. He does not tell much about his wife Wu Shiliang or their two children, though his young son Ying Da roamed the streets unsupervised by his grandmother, when his parents were both in prison. At the time of Wu’s death in 1987, she was translating Bette Boa Lord’s novel *Spring Moon*, and

Ying completed the work for her. He seems genuinely devoted to her, but also had other women in his life. As with anyone who writes a life narrative, the question arises as to what to include and what to leave out. “He didn’t want to kiss and tell,” reports Conceison.

When his life ended after several years of hospitalization, Ying was in the process of translating Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* into Chinese. Conceison pondered, “Who does that?” He was a remarkable man and this collaborative autobiography (*Voices Carry: Behind Bars and Backstage during China’s Revolution and Reform*) extends his legacy to Western readers. It is soon to be translated into Chinese and published in China with the help of Ying Da, to capture the tone of his father’s Chinese voice.

“If Ying Roucheng had one unique quality besides his keen memory, it was his cheery view of life. He chided despair and embraced hope,” concludes Conceison in her introduction to the collaborative autobiography.

Additional info: Learn more about *Voices Carry* at

voicescarrybook.wordpress.com