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Dramatic Publishing

CHINA DOLL
(The Imagined Life of an
American Actress)

By
ELIZABETH WONG



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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CHINA DOLL (The Imagined Life of an American Actress)

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PRODUCTION HISTORY:

- Off-Broadway premiere at West End Theatre. Presented by Pan Asian Repertory Theatre. Directed by Tisa Chang. Production archived at The New York City Public Library’s “Theatre on film and videotape” at Lincoln Center.
- West Coast premiere at Northwest Asian American Theatre. Directed by Jane Kaplan.
- Featured in the first inaugural New American Play Reading Series at Arena Stage, Washington, D.C.; and at the LA History Project/LA Edge-of-the-World Festival/the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum.
- Developed by Denver Center Theatre for the Performing Arts/Denver Center Theatre Conservatory, Asian Theatre Workshop/Mark Taper Forum, Bowdoin College, Catawba College, Lodestone Theatre and Harvard University’s AAA Players.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

If Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers can dance on it, then it’s a good set for this play. Oriental flourishes. Lighting in the Richard Avedon photographic style—defined shapes and shafts of bright light, i.e., spotlights, pinspots. Be clear about the various locations of the play—Hollywood and Chinatown. Los Angeles and New York City. China and America. All these locations should live onstage simultaneously to exploit the tension between these worlds and the choices faced by Anna May. The Stagehand Chorus should

witness the action, even if they portray furniture. They should live to serve Anna May. Period costumes should be suggested, with diaphanous scarves and feathery boas. Ostrich feathers, sequins. Think sparkle. Think glamorous. The dress that Anna May wears during the “backstage with Marlene Dietrich” scene must be clearly Chinese, and it should be the same outfit that is auditioned. When possible, use rear-screen projections to create the feeling characters are stepping into and out of a film or movie poster.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Special thanks to Mark Thompson for the postcard of Anna May in her tuxedo and for his friendship; Chiori Miyagawa for suggesting a ten-minute play way back in 1991, from which this full-length sprang; the prestigious Yaddo artist colony, as a 1992 Fellow, where I wrote the ten-minute version; to Ucross Foundation, 1993 Fellow, for the quiet that allowed me to write the play; to Gordon Davidson, Chay Yew and the Mark Taper Forum’s Asian Theatre Workshop for the play’s very first reading, and the marvelous cast that included Margaret Cho and the late David Dukes; to Donovan Marley, Daniel Renner and Luanne Nunes de Char of the Denver Center Theatre of the Performing Arts/Denver Center Theatre Conservatory and Academy for helping me find the relationship between Marlene and Anna May; to Daniel E. Kramer and Bowdoin College for flying in a slave costume and a vertical bed, wonderfully funny; to Catawba College for casting a beautiful black actress to play Anna May, when we learned that it resonated no matter the color; to Harvard University/

Radcliffe and the AAA Players for letting me see the play with an all-Asian cast; to Northwest Asian Pacific Theatre and director Jane Kaplan; to Molly Smith and Wendy Goldberg for selecting the play for its inaugural Downstairs at the Vat New American Plays series and director Tom Prewitt; to ATHE for the Jane Chambers Award and Lisa Tejero at the San Antonio reading, for her insightful advice and the fiercely vulnerable Lady Macbeth images—she’s my inspiration; to the Kennedy Center and ATHE for the David Mark Cohen Award, and a reading at their Chicago convention; and finally to Lodestone Theatre and Edgefest/LA History Project at the Gene Autry Museum for a chance to see Tamyln Tomita tackle the role of Anna May. Special thanks to *the* Conrad Doerr for his blessings; the late Jeff Corey for Anna May at the top of the stairs at the Mocambo; to Tisa Chang and Pan Asian Repertory for the opportunity to resurrect and honor the memory of Anna May and her many works; to Gayle Sergel of Dramatic Publishing; to her staff, the intrepid and thorough Char Borman and Linda Habjan. A special note of appreciation to the family of Anna May Wong. And to my mother Ruth and my brother Will, for their longstanding belief in the potency of the play over these thirteen years. And finally, here’s to the legacy of a legendary American film icon and remarkable woman too soon gone.

Happy 100th birthday, Anna May!

CHINA DOLL

(The Imagined Life of an American Actress)

CHARACTERS:

ANNA MAY WONG a sultry Asian woman,
“leading- lady” type

STAGEHANDS. a chorus of “different movie types”
playing multiple roles*

PLACE: The mind of Anna May Wong.

TIME: 1920s to 1960s.

*CAST BREAKDOWN: 6 actors (2w., 4m., if all Asian
cast); OR 8 actors (3w., 5m., if multiculturally cast.

Female Actor #1: beautiful Asian woman, “leading lady
type” plays Anna May Wong.

Female Actor #2: beautiful “leading-lady type” plays
Marlene Dietrich, Blonde Actress, Studio Head, Chinese
Audience.

Female Actor #3: attractive Asian woman, “older leading-
lady/character type” plays Anna May’s Mother. (Can
also play Marlene Dietrich.)

Male Actor #1: rugged “leading-man type” plays Gary Cooper, Irving Thalberg, Douglas Fairbanks, Fu Manchu, Chinese Audience, Stagehand, Studio Head.

Male Actor #2: a “character type” plays Krasner the elocution teacher; Max the makeup artist; Samuel Goldwyn; Fu Manchu; Chinese Audience; Auctioneer; Stagehand.

Male Actor #3: good-looking Asian male, “character/leading type” plays Anna May’s Father; Clive Brook, Louis B. Mayer, Chinese Translator, Stagehand. (Can also play Gary Cooper.)

Male Actor #4: a charming “boy-next-door type” OR “bookish or nerdy character type” plays Conrad the tenant; Christopher “Fuzzy” Harkis, Paul Muni, Fu Manchu, Chinese Audience, Stagehand.

Male Actor #5: sophisticated “leading-man type” plays Nikolai Brandt, Warner Oland, Karl the photographer, Fu Manchu, Chinese Audience, Script Assistant, Stagehand.

ACT I

(Los Angeles. Present day. In a spotlight stands CONRAD, an elderly, well-heeled man in an overcoat, carrying a cane. He's partially obscured by an open umbrella. LOUD BUZZER! SUSTAINED BELL! SOUND OF A CLAPBOARD!)

CONRAD. The Moongate used to be right here, at the corner of San Vincenté and Fourth streets, Santa Monica, California. You'd come around the corner, and oh this fabulous imposing round red Chinese gate. Tanner buses used to pull up, park there, the tour guide would make some grand sweeping gesture, as if commanding the gates to part, everyone hoping to get a glimpse of *her*. Sometimes a tourist would stop *me*, asking *me* to take *my* picture. Like I was a somebody! Knowing *her*, always made me feel like somebody.

(An angled shaft of light on a large movie poster or publicity still of ANNA MAY, a beautiful Asian woman, in a brilliant red Chinese cheong-sam. The silhouette of a curling black dragon shares the spotlight with her. Her cigarette in an elegant holder held aloft.)

CONRAD. On occasion, when I couldn't sleep, I'd see her on TV. Magnificent. Flickering in the dark. I lived in the

converted single above the garage. Gar'age, she always said, very British. Gar'age. I paid \$35 a month. I always paid on time.

(Suddenly, the glamorous woman frozen in the poster actually moves.)

ANNA MAY. You're late. *Again.* *(She descends out of the poster and into the real world.)* And, you're old! When did that happen? Conrad, dahling, you used to be so pretty.

CONRAD. We played miniature golf, we danced the rumba in her living room, I sat for hours drinking her medicinal tea, listening to her stories. I was her dearest and most cherished friend.

ANNA MAY. You were my errand boy, and yes, well, a friend. *And* how I abhor the way you are manhandling *my* story. Truly, the height of irony, interpreted by a mere bit player. Damn history! And damn you. *And*, how dare you be so, so old. I command you to be young again. Like me. *(She strips off his coat, and before our eyes, just by straightening up his posture, he's young again—a Gig Young/Troy Donohue/ Greg Kinnear boy-next-door type.)* Ah, this is how I remember you. Young, and tasty. Dance with me, Conrad. I love to rumba!

(A red moongate. 1960s. STAGEHANDS set the scene, holding decorative Chinese objet d'art, phone, windows and doorframes. Her home resembles a set for a Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers dance number, all shining and slick. The STAGEHANDS remove ANNA MAY's dress.)

Now she wears Capri pants and tight dance blouse, tres Audrey Hepburn-esque. SUSTAINED BELL! BUZZER! SOUND OF CLAPBOARD!

ANNA MAY. Conrad. Guess what? I received an interesting offer today.

CONRAD. An offer? A movie offer? No kidding.

ANNA MAY. There's the script right there.

CONRAD (*reads*). *Flower Drum Song*.

ANNA MAY. *Flower Drum Song*. It's all very exciting, Conrad. Simply scrumptious, a musical, an all-oriental cast. Mr. Ross Hunter, the producer, called me this morning, sent over a boy with the script right away.

CONRAD. Anna May, that's just swell. It's very...peachy.

ANNA MAY. Peachy? Peachy? Young man, *peachy* is an understatement. I'm positively deliriously giddy with peachiness. I was worried at first, I have the voice of a bullfrog. But luckily, Conrad, it's a non-singing part, thank goodness! Won't you stay a moment, dahling, read lines with me? Please???? (*STAGEHAND holds out script.*)

CONRAD. Oh sure, I'd be honored. I've never done something like this before. Wow. This is fun.

ANNA MAY. Yes. It is. Read right here.

CONRAD (*reads*). Well I'm off to my canasta game.

ANNA MAY. No, silly goose. That's my line.

CONRAD. That's your line? That's it? Seven words?!

ANNA MAY. Yes, seven words.

CONRAD. Are you insulted? I mean you, a great actress!

ANNA MAY. True, a lesser actress would be crushed by such humiliation. But, dahling, remember this, there are no small parts. Big or small, this is what I've trained for.

Besides. I wouldn't want to disappoint Mr. Ross Hunter. He was so excited to have found me after all these years. He needs me to legitimize his movie. To give his movie dignity. After all these years, he remembered *me*.

CONRAD. Well, okay then!

ANNA MAY. He wants me to play a wealthy woman who plays canasta. And I can play it splendidly. I can play the bloody hell out of it. So what if it's a small part. So what if I'm someone's *mother*. Seems only yesterday when I was *not* the mother type.

CONRAD. But you've played a mother before. I've always wanted to tell you. I can't believe I've been here for months, and I never told you. When I was a kid, I saw *Toll of the Sea*. You were so moving. You made me cry.

ANNA MAY (*grimacing*). How nice. You know I was only twelve years old when I did that picture. Only twelve and playing The Mother. Me a mother, ghastly.

CONRAD. Oh I love those old silent films of yours. Classics! (*She winces.*) You were the lead in that movie, it seems wrong someone of your caliber has just one line in some dumb musical. I mean, after all you're a star!

ANNA MAY. Would you like to see the costume? (*A STAGEHAND holds a Chinese wedding crown over her head.*) A few of the tassels are missing. The color still as good as new. Red for good luck. When you get married, you need all the luck you can get.

CONRAD. You renounce the child, and implore the wife to take your little boy.

(A rocky precipice. Movie MUSIC, or STAGEHANDS make OCEAN SOUNDS. The final scene from The Toll

of the Sea—*strobe and sprocket SOUNDS recreate the silent film.*)

ANNA MAY. Without saying a word, I sit here on this rock, pining away for my lover. Waiting for the return of his blonde hair, his blue eyes, his undying love. So what do I do? How do I bring reality to a woman so deluded? Well, I become her. I become blinded by a stupid love. Then, I say goodbye to my child. Then, I give him away.

CONRAD. Wow. Poor Lotus Flower. This is fun!

ANNA MAY. Shhhhh! Now, the restless sea calls to me. I stand at the precipice. I do not leap into the sea. I imply I leap into the sea. It's all in my eyes! But of course, the final image of the film is the crashing, churning, heart-sick *stupid* sea.

(Another spotlight. In the office of NICHOLAI BRANDT, a David Niven/William Powell/Pierce Brosnan leading-man type—a sophisticated, debonair film director.)

NICHOLAI BRANDT. Make a note. She's too damned tall. Seventeen years old, and she's too tall. Can't have a villain towering over the hero. I have to tell Fairbanks, "Dougie, this girl just won't do." But you gotta admit, she does have *it*, know what I mean? Sex appeal, a naïve woman/child. A real hot tomato.

(Lights up on a STAGEHAND holding a skimpy slave-girl costume. ANNA MAY inspects it closely, completely baffled and yet intrigued.)

ANNA MAY. But this costume, Mr. Brandt.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. I'm sorry, my dear. We can't use you. Next!

ANNA MAY. This costume is so small. Hardly anything to it. I mean you can see right through it. Even when you have it on, you can see...right through.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. Dear girl, you are too much. What's your name again?

ANNA MAY. It's Wong Jun May, sir.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. Okaaaaay.

ANNA MAY. Wong is my last name. My first name is Jun May. I'll teach you. Jun May, see? It's easy. Jun May.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. June May. Well, that wasn't so hard. June May.

ANNA MAY. Uh-huh. Jun May. My father says it means, "prepare to be beautiful." I guess, he thought I was an ugly baby with no hope whatsoever, but my mother says not to mind. My mother says my name means...

(BRANDT freezes. Lights up on Anna May's MOTHER, a pretty leading-woman type, in western-style dress of the period, and an apron. In the Wong Laundry. Chinatown, Los Angeles.)

MOTHER *(overlapping)*. Your name means, "beautiful summer." Don't cry, okay? *(Sternly.)* But, you shouldn't sneak out of school. No sneaking to go to the movies, okay? Your father talked to the teacher, and told her to give you punishment, a spanking if you do it again, so don't do it again, okay? Kai nui, jet du nay! [Translation: naughty girl, little idiot.] No more kai nui, hm? No more naughty girl, okay? Okay?

ANNA MAY. Okay, I promise, Mommy. No more sneaking.

MOTHER (*sternly, parentally*). Good. And stand up. Stop shrinking into nothing. You are not nothing. And stop hiding behind your hair. Push your hair back. Shoulders straight. That's better. Now you are pretty. Much prettier. Shoulders. Don't bite your nails. Open your eyes. Wider. *Wider*. Good. That's better. A wide-eyed girl and a tall girl is a much prettier girl. I stand tall, see how pretty I am. Yes? Right! Okay, so, let's get to work or else BaBa will have more to say about everything. (*She and ANNA MAY fold clothes. Softening:*) I marry this corner, with that corner. Fold, and smooth. Fold, and smooth. Marry the right, with the left. Fold, and smooth. Let the wrinkles fall to the floor. Let your troubles fall to the floor.

ANNA MAY. Let your troubles fall to the floor. (*They fold clothes together in sync with each other. Then:*)

MOTHER. How easy is that? (*Beat.*) Okay, let's go.

ANNA MAY. Where are we going?

MOTHER. To the Vista. To see *The Perils of Pauline*.

That Pauline gets into so much trouble. Her life is so miserable. But no matter how bad things get...

ANNA MAY/MOTHER. Mounties to the rescue!/Mounties to the rescue!

ANNA MAY. *Perils of Pauline*. Your favorite movie. Yay!

MOTHER. Don't tell.

ANNA MAY. Our secret.

MOTHER. Our little secret. BaBa is snoring. Let's go.

(*MOTHER exits. Lights up on BRANDT.*)

NICHOLAI BRANDT. Yes, a fresh soft summer breeze, that's what you are.

ANNA MAY. Mr. Brandt, this costume is so confusing. Where do you put your arms? Where do your legs go? This costume, uh, confounds me. I just don't get it.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. Forget the costume, kid. It's too advanced for you. (*Sotto voce.*) It's even too advanced for me! (*To ANNA MAY.*) Look, kiddo, I'll be straight with you. I don't think you're right for the part, but I'll test you anyway, how's that?

ANNA MAY. Oh, thank you very very very much, Mr. Brandt. I won't disappoint you. I promise.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. Now, kiddo, listen to me. Sit on that chair. That's a girl. Now, listen to me. You...you are a slave girl.

ANNA MAY. I am a slave girl.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. You are a fantasy. Look into the camera.

ANNA MAY. I am a fantasy.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. No, don't repeat after me. Just show it to me. Show it to the camera. (*She does, subtly. A movie camera records her test.*) That's it. You've got it. You are sandalwood. You are jasmine. You are the promise of faraway places. Good, good, good. Very nice. (*He moves away from her.*)

ANNA MAY. Are we done?

NICHOLAI BRANDT. Yes, all done. You can go home now.

ANNA MAY. Do I start work, Mr. Brandt? I will make a very good slave girl. When do I start? I can start right away. I will make you very proud of me. You won't be sorry. I promise you. You won't be sorry.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. Now hold on. Listen, I'll be honest with you, whatever your name is, we can't use you. You are just too tall, and your eyes are too...

ANNA MAY. Oh. I can make my eyes very wide. See?

NICHOLAI BRANDT. In this business, disappointment is our stock in trade. I just can't use you. I'm sorry, kiddo.

ANNA MAY. I want that part, Mr. Brandt. I will do anything to play the slave girl. This part, the part of the slave girl, is the only thing that matters to me.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. If you want my advice. Go back to Chinatown.

ANNA MAY. Chinatown stinks! I hate Chinatown. Hate it hate it hate it!

NICHOLAI BRANDT. Hey, kid, come on now. I've been more than fair. Time to go home now, June May.

ANNA MAY. I hate that name. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it! From now on, Jun May is dead. I take that name and throw it away. From now on, I'll have a new name. Yes, a new name. (*ANNA MAY sees a movie poster of Anna Karenina held by a STAGEHAND.*)

NICHOLAI BRANDT. A new name?

ANNA MAY. Yes. (*Considers the poster, then.*) Call me Anna May. (*Her back to the AUDIENCE, she lets her robe fall to the floor.*) Mr. Brandt, I want that part.

NICHOLAI BRANDT. Yes, I can see that you do. Anna May. (*He restores the robe.*) Come now, my child. You'll catch a cold, Anna May. I'm a man who can appreciate a naked girl, but come back in a year or two.

ANNA MAY. Am I a slave girl, Mr. Brandt?

NICHOLAI BRANDT. You most certainly are.

(He exits. BELLS! BUZZER! Lights up on DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS, the movie star, beefcake of the era, on a Hollywood movie set.)

STAGEHAND #1. Quiet on the set!

STAGEHAND #2. Rolling!

STAGEHAND #3. Speed!

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS. And action!

(STAGEHANDS help ANNA MAY recreate the harem scene from The Thief of Baghdad. Movie MUSIC. A diaphanous drape, like mosquito netting, above a bed. DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS is behind the eyepiece of a camera.)

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS. Cut! Everybody take ten. Anna May, let's talk, my dear.

ANNA MAY. Yes, Mr. Fairbanks. I'll do better next time.

I promise. I stepped on your foot. I really stomped on it.

I wasn't looking, sorry, I'm so sorry, Mr. Fairbanks, about your foot.

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS. Never mind my foot. But when Raoul comes back, don't step on his foot. He's one director who minds when you step on his feet, as I stomp on his quite regularly. Come let me warm you.

ANNA MAY. I am so sorry. Oh gosh, it's so cold in here.

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS. My dear, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. Anna May, I can see your nipples.

ANNA MAY. My nipples?!

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS. They are beautiful nipples, don't get me wrong, but we have to take care of it, okay?