



# The Precious Woman

by Louis Nowra

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## First Production of the Play

*The Precious Woman* was first performed by the Sydney Theatre Company at the Drama Theatre of the Sydney Opera House on 11 November 1980 with the following cast:

DAI YU Noni Hazlehurst  
SU-LING Robyn Nevin  
NANNY, REFUGEE, REBEL Janice Finn  
TENG Vic Rooney  
CHI YU Kevin Miles  
COUNCILLOR WA, 'MINISTER GO', DRINKER Robin Bowering  
BAO Brandon Burke  
KWEI, PHOTOGRAPHER, DRINKER Bill McCluskey  
ZHOU, 'WANG', SERVANT, AIDE Craig Ashley  
PATRICIA SIMPSON, 'EMPRESS CHO', VIOLINIST, SINGER, REBEL Gillian Jones  
FU, 'EMPEROR CHO' Alan Tobin  
MR SIMPSON, 'PEASANT', REFUGEE, PIANIST Norman Kaye  
GARDENER, 'PRIME MINISTER', REFUGEE, BARMAN, REBEL Andrew Tighe  
REBEL, 'SERVANT', SOLDIER Ned Manning

Directed by Richard Wherrett  
Designed by Luciana Arrighi  
Lighting designed by Tony Youlden  
Choreography by Marguerite Pepper  
Music composed by Sarah de Jong

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For the original music score by Sarah de Jong, apply to Currency Press.



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## P L A Y W R I G H T ' S P R E F A C E

The geography of the human imagination is often difficult to survey. This becomes obvious when trying to determine the genesis of a play or novel. For where is the starting point of an idea? Perhaps, like an infinite series of Chinese boxes, the beginning can never be reached. I do know that in 1977 I became preoccupied with powerful women or women in positions of power, and, just after writing *Inside the Island*, I accidentally picked up a book on the Chinese warlord era of the 1920s. The picture the author presented of a country at odds with itself and dependent on a fragile or almost chaotic political structure was fascinating. Coupled with this was a second-hand book I bought soon afterwards called *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution* by the American journalist Agnes Smedley. It was around this period that I recalled a play I had read in my youth called *Strategems of a Blind Empress*, a Chinese Ch'uan Ch'i drama (literally 'trans-mission of the strange' or, to use our term, 'romance').

Gradually a story began to evolve in my mind and I sought more books about China: not non-fiction books but works of the Chinese imagination (fiction and poetry are a truer reflection of a country's psyche than any historical or sociological study). The novel *Story of a Stone* and the poems of Li Po and Tu Fu proved to be most helpful. The concentrated and resonant quality of the two famous poets' poems especially appealed to me as it is a quality I was after in *The Precious Woman*, a play which I conceived as a parable. By 'parable' I do not mean the Marxist nurseryland mentality of later Brecht but more the qualities of the tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, Kafka and the traditional Chinese plays and Japanese Kabuki.

However, it is best not to take a parable too literally. The form of *The Precious Woman* puzzled some people and the play's apparent simplicity led some to think, for instance, that Su-ling's blindness was the cliché of 'only those who are blind can really see'. Far from agreeing with this, I tried to suggest that Su-ling, when blind, is, although changed, still confused and unsure. In her conversation on the beach with Zhou (Scene Twelve), far from being able to 'see' her options and her past and present clearly, Su-ling can only see paradoxes and ambiguities. Even her words to Merchant Fu in the final scene are not a true summation of her views; in fact, they are a deliberate simplification because she thinks such a stance is required of her.

While Su-ling is talking to Fu we can see that she is also listening to the progress of her son's trial and with the cry of agony at the sound of his execution we realise she is not as tough and as ruthless as she has described herself. The cradling of her dead son further illustrates just how difficult it is to understand the world in simplistic terms; yes,

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Bao had been a tyrant, but he was her son. In the terrible world she had found herself in—we are introduced to it in the first scene when Nanny asks, 'What can you see?' and Dai Yu replies, 'Darkness'—Su-ling has to learn the hard way how the world is run. The direct learning starts when her husband says, 'I want you to see. To understand', but even in discovering that the world is full of brutality and terror, she is at the end, strong enough still to be able to feel compassion. If it is a weakness to feel compassion for her brutal son and feel the emptiness of unrequited love, then she is weak, but I would like to think that it is a strength still to be humane, just as it would be still to feel compassion after surviving the Pol Pot regime.

Far from endorsing Su-ling's words to Merchant Fu in Scene Fourteen, I think one should view them as logical given her circumstances, but an over-reaction and morally wrong; an opinion she confirms by her subsequent actions. The only firm conclusion one can draw from this play is that it is wrong to see the world in terms of black and white.

In other words, the issues are not as clear-cut as a superficial reading or playing would lead some to believe. In fact, Su-ling's education at the end of the play is not complete; her metamorphosis is still unresolved; and it is because she is in a period of transition, and now has the potential to educate herself not just react to events, that I think *The Precious Woman* is my most optimistic play.

*Louis Nowra*  
*Sydney, 1981*



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## C H A R A C T E R S

NANNY	MR SIMPSON
DAI YU	TWO SERVANTS
SU-LING	PHOTOGRAPHER
TENG	WOMAN, refugee
'EMPRESS CHO'	OLD MAN, refugee
'PEASANT'	TSU WING, refugee
'AIDE TO P.M.'	SOLDIERS
'PRIME MINISTER'	BAO
'MINISTER GO'	KWEI
'GHOSTS'	GIRL VIOLINIST
'EMPEROR CHO'	MERCHANT FU
'WANG' (MR ZHOU)	BARMAN
CHI YU	WOMAN SINGER
REBEL	HOTEL DRINKERS
COUNCILLOR WA	THE REBELS
PATRICIA SIMPSON	WORKMEN ON THE WALL

Many parts can be doubled or even tripled.

## S E T T I N G

Northern China, 1920-23. The warlord era. A time of internal chaos.

*To Marita.*

Then they went along further and came to a country and asked, 'Who is your King?'. They answered that they had chosen murder for their chief purpose. And they accepted a murderer as their King. Afterwards they found a certain woman sitting in a sea of blood and took her for their King since she is surely a great murderer because she sits in a sea of blood that is made from her own tears.

Rabbi Nahman, *The Master of Prayer*

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## SCENE ONE

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*Evening. The garden.*

NANNY *and the maid*, DAI YU, *are seen*. NANNY *is much shorter than DAI YU, who is standing on her tiptoes.*

NANNY: Can you see him?

DAI YU: No.

NANNY: Perhaps he's coming by car?

DAI YU: Not from the mountains. I can't see properly. I can just barely see over the far wall.

NANNY: Get a chair.

DAI YU *exits.*

And a coat for me! It's getting cold. Dai Yu!

NANNY *stands on her tiptoes but soon gives up.* DAI YU *returns with a chair.*

My coat?

DAI YU: Uh?

DAI YU *stands on the chair.*

NANNY: Can you see now?

DAI YU: Just.

NANNY: What can you see?

DAI YU: Darkness.

*Silence.*

Maybe he won't come tonight, Nanny.

NANNY: Keep looking.

*Silence.*

A long time ago there wasn't a wall around this garden. It was endless lawns and flower beds. When I was a little girl I came here to look at the white deer. They just strolled around. Brazen as could be. Years ago; when a governor was appointed by the Emperor, not because he slaughtered his opponents.

DAI YU: Shhhh!

NANNY: Can you see anything?

DAI YU: [*irritated*] No, be quiet. I can't concentrate.



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NANNY: All you have to do is look. [*Remembering*] No-one ever stole anything, even though there were no walls. We knew not to. At night ghosts patrolled the gardens. Pale pink ghosts after blood.

DAI YU: Don't talk about them. It's bad enough being out here in the dark.

SU-LING: [*offstage*] Can you see anything yet?

NANNY & DAI YU: [*together*] No, Madam.

*Silence.*

DAI YU: She's eager to see her husband. I know if I were married I'd be glad to see him gone for weeks.

NANNY: It all depends on who you marry.

DAI YU: Perhaps she's missed the prickle in bed.

NANNY: Dai Yu!

DAI YU: [*teasing*] I heard that in the old days the gardens weren't patrolled by vampire ghosts, but by ghosts with pricks a metre long.

NANNY: What a mind you have.

SU-LING *enters, dressed in a beautiful gown.*

SU-LING: Seen anything?

NANNY: Not yet, Madam.

SU-LING: Sergeant Kung phoned me a few minutes ago and said they could be here soon.

DAI YU: I'm looking as hard as possible.

SU-LING: Why are you looking in that direction?

DAI YU: To see if Governor Teng is coming. Like you asked.

SU-LING: The road comes in that way.

DAI YU: It's the dark. I couldn't make it out. I don't have a very good sense of direction.

SU-LING: I believe that. [*To NANNY*] Is my hair right?

NANNY: Yes, Madam.

DAI YU: Lights!

SU-LING: Where?

DAI YU: On the road. Car headlights.

SU-LING: They changed at Li Tu Valley into a car. The rest of the troops are coming by rail or horse. [*Beginning to exit*] I'll meet him in the foyer.

DAI YU: The lights are changing direction.

SU-LING: [*coming back*] What do you mean?

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DAI YU: The car is going off the road and turning down the track.

*The three women are momentarily sprayed with light from the car.*

SU-LING: He must be coming in through the garden gate. [To DAI YU] Take that chair inside.

DAI YU *exits with the chair. The car engine stops.* SU-LING *speaks to NANNY.*

It has never changed in all these years. Welcomes seem more terrible than goodbyes. I'm always afraid I'll do something wrong. I want to greet him the right way. [To NANNY] Inside.

NANNY *exits.* SU-LING *straightens her dress and makes sure she looks presentable.* TENG, *unshaven, dirty and weary, comes out of the darkness through the garden. He seems preoccupied and doesn't notice SU-LING for a moment; when he spots her, he stops. He returns her smile.*

TENG: How did you know I was coming in this way?

SU-LING: I saw the car headlights.

TENG: It was nearly a horse. We broke down a mile back.

*He comes closer. We see SU-LING desperately wants to rush up and hug him but she controls herself.*

SU-LING: How did it go?

TENG: Reasonably.

SU-LING: [*spotting blood on his uniform*] You've been hurt!

TENG: Don't fuss. Some blood from one of my men. I'm just very tired.

*Pause.*

SU-LING: I missed you.

TENG: I'll tell you about it after a bath and change of clothes.

SU-LING: You're not going to escape.

*She hugs him as lightly as she can and kisses him.*

TENG: [*smiling*] After my bath. I was hoping I could sneak in and have one before we met. I smell like a pig farm.

SU-LING: It doesn't bother me.

TENG: [*slightly sardonic*] Then you don't remember what Cao Xueqin said. 'The word "girl" is very precious and pure, more so than the rarest beasts and birds and plants. So you must never violate it with your coarse and stinking breath. Before you say it, you should rinse out your mouth with scented tea.' Oh, before I forget.



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*He takes a packet out of his pocket and gives it to her.*

A present.

SU-LING: For me?

TENG: Who else?

*She goes to unwrap it. TENG takes it from her hands.*

Guess.

SU-LING: Oh, don't tease me. You know I love presents.

TENG: Guess.

SU-LING: Oh, I can't. [*Laughing*] Oh, don't tease me. A—I can't think.

TENG: [*giving it to her*] Too excited.

SU-LING: Especially when I get presents.

TENG: [*as SU-LING unwraps the present*] You have never lost the excitement of a girl.

You haven't changed in all these years.

SU-LING: Do you want me to change?

TENG: No. Stay as you are.

SU-LING: [*looking at the present*] An egg!

TENG: With a difference. Open it.

SU-LING: [*opening the egg*] A bird.

TENG: Jade.

SU-LING: [*kissing him on the cheek*] It's beautiful.

TENG: Come inside. Your slippers are soaked with dew.

SU-LING: When I knew you were coming home tonight I asked a travelling theatre to stay one more night and perform a play especially for you. A welcome-home present.

TENG: Tonight?

SU-LING: I knew you'd be too tired. They didn't know *Stategems of a Blind Empress*—

TENG: Don't make too much of a fuss.

SU-LING: So they're going to do one of their own plays: *Emperor of Darkness*.

TENG: [*grabbing her by the arm*] Inside.

*They stop. We hear, as they do, the faint sounds of a Christian hymn.*

They're not supposed to sing after eight.

SU-LING: It's not eight, yet.

TENG: I wish I could get rid of them.

SU-LING: Don't take any notice.

TENG: The Westerners think they own us.

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SU-LING: Some of them are nice.

TENG: I've yet to meet one. Their songs are terrible.

*They laugh.*

Come on. [*As they exit*] Have you heard from Bao?

SU-LING: He's in Germany and plans to go to England next week.

TENG: Any luck?

SU-LING: No. Nobody could help him.

*They exit. We can still hear the faint sounds of a Christian hymn.*

*Blackout.*

## SCENE TWO

---

*Evening. The garden.*

*A pale-faced woman, wearing white clothes, walks down through the garden, places a bundle before her, and addresses the audience.*

EMPRESS CHO: I am Empress Cho. I have just killed myself. [*Pause.*] My husband was a cruel man. He beat me terribly. He said his son was not his. I could not fight him and I need peace. This morning I walked out of the Palace, carrying my baby son, and down to the Crystal Lake. I left my baby on the bank and threw myself in. I leave the baby, the Emperor's son, to his fate. [*Pause.*] I must return to my tomb of water.

*The woman walks off. As she does we hear shrill percussion and wailing voices. After a silence, a PEASANT enters singing.*

PEASANT: [*singing*]

When I come home from the fields  
The moon is always in the sky,  
The owls stare at me and the dew  
On the grass brushes against my thighs.

I go to the fields before sunrise,  
Moon dust filling my eyes,  
I—

*He stops singing.*



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Hello, what's this?

*He bends down and picks up the bundle.*

A baby. It has blankets in the royal colours. Strange.

EMPRESS CHO *becomes partly visible. Her voice has changed. It sounds distant and detached.*

EMPRESS CHO: Peasant, you must look after my child. I cannot do it anymore. I am now part of the waters of this Crystal Lake. You must never let the child know he is the son of Emperor Cho.

EMPRESS CHO *vanishes.*

PEASANT: Come, child. We must get home. My wife and I have no children. You can be our son. I'll call you Wang.

*He exits with the child. The PRIME MINISTER enters with MINISTER GO.*

PRIME MINISTER: Minister Go, I'm afraid of being overheard. I also know that the Emperor has a spy who can read lips. Did you find out what happened to the Empress?

GO: She drowned herself, Prime Minister. The boats are on the lake looking for her body.

PRIME MINISTER: The child?

GO: We think he's drowned too.

PRIME MINISTER: Emperor Cho caused this. We must stop him. He must be overthrown.

GO: We can't overthrow anyone appointed by God.

PRIME MINISTER: He's a tyrant. He must be overthrown. God is on our side if we do.

GO: So you plan to overthrow him?

PRIME MINISTER: It cannot go on like this. It's our duty to do so. It will be difficult. Full of dangers. Emperor Cho has spies everywhere. It can be done if well planned. Are you with me?

GO: No.

PRIME MINISTER: But yesterday—

GO: Today I am a spy for Emperor Cho. You are a traitor and will be executed.

*The two of them exit. The sound of shrill percussion and wailing is heard. The ghost of the PRIME MINISTER enters and talks to the audience.*

PRIME MINISTER: I have been dead for twenty years. I was killed because I was a traitor.

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First published in print in 1981

in *Inside the Island and The Precious Woman*

by Currency Press Pty Ltd,

PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia

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www.currency.com.au

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### PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

Louis Nowra was born in Melbourne. His plays include *Page 8* (with David Page), *The Woman with Dog's Eyes*, *The Marvellous Boy*, *The Emperor of Sydney*, *Inner Voices*, *Visions*, *Inside the Island*, *The Precious Woman*, *Sunrise*, *The Golden Age*, *Capricornia*, *Byzantine Flowers*, *The Watchtower*, *Summer of the Aliens*, *Così*, *Radiance*, *The Temple*, *Crow*, *Miss Bosnia*, *The Incorruptible*, *The Jungle* and *The Language of the Gods*. He has translated *The Prince of Homburg*, *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Lulu* for the stage. He has also written the libretti for *Whitsunday* and *Love Burns*.

For television he has written *Displaced Persons*, *Hunger* and *The Lizard King* and for film *Map of the Human Heart*, *Così*, *Heaven's Burning*, *Radiance*, *K-19: The Widowmaker* and *Black and White*. His radio plays include *Albert Names Edward*, *The Song Room*, *The Widows*, *Sydney* and *The Divine Hammer*.

Other writings include nonfiction works *The Cheated*, *Warne's World* and *Walkabout* (in Currency's Australian Screen Classics series); four novels *The Misery of Beauty*, *Palu*, *Red Nights* and *Abaza*; and two memoirs, *The Twelfth of Never* and *Shooting the Moon*. Nowra has won multiple awards and prizes, and lives in Sydney.