

Actor: Chiasui Chen, Taiwan actress in New York



Chiasui Chen hails from Taiwan where she studied at the Soochow University and performed with the famous Godot Theater. Since arriving in New York, she has worked on numerous films and plays including *The Tempest* with Looking Glass Theatre and *As You Like It* with the Actors Theatre Workshop. In addition to her acting, she is also an accomplished writer, director, and pianist.

**When did you know you wanted to be an actor? Was there a certain performance or experience when you knew you wanted to be on stage?**

I've always loved performing arts since very young age. I've played piano since I was seven and had concerts every year with my choir group. I started acting and directing with my friends when I was 11. However, acting is not a well-respect profession in Chinese culture. We used to have a saying: Prostitute, actor and beggar are the three worst occupations. Because in the old days, only very poor parents who can't afford to raise their children sent kids to theatre groups--they didn't choose to be actors, they were there because they didn't have a choice. I never dared to say that I want to be an actor until I was helping quick change in "Kiss Me, Nana" (Godot Theatre) in 1999. I stood at the wing and couldn't help thinking: "what am I doing? I'm supposed to be out there. I belong on stage!" And not until I'm in New York, I can finally say to people: Yes, I'm an actor!

**What are the differences between Taiwanese theater and American theater?**

Besides western theatre, we have Chinese traditional theatre such as Peking Opera or Taiwanese Opera. However, when you mention "theatre", people usually think about western theatre. Sadly, traditional theatre is losing audience everyday.

Generally, there's not much difference. We have business theatre as well as experimental theatre, community theatre. Since western theatre is still new in Taiwan, we don't have many theatres, actors, theatre groups or audience yet. The market is much smaller and everything's still developing.



Chiasui in *Happy Anniversary*

**You worked with the Godot Theater Company in Taiwan which has performed many Western plays such as *Our Town* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. How is Western theater perceived in Taiwan? Is it very popular? What influence does it have on the culture?**

Western theatre is so much easier to understand and appreciate since the style is trying to recapture the real life behavior. Therefore, it's actually the main stream in Taiwan. Since it's a new craft, we don't have much original plays yet, we adapted lots good plays from American and European plays. There are many directors who studied theatre theory, performing arts or literature in western countries and when they came back to Taiwan, naturally they brought these plays back to us. Some theatre groups are focusing on bringing these wonderful plays to Taiwanese audience while others devoting on original works.

We also have a theatre group that adapts Shakespeare into Peking Opera. It's not traditional one anymore but more of an innovative creation. And they've been invited to numerous theatre festivals in Europe. It attracts people coming back to traditional theatre.

We have our first Chinese musical, “Cyrano de Bergerac” by Godot theatre in 1995 and it’s getting very popular. More and more theatre groups are doing it, including children theatres.



Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

**American actors often train at university and many earn graduate degrees before they begin their professional careers. What training is typical of professional actors in Taiwan?**

We didn't have theatre departments in college until 1963. Actors used to learn the craft from doing it. People spent more time rehearsing, experimenting with things and figuring out their own way to do it. We also have some actors go to Europe, America and Russia to study acting. Stanislavski, Grotowski and Uta Hagen are the names mentioned the most in Taiwan.

Colleges in Taiwan focus on theory and education rather than acting. Many actors graduate from college and end up doing something else. Now besides college, we have a couple acting studios offer acting training to people who are interested in acting. Although it's not for professional actors, it does help people to understand this art better and learn how to appreciate it.

**You have experience not just as an actor but also with scenery, lighting, sound, costume, producing, directing, teaching and writing. In your opinion, how does your experience in so many different theater jobs make you a better actor?**

Definitely! I learn to appreciate other people's work from these experiences. I respect everyone I work with because I know how hard it is and I can't do it without them. By understanding their work, we make things move faster and easier since I know what they want and why, I do just what they ask and sometimes even without them asking. I'm well known as an actor who takes adjustments and directors very well because I trust director's choices because I know he/she can see what I can't and it's for the best of the play.

It also helps me to understand my work as an actor. I think about my character from every aspect, I read the play with vivid imagination. What would she wear, what kind of furniture, personal property she'd have, and how about her hair and make-up? And one very important thing—I learn how to stay in the light, especially when you don't have enough time to do tech & dress rehearsal at the theatre.

**Why did you decide to come to New York?**

I knew I'm a very gifted and talented actor through all these years acting in Taiwan. However I wasn't satisfied. I want to become a better actor.

I gave New York a visit for a summer in 1999 and was amazed by the huge amount of shows going on every night. In Taiwan, we have one show every week if we're lucky. And there're all these acting schools, all kinds of different styles. The city is heaven for actors. Places to study, shows to watch, people to work with.



As Osei in *The Samurai*

I want to work with these talented and experienced people who come from all over the world bringing their own culture and different ways of thinking. Besides, we can do classical, experimental, theatre, film, television... You name it, we have it!

I fell in love with New York right away. However, I was timid about moving across the globe to a foreign country all by myself. It was after I spent six months in hospital taking care of my mom before she passed away and then few weeks later I myself lay in the hospital bed for a week from surviving a fire—these things made me realize that I should follow my heart. Life is unpredictable. You never know what'll happen tomorrow. So I booked my ticket and here I am.

**What are your goals as an actor here? Do you have any role models, actors that you admire? If so, what do you admire about them?**

I want to be a better actor every day and be able to influence people through my work. I believe everyone's assigned to do something in this life to make the world a better place. For me, it's acting. If someone sees my work and decides to do something that influences some other people, it'll roll like a snowball. That's the power of art.

My favorite actors are Meryl Streep and Kate Winslet.

Their work is very convincing. You forget that you're watching a film when you're watching them. There are a great deals of details in their work. They can play all kinds of different characters, no matter if it's "A Series of Unfortunate Events" or "Angels In America"; "Finding Neverland" or "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind", they're great.

They're actors, not just stars. I have great admiration for them and am expecting myself to be like them someday.



Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

### **Coming from Taiwan, what are the biggest challenges of becoming an actor in America?**

Getting an artist visa or even a green card is the most difficult thing for me so far. Despite the language barrier, culture and life style difference. I'm blessed to have done lots of work here already and still some waiting for me to finish. However, that doesn't ensure that I will get my artist visa to stay here and work.

Like all other foreign actors, language is the first problem for me. Not only speaking it but to be an expert of it—actors make literature alive on stage, we need the skill for "language". Comedy is harder than drama in this sense. If you can tell a joke in a foreign language or even do stand-up comedy, you've mastered the language-- I've had the opportunity to discuss it with comedian Margarat Cho when we're

shooting the movie "Social Grace".

And then there's history. I need to learn about everything mentioned in the play—people, places, events... I need to learn about American culture and how people live because a play reflects the real life.

### **Despite these challenges, you have already had success here as an actor. What do you do every day or every week to develop your skills and your career as an actor?**

It's a life-long career and my body is my instrument so the most important thing is to take care of myself: body, mind and spirit everyday. Eat right, sleep enough and exercise. I don't smoke or drink. I have a very nice support group who're all in this business and I can share my success with and they're willing to help me whenever I need. I also have friends I can talk to.

I try to take classes non-stop with acting (on-camera & off) and speech. I also take singing, dance, yoga and meditation when I can afford. I consistently do my homework for class.

I check casting notices on trade papers and websites and email lists I belong to. Send out headshot and resume to them. Attend open calls. I go to Actor's Connection and TVI meeting industrial people. Basically give people chances to know me.

I send thank you postcards to agents, directors and casting directors after I met them. And keep them updated with my news every month.

I also try to watch movies and plays as many as possible. There're actually many ways to save money—usher for the show, join TDF, buy movie tickets in bulk (with friends)...

### **What do you love about acting?**

1. I think human beings are fascinating. I love the fact that we're not honest. We don't do or say what we really think. We're always changing. We are cowards. We don't want to face the truth. I love to observe and analyze people.
2. Born to be an actor, I'm sensitive and have a great memory for all my life stories. I can express my emotion through my work. I can cry, yell, fight, even kill somebody onstage and don't need to worry about what my partner thinks. You know it's just a play. Not your real life.
3. I can use myself as an instrument to tell a meaningful story and



student film, *Coming Home*

influence people and even change the world.

4. Get to play in all kinds of different characters. Experience things, learn something every time.

**What is your least favorite part of life as an actor?**

I'm constantly worrying about the future. Although there's no real security in life, we still want to hold on something to feel safety. Being an actor needs courage and belief. Thanks to everyone in my life who keeps feeding me these.

**In your opinion, why is theater important? Why does a society need actors?**

Acting is a natural way of learning. Children learn things from playing. We love stories: to tell, to listen, and to watch. We also save our wisdom in these great plays. We need to express ourselves and communicate. Language isn't always enough. Through theatre, we can express a whole concept in an easily acceptable way. That's also why people use it as a political or religious tool.

Theatre is food for the mind and spirit. The actor is the main ingredient. You can have a play without any other element but not without actors. No matter what happened: war or plague. We always have theatre in our life. We have them to keep ourselves sane. We know that we still feel love and fear. They remind us that we are human.

**What did you think of this interview? Let us know!**

[Feedback@actorslife.com](mailto:Feedback@actorslife.com)

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