Acting Edition

The Great Leap

by Lauren Yee

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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THE GREAT LEAP was first produced at the Denver Center in Denver, Colorado from February 2 – March 11, 2018, and then at Seattle Rep. in Seattle, Washington from March 23 – April 22, 2018. The productions were directed by Eric Ting, with sets by Wilson Chin, lighting by Christopher Kuhl, costumes by Valérie Thérèse Bart, sound by Curtis Craig, projections by Shawn Duan, and dramaturgy by Kristin Leahey. The stage manager was Jessica Bomball, and the assistant stage manager was Dana Reiland. The cast was as follows:

MANFORD . . . . . Linden Tailor
CONNIE . . . . . Keiko Green
WEN CHANG . . . . . Joseph Steven Yang
SAUL . . . . . Bob Ari

THE GREAT LEAP was subsequently produced by the Atlantic Theater Company in New York City from May 23 – June 17, 2018. The production was directed by Taibi Magar and assistant director Ran Xia, with sets by Takeshi Kata, lighting by Eric Southern, costumes by Tilly Grimes, sound by Broken Chord, projections by David Bengali, and movement direction by Jesse Perez. The stage manager was Laura Smith. The cast was as follows:

MANFORD . . . . . Tony Vo
CONNIE . . . . . Ali Ahn
WEN CHANG . . . . . BD Wong
SAUL . . . . . Ned Eisenberg

THE GREAT LEAP was commissioned by the Denver Center.

CHARACTERS

THE TEAM

MANFORD – (#1) Seventeen, male, Chinese American. Intense, scrappy, runs into trouble, attacks the rim, has a ruthless crossover. Not tall. More Allen Iverson than Jeremy Lin.

CONNIE – (#2) Twenty-five, female, Chinese American, Manford's cousin, and UC Berkeley grad student. Level-headed, big picture. A Chris Paul/Klay Thompson type.

WEN CHANG – (#3) Forty-three, male, Chinese, coach of Beijing University's men's basketball team. Observant, efficient. Favors three-pointers over aggressive inside shots. Tim Duncan would appreciate his energy. (His English is formal but relatively unaccented.)

SAUL – (#4) Fifty-two, male, Jewish, coach of University of San Francisco's men's basketball team. A shit-talking, shot-blocking, washed-up Larry Bird.

SETTING

San Francisco, California
Beijing, China

TIME

May 1989
Summer/Fall 1971 and June 1989

ABOUT THE PLAY

This is a play about basketball, but it is also a basketball play. The game is reflected not just in the subject matter, but the rhythm, structure, language, and how the characters move through space.

We also should have a sense that someone is always watching.

We may or may not see any actual basketballs onstage.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Growing up, my father played basketball. Every day, all night, on the asphalt courts and rec center floors of San Francisco Chinatown. It was the only thing he was good at.

He was never good enough that he was going to play for the NBA or even at the college level, but for a 6'1" Chinatown kid from the projects, he was good. Really good.

I know this because even today, people still stop him on the street and try to explain to me what a legend he was. They tell me his nickname (Spider), his position (center), and his signature move (the reverse jump shot). Then they will tell me about China.

One of my dad's first trips to China was in the 80s playing a series of exhibition games against China's top teams. At their first game, my dad and his American teammates faced off against a Beijing team of three-hundred-pound seven-footers that demolished them. It was the first of many slaughters.

Today he no longer plays, but his head is still in the game. He will walk up to tall young men at checkout counters, parking lots, and sporting events and ask them if they've ever considered playing basketball. And no matter the answer, he proceeds to give them a master class in technique right then and there.

This play is not my father's story.

But it is a story like it.

Special thanks

Joshua Kahan Brody, Mark Christine, Will Davis, Francis Jue, Doug Langworthy, Brian Keane, Kevin Lin, Jo Mei, Joe Ngo, and Kent Thompson.

For
all the Jeremy Lins
(on and off the court)

Prologue

[Projection: An image flashes across a screen: an old photograph, black and white, grainy, of two basketball coaches in a handshake. And a caption that reads: "Beijing 1971."]

SAUL. *(Voice-over.)* Eighteen years, that's how long you got. You start at eighteen and you're lucky if you hit thirty-six and you can still run down the court without blowing your knees out. And you want to know why?

WEN CHANG. *(Voice-over.)* Because you Americans are always running, you can never wait your turn.

SAUL. *(Voice-over.)* It is always your turn.

Every time you are on that court, it is always your turn.

WEN CHANG. *(Voice-over.)* "It is always your turn."

(A flash, and then the image disappears.)

Scene

[Projection: "San Francisco. 1989. Eighteen years later."]

(Then we see an indoor basketball court at the University of San Francisco. **MANFORD**, *dressed in an ill-fitting black suit, reads to* **SAUL** *from his notes, very fast, almost stream of consciousness:)*

MANFORD. I will win you games.

I will score you points.

I will make you layups.

I will shoot from half-court, full-court.

I will shoot over whatever whenever whoever is getting in my way.

I am quick. I am relentless.

I am the most relentless person you have ever met and if you have met someone more relentless than me, tell me, tell me and I will meet them and I will find a way to become even more relentless than them.

I am a people person.

I am a guy's guy.

I am a man's man.

But raised by my mom, so Title IX, equal opportunity.

I carpe diem.

I think, therefore I am.

– I'm just gonna keep going till you stop me –

When you say jump, I say ten feet.

I don't drink, I don't eat, I don't breathe, that's not true, I don't know why I put that.

I live for the moment.

I am the "I" in team –

SAUL. You done yet?

MANFORD. And if you don't give me a chance, I will regret this for the rest of my life.

Or, no, you, you will regret this for the rest of your life.

I'm just going to stop now and show you what I can do.

I should've started with that.

Okay, here I go.

SAUL. Kid, what're you doing?

MANFORD. You said I had thirty seconds to tell you why I was shitting all over your practice before you had security drag me out by the balls, so I am doing just that.

SAUL. No, WHY are you here. To begin with.

MANFORD. Isn't it obvious? I'm here to join the team.

SAUL. It's May. Season's over.

MANFORD. China. China. You're going to China. In one month's time.

SAUL. Who told you that, Rain Man?

*(***MANFORD** *takes out a newspaper, reads:)*

MANFORD. "I brought basketball to China, I taught Beijing the game / my visit changed everything, and now I'm ready for a rematch."

SAUL. "My visit changed everything, and now I'm ready for a rematch."

MANFORD. Saul Slezac, the American coach.

SAUL. They finally ran the interview! Where'd you find that?

MANFORD. Today's Chron, sports section. Beijing University vs. USF. Friendship game. They're gonna broadcast it on TV.

SAUL. Let me see that!

*(***SAUL** *takes the newspaper.)*

They stuck me across from the obituaries. Of course.

MANFORD. So can I show you what I can do?

SAUL. You snuck into my practice.

MANFORD. I came in through the players' entrance.

SAUL. You barreled into my point guard.

MANFORD. I thought he saw me coming!

SAUL. You twisted his ankle.

MANFORD. My bad.

SAUL. Why would I "see what you can do" when you've just shown me what an inconsiderate sonofabitch you are?

MANFORD. 'Cause your point guard, Kovitsky? He's injured, he's out, and you're playing Beijing in a month. Sorry I'm late: Colma is far, the service ran long.

SAUL. What, you come from a funeral or something?

*(***MANFORD** *rips off a black armband.)*

MANFORD. *(Re: clothes.)* Yes. Obviously.

SAUL. Well, my condolences –

MANFORD. It's nothing. It's no one. They're dead, doesn't matter. You're not going to find anyone as good as me on such short notice.

SAUL. "As good as you"?

MANFORD. I am the most feared player in Chinatown.

SAUL. And I'm the least circumcised Jew from the Bronx.

MANFORD. What does that mean?

SAUL. It means I'm sure you're good for a Chinese player.

MANFORD. For any player.

SAUL. But if you were black –

MANFORD. If I were black, I'd be playing in the NBA.

SAUL. And if you changed your height, your muscle mass, and every single thing about you, starting center for the Lakers, why not!

MANFORD. I'm the best in the Bay, I promise you. Ask around and you'll see.

SAUL. Ask who? Ask Chinatown?

MANFORD. Or your players.

SAUL. My players?

MANFORD. If they're straight with you, they'll tell you I've played them, I've beat them.

SAUL. You beat my guys?

MANFORD. Summer leagues, off-season, I go across the bridge to Oakland and take 'em down with my crew.

SAUL. And who is this "crew"?

MANFORD. Robert Lai, Donald Woo, Munson Jin, Dennis Jue, Kwock Yee –

SAUL. Chinese.

MANFORD. My team from Galileo.

SAUL. Galileo HIGH SCHOOL?

MANFORD. YES.

SAUL. You're telling me a high school team of Chinese kids beat my guys?

MANFORD. You are finally understanding me, YES.

SAUL. What's your name, kid?

MANFORD. Manford. / "As in Stanford."

SAUL. "As in Stanford."

MANFORD. The name was aspirational, unfortunately.

SAUL. You know what? I HAVE heard about you. Oh yeah, now I remember, my players told me about you. This loudmouth point guard from Chinatown, who runs around like some goddamn Duracell bunny.

MANFORD. And took his team all the way to city finals this year.

SAUL. But you didn't win it, did you?

MANFORD. They pulled me out in overtime.

SAUL. You mean they ejected you.

MANFORD. For BS technicals.

SAUL. The only player I've ever heard of getting thrown out of a game for fighting with his own teammates.

MANFORD. My guys weren't bringing it and someone needed to call them on their shit.

(Beat.)

Your players could use some of that, too.

SAUL. You think you know my guys?

MANFORD. Since I BEAT them, think I know them better than you.

SAUL. So tell me then. What do you know about my guys?

MANFORD. Well, tell me who they are and I'll tell you what I know.

SAUL. Hunt.

MANFORD. Forward. Can't shoot, won't shoot, not at the right time at least, chokes on the ball when you give it to him.

SAUL. Fisher.

MANFORD. Shooting guard. I've seen eunuchs with better ball-handling skills than him.

SAUL. McKellan.

MANFORD. Lazy center, can't run, his instincts suck, doesn't know how to be a fourth-quarter man.

SAUL. Wanamaker.

MANFORD. Injured, injured, always injured.

SAUL. Jackson.

MANFORD. Ball hog. Too slow. Keep going?

*(***SAUL** *slow claps.)*

You're welcome.

SAUL. And if you ACTUALLY knew my team, you would know that I go for height.

MANFORD. And because I ACTUALLY DO know your team, I ALSO know that you use height to cover for sloppy fundamentals and lazy footwork.

SAUL. That height is gonna be our advantage over the Chinese, trust me.

MANFORD. Come on, Coach, I'm a point guard. We aren't supposed to be tall!

SAUL. You're not supposed to be midgets either.

MANFORD. I'm six-two.

SAUL. Five-two.

MANFORD. Five-ten.

SAUL. Five-five at best.

MANFORD. My mom was tall, my dad was not.

SAUL. Name me four ACTUALLY GOOD point guards under six foot.

MANFORD. Calvin Murphy, Spud Webb, and Muggsy Bogues. BOOM.

SAUL. That was three. I said four. BOOM. Can you even tell me the last time USF started a point guard under six feet?

MANFORD. …I don't know.

SAUL. Exactly. Not happening. You want to try out, come back in the fall. Or better yet, when you hit puberty.

MANFORD. I don't go here, I'm seventeen. And puberty tends to happen / around thirteen, fourteen –

SAUL. I know that. That was a joke.

MANFORD. Okay, but jokes are funny.

SAUL. This is a college game, kid. You're not even done with high school yet. You think I'm gonna run afoul of child labor laws like that?

MANFORD. I'll get permission. I'll graduate.

SAUL. Not worth the hassle.

MANFORD. USF was 8-20 this season. I am completely worth the hassle.

SAUL. Hey, I get it. I used to be just like you, a scrappy kid who wanted to play with the bigs, but even I learned to accept my biological destiny.

MANFORD. You mean the biological destiny where you stop trying to win?

SAUL. You think I don't want to win?

MANFORD. I think anyone who's satisfied with 8-20 doesn't deserve a Division One-sized paycheck.

SAUL. You watch your booster program go belly-up and you see how easy it is to retain quality players without bribing 'em hand over fist.

MANFORD. Just let me practice. If you like what you see –

SAUL. Sorry, practice is over.

MANFORD. No, it's not.

SAUL. – For you. It is over for you.

*(***MANFORD** *stands in* **SAUL***'s path.)*

MANFORD. Let's make a bet. I win, I go with you to China. You win? You will never have to see me again.

SAUL. That's enticing. So what's the bet?

MANFORD. Free throws.

SAUL. How many?

MANFORD. How many you want?

SAUL. What?

MANFORD. How many baskets do you want me to sink?

SAUL. Twenty in a row?

MANFORD. How about fifty?

SAUL. How about five dozen?

MANFORD. I make a hundred straight baskets every night before bed. So you may want to be more ambitious than that.

SAUL. You're going to shoot me a hundred free throws? Without a miss?

MANFORD. YES.

SAUL. You do that and I am definitely taking you to China.

MANFORD. Then we should get started. 'Cause I'm going to have practice in the morning.

SAUL. Okay then, big man, let's see what you got.

*(***MANFORD** *takes the ball.)*

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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