

## GOOSE-STEPPING WITH BOUND FEET

## A HISTORY INTO THEATER PROJECT

*A play for the stage by AMANDA WEIR that depicts women on trial in a mythical meeting between LENI RIEFENSTAHL and MADAME MAO in a prison cell between heaven and hell.*

“Everyone who thinks art can be apolitical are on the right.”

-Steven Bach

Steven Bach, a former motion picture studio chief and celebrated biographer and author, said this to Richard Wolinsky in a 2007 interview with KPFA radio. Bach had come in to discuss Nazi propaganda, especially the work of LENI RIEFENSTAHL. RIEFENSTAHL, held my many to be a cinematic wunderkind, was the first major female film director. She was also the most effective Nazi propagandist of all time. She was the subject of Bach's latest biography, *LENI: The Life and Works of LENI RIEFENSTAHL*.

RIEFENSTAHL was responsible for films such as *TRIUMPH OF THE WILL*, a chronicle of the infamous Nazi conclave that ADOLPH HITLER held shortly after taking absolute power. It featured 100,000 men marching in the infamous torch lit parade that illuminated the horrors to come in his name. Later, her film *OLYMPIA*, shot on an unlimited Nazi German government budget, memorialized the Berlin Olympics of 1936. It was recently the subject of a theatrical feature film entitled *RACE* that focused on the athletic triumph of Jesse Owens. Leni Riefenstahl appears as a minor character in the film.

RIEFENSTAHL maintained throughout her life that she never supported the atrocities of the Nazi regime and that her only intention was to create beautiful works of art. Divorced from their content, RIEFENSTAHL's films are indeed breathtaking. However, her claims that she had no political agenda in creating them are difficult to accept. Her claims that she had no knowledge of *THIRD REICH*'s crimes against humanity are difficult to swallow. They are even contradicted by LENI herself. In her 1987 memoir, she describes her first experience hearing ADOLPH HITLER speak at a Nazi Party rally with these words:

*“I had an almost apocalyptic vision that I was never able to forget. It seemed as if the Earth's surface were spreading out in front of me, like a hemisphere that suddenly splits apart in the middle, spewing out an enormous jet of water, so powerful that it touched the sky and shook the earth.”*

This erotically charged- imagery grants to ADOLPH HITLER the power to bring the very earth to ecstasy. One would be hard-pressed to argue that this is anything other than an enthusiastic endorsement. Yet Riefenstahl would maintain that it is merely a beautiful image, no

more and no less. Based on his position as the most brutal mass murderer in world history, this is an absurd comment. We must agree with Bach's assessment, then, that her very denial is proof that she was in fact highly political.

JIANG QUING (aka MADAME MAO) was also an artist in the service of a totalitarian state dictator. She worked at the behest of the powerful forces that conquered mainland China and ruled with various levels of absolute control. She became the second wife of MAO TSE-TUNG and went with him on the "long march" to hiding and isolation from the pursuing Nationalist Kuomintang armies. They would eventually re-emerge triumphantly and drive their enemies to the island of TAIWAN. The life of MADAME MAO is well documented in *WHITE BONED DEMON* by ROSS TERRILL.

These women were equally condemned by history and in the minds of their fellow citizens. Defiant to the end, their stubborn un-repentance raises the most pressing questions about them and sets up the drama portrayed in Amanda Weir's dynamic new play, *GOOSE-STEPPING WITH BOUND FEET*. It plumbs the question of art, politics, and moral complicity in a fantastical setting that pits LENI RIEFENSTAHL, with her allegedly apolitical theories of art, against MADAME MAO, who wielded art as a political weapon during her life as the spouse of the ruthless ruler of Communist China. The piece creates a supernatural show-trial with a guard who represents the collective victims of MAO and HITLER. Throughout the play, we come to understand the two women, whose paths never crossed in real life, as philosophical and artistic mirror images. Their lives are in constant dialogue with one another. The play examines the depths of the moral questions raised by their choices on every level, from intrapersonal, to metaphysical and even Meta theatrical.

Both LENI RIEFENSTAHL and JIANG QUING (aka MADAME MAO) were artists in the service of totalitarian states, working at the behest of more powerful men with whom they were intricately connected. LENI, by being a confidante of the entire hierarchy of the NAZI state, and MADAME MAO, by marriage. Both believed themselves to be innocent of the crimes of which they were later accused. Both faced trials in the dual courts of law and public opinion. Although the outcomes of their trials were different. JIANG QUING was sentenced to life in prison, where she eventually committed suicide. RIEFENSTAHL was cleared of all charges and lived into old age. However, they were equally condemned in the minds of their fellow citizens and the annals of history. Defiant to the end, their stubborn un-repentance raises the most pressing questions about them:

What power does art have to influence mass atrocities?

To what extent can an artist be blamed for the political fallout and endgame of their work?

Do our best intentions matter if the results of our work are disastrous?

By placing these two women together and giving them the chance to plead their cases, Weir has not only written a play about history, but a play about society itself.

GOOSE-STEPPING WITH BOUND FEET, the multilevel media project, is intended to teach audiences about a pair of lesser-known or perhaps misunderstood historical figures in an entertaining and captivating way. It harnesses the imagination and inspires the reader to learn more about them. LENI RIEFENSTAHL and MADAME MAO were both hugely influential figures whose historical contributions, for better or worse, have been overshadowed by the more powerful men directing them. They both lived and worked during periods of incalculable human tragedy, making their individual stories seem small in comparison. However, both the German Nazi Regime and the Chinese Cultural Revolution cannot be fully understood without a deep assessment of the role of propaganda, in which each of these women were major players. Taking the time to delve into the stories of LENI RIEFENSTAHL and MADAME MAO will allow us a richer understanding of the context of these periods in history.

The second, and most important, goal of the theatrical play is to explore the ways in which these lesser-known historical figures have impacted our cultural psyche and transformed how we understand ourselves in the modern world. In what ways are our own lives and motivations similar to LENI or JIANG and how does our current cultural climate mirror theirs? What warning signs exist today and what tools, if any, do we have to prevent similar tragedies from repeating themselves? In examining the lives of LENI RIEFENSTAHL and MADAME MAO, we are pulled repeatedly into the present, a culture on fire with debate over the concepts these women were wrestling with: guilt, innocence, complicity, repentance, and the meaning of truth.

“Who you are doesn’t matter here. Only what you’ve done.”  
-The GUARD, GOOSE-STEPPING WITH BOUND FEET

The play opens in a dank stone cell, not unlike the one in which MADAME MAO spent the final years of her life. The toilet is a filthy bucket and the steady drip of running water leaves the distinct impression that someone, somewhere, is being driven insane. But MADAME MAO is strangely comfortable here, or at least unwilling to show signs of discontent. As in life, it is her single-minded belief in her own righteousness that is keeping her sane. For LENI, who is brought into the cell for the first time, it is a completely different story. She lived out the remainder of her life comfortably, vigorously defending herself and her work and shamelessly suing anyone who dared criticize her. Despite the enormity of the crimes of which she was connected to and accused, by the end of her life, most people appeared to have forgotten them, at least to her face. As BACH explains, “nobody wanted to confront a 95-year-old still doing artistic work.” Her age, wealth, status, and talents shielded her from the worst of the defamers, even as whispers continued to swirl around her. But now, as she is thrown into this after-life cell, none of this matters. For the first time in LENI’s existence, she will be forced to face the results of her life, not just the visual trappings. And who better to serve as her metaphysical foil than the woman for whom results were all that mattered: MADAME MAO?

The first task for the two women in the limbo-based afterlife is to determine how and why they were placed together. This question alone gives them ample material to work with, as the numerous parallels between their lives quickly become apparent. Both began their artistic careers as actresses. For MADAME MAO, who at the time was known by the stage name LAN PING (BLUE APPLE), her most significant role was that of NORA in IBSEN's A DOLL'S HOUSE, for which she received rave reviews. Despite her immense pride at her success in this role, she never received the same accolades in another part. In fact, LAN PING was better known for her scandalous and turbulent personal life than for her acting. Her dramatic relationship with movie critic and director TANG NA was fodder for gossip across the country, with TANG reportedly attempting suicide on three separate occasions as a result of their repeated breakups. In another infamous incident, LAN PING went out to dinner with fellow actress WANG YING, and her husband. Reportedly, LAN PING became so drunk that night that when she awoke the following morning she found herself completely nude with the warning "Be careful next time, Greedy Drinker" scrawled across her stomach in red lipstick. LAN PING's life in Shanghai was marked by decadence and glamour, a reality that would serve only to embarrass her later on and lead her to punish and silence anyone who knew her at that time. Indeed, WANG YING would eventually pay for her silly drunken prank with her life.

LENI RIEFENSTAHL began her artistic career as a dancer, traveling across Europe with the famed Austrian director Max Reinhardt. At first, her work was well received and she appeared to be on the path to success. However, she suffered a series of injuries that eventually put her dancing career to an end and prompted her to experiment with film. She became acquainted with Arnold Frank, a pioneer in the emerging genre of mountain films, a uniquely German style of silent film that focused on feats of human daring and the triumph of man over nature. It was through such films that LENI began to achieve international fame. However, like MADAME MAO, this work would later come to embarrass her. Although these "ALPINE" films were popular at the time, their moment was short-lived, and they were later perceived as little more than idealized renderings of pretty woman scrambling over snowy rocks and men flexing their muscles. LENI was resentful of the lack of respect given to her early work and blatantly denied having appeared topless in WAYS TO STRENGTH AND BEAUTY. Unfortunately for her, this original footage was uncovered by STEVEN BACH during research for his book.

Both LENI RIEFENSTAHL and MADAME MAO were widely believed to have more looks than talent, an assessment that they both found unfair. They would address this injustice, however, in dramatically different ways. Once JIANG QUING had transformed into MADAME MAO, she used her political power to prosecute and punish all those she perceived as having humiliated her. RIEFENSTAHL, in contrast, threw herself into creating art of such high quality that no one could argue that she benefited from her beauty. It was their divergent philosophies about art that fueled their different creative strategies. For LENI, art was entirely apolitical and aesthetics were all that mattered. For MADAME MAO, art was a delivery system for a mass system of political messaging. If quality mattered, it was only so much as necessary to hold the attention of the masses. For LENI, quality was paramount. The fact that both women created seminal

works of propaganda does little to determine whose theory was better. What is certain is that they each developed strategies that remain in use today, often with horrifying results.

In this interview with radio station KPFA, Bach argues that “there isn’t a sports photographer alive who isn’t in LENI RIEFENSTAHL’s debt because of OLYMPIA.” OLYMPIA, RIEFENSTAHL’s documentary about the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, is famed for its barrier-breaking techniques, such as the use of extreme close-ups, tracking shots, and dramatic camera angles, all of which have become industry standards. It also contains stunning footage of Jesse Owens, who broke his own barriers, taking home four gold medals right under HITLER’s nose.

RIEFENSTAHL often cited her footage of Owens as evidence that she did not share the Nazi’s bigoted racial views. However, OLYMPIA was also a propaganda film, presenting HITLER as a God reining down over the lavish Olympic rituals. It was seemingly designed for his worship. It received instant acclaim within Germany and around Europe and served to normalize the Nazi regime. As BACH asserts, “TRIUMPH OF THE WILL was the movie that made HITLER safe for Germany and OLYMPIA was the movie that make HITLER safe for the world.” The propaganda was so effective in fact, that the original version of the film is no longer available. Any cut now accessible for viewing is stripped of them images of ADOLPH HITLER, deemed too laudatory and too evocative to be tolerated. But OLYMPIA was not LENI’s greatest masterpiece.

“TRIUMPH OF THE WILL, easily the most important and effective propaganda films ever made, is fascinating to look at from the point of view of ideology. If you look at it trying to find a political program, you won’t find it. It’s not there. What’s there are pleas for... obedience, pleas for patriotism, pleas for unity, pleas for trusting the leaders... The only thing that HITLER stresses that we don’t is sacrifice, and I think it’s the one note that our politicians ought to be borrowing from HITLER.”

Virtually nothing of the Nazi ideology is present in TRIUMPH OF THE WILL. Instead, we have long shadows that stretch out over white marble, framing HITLER as if he were a statue of a Greek god. We have seas upon seas of crisp uniforms, faces looking upwards in adoration. We have vague references to universal values, not at all different from what we might find at a political rally here in the United States. In fact, RONALD REAGAN is said to have staged private viewings of TRIUMPH OF THE WILL in the White House in order to generate ideas among his staff. No doubt, REAGAN would argue that it is the film’s technique, and not it’s content, which he desired to emulate.

But if you are able to put content aside, the film certainly does make one feel. The psyche wants to be inspired by these images, but the heart and mind knows to be disgusted. How effective, then, would it be for a person who did not know the truth of HITLER’s dark plans? For me, it was impossible to watch this film with a detached eye and an impassive respect for the technique. Yet RIEFENSTAHL maintained throughout her life that this is exactly the manner in which the film ought to be watched. It leaves one to wonder if she truly believed this was

possible, and if so, whether the emotional effects of her films constitute failure on her part. Of course, she never considered TRIUMPH OF THE WILL a failure, so one can only posit that she knew precisely what she was doing: raising HITLER above failure.

In contrast, when MADAME MAO was tasked with creating art on behalf of the state controlled Communist Party, she did so explicitly with politics in mind. When she was first granted permission to marry MAO Zedong, it came with strict conditions: she was obligated to stay out of politics for thirty years. When that amount of time passed, everything changed. She was given the position of Director of Film in the Central Propaganda Department and became a member of the Ministry of Culture, as well as being named MAO's official successor. She took to her new role with the fury of a woman whose ambitions had been constrained for decades. Eventually, she was named director of the Central Cultural Revolution Group and set about systematically destroying China's artistic heritage. She sanitized Chinese theater of any vestiges of feudalism, spirituality, or bourgeois tendencies, and substituted works that explicitly forwarded the interests of the Communist Party agenda.

The results were the eight "model operas," mash-ups of American-style musical theater, Beijing Opera, and MADAME MAO's unusual personal sensibilities. In doing so, she invited the ire of China's artistic class, trampling on everything they had once held dear, and seemingly delighting in doing so. There were no tears wasted on the loss of Chinese masterpieces; she was happy to replace them with fluff. As Ross Terrill writes in his biography *The White-Boned Demon*, "By the time she has finished, the minds of Chinese theatergoers were reduced to mashed potatoes. As JIANG, she probably didn't care about that; MAO Zedong may have welcomed it. Broadcasts had become so boring that you could not resell a good radio set for a quarter of its original price." In contrast to RIEFENSTAHL's carefully crafted cinematic images, the model operas were brash, overwrought, and campy. But aesthetics were never the point; Chinese theatergoers would receive one message and one message only.

Despite the relative strangeness of the model operas, they continue to be produced in China to this day and have become part of the Chinese theatrical cannon. However, traditional plays and ballets have been allowed to return as well. Of all MADAME MAO's legacies, these plays have been the most enduring, and continue to impact Chinese culture, even as the rest of her accomplishments have been wiped under the rug. Granted, unlike the Nazi party, the People's Communist Party remains in power today, however in a different form. It continues to benefit from the messaging in these productions, despite having condemned MADAME MAO herself. Current Communist Party ideology has made her the scapegoat for everything that went wrong in the Cultural Revolution.

China is not ashamed of these pieces. In fact, when President Nixon paid a visit to China in 1972, he was treated to a production of *The Red Detachment of Women*. One wonders if, while the quality is certainly lesser, there is something in the honesty with which they were created that made them more effective in the long-term than TRIUMPH OF THE WILL could ever be.

Whatever one might say about MADAME MAO- and one might say a great deal- she was never disingenuous about her intentions.

In GOOSE-STEPPING WITH BOUND FEET, MADAME MAO continually confronts LENI about her lack of honesty. MADAME MAO knows what she did in her lifetime of NAZI support and association and she believes LENI does as well. LENI, for her part insists on understanding only beauty, even the beauty of ADOLPH HITLER. She gushes, "I wanted to live in the gorgeousness he described and said one day would be real. He spoke of a people ascending, creating an ideal for the world that would inspire both power and grace." This fixation on the beauty of HITLER's promised utopia, to the exclusion of all its horrors, was the absolute "true story" of the real LENI, and indeed of many Germans after the war.

LENI insisted on knowing nothing of the evil that was definitely lurking in plain sight. Her biographer BACH asserts, "People who tell you, or write or claim, that they had no notion of what was going on are either lying or they were in some kind of a coma." BACH, like so many others, does not buy LENI's story, and neither does MADAME MAO. She is supremely unimpressed with LENI's fixation on beauty. "You lied," she states definitively, "and you may have believed every lie you told, but lies and dreams don't go over well with those who are suffering truths and nightmares." There is no small irony in MADAME MAO's accusation: she too told lies in which she believed. The only difference, perhaps, was in the sincerity of the belief. MADAME MAO never recanted and she never denied.

"We each were merely a product of our times, not evil, but in fact too innocent"  
-MADAME MAO, GOOSE-STEPPING WITH BOUND FEET

The question of guilt and innocence is one that appears frequently throughout the play and has become a cultural obsession in our own time. Debate rages around the concept of "cancel culture", the idea that a moral error can and should strip someone of his or her cultural currency. However, no one can state definitively how great a misstep must be made to result in cultural cancellation and if there is a statute of limitations on social repercussions for misdeeds. Some would argue that cancel culture does not exist, but is merely a phantom invited by the right- those who believe art to be apolitical- to stir up moral outrage on their behalf. Others argue that it does exist and serves as a new Puritanism, a lifelong "Scarlet Letter" given without a trial. What is certain is that if cancel culture had existed in LENI's time, she would not have gone on to publish books, write best-selling, memoirs, indulge in major photography expeditions and die with her reputation, at least in her own estimation, intact. She would never have been allowed to continue the art she claimed to be the center of her very being. Or would she?

One of the signature features of a culture cancellation is a public apology- even if halfhearted- from the accused party. This mea culpa will inevitably be deemed insincere, or at the very least insufficient to absolve the party of the crimes they have committed. Thus, the party is resigned to obscurity along with their feeble confessions- unless they refuse to apologize. A prime example is the case of STEVEN PATRICK MORISSEY, long revered front man of the band THE

SMITHS. He has overcome repeated calls for cultural cancellation due to his controversial stances on Islam, British Nationalism and masculinity. He repeatedly denies these accusations, insisting that his music has been misunderstood. Rather than disappear from public view, MORISSEY continues to make music and play to sold-out crowds. Another notable example is LOUIE CK, who admitted to sexually harassing women and apologized for his behavior- then simply refused to go away. He plays to sold-out comedy clubs, despite protests and petitions that he be banned and his career cancelled.

Both LENI RIEFENSTAHL and MADAME MAO refused to either apologize or go away. They both considered themselves innocent of all crimes, albeit for different, yet equally problematic reasons. LENI, as discussed, claimed to have no knowledge of the atrocities in which she was participating. MADAME MAO sang the age-old tune of the war criminal, "I was only following orders." To condemn her was to condemn MAO, she insisted, as it was he who married her, he who put her in power in the first place, and he who directed all her actions. "Everything I did, MAO told me to do," she proclaimed at her trial, "I was his dog; what he said to bite I bit." Between their two defenses, MADAME MAO's is more likely to be true. The Communist Party of China had- and still has- a vested interest in foisting all of MAO's failings, from his separation from his adored second wife to the brutality of the Cultural Revolution, onto MADAME MAO. She became the historical scapegoat yoked with MAO's downfall. In truth, she was a loyal supporter of MAO to the end. Her suicide note read:

"Today the revolution has been stolen by the revisionist clique of DENG, PENG ZHEN, and YANG SHANGKUN. CHAIRMAN MAO exterminated LIU SHAOQI, but not DENG, and the result of this omission is that unending evils have been unleashed on the Chinese people and nation. CHAIRMAN, your student and fighter is coming to see you!"

There can be no denying the sincerity of MADAME MAO's commitment to her husband, MAO ZEDONG, except in one case: her obstinate refusal to confess. Although she held, and certainly believed, that to confess would be a betrayal of MAO, refusing to do so put her in opposition to his party. As Ross Terrill elucidates, "No Communist Party can acknowledge the moral sovereignty of the individual. The truth is fluid, but the source of truth (The Party) is fixed. A Communist would not be a Communist if he or she did not confess to all sins, whether they were guilty of them or not." Instead, MADAME MAO held her truth and remained unwilling to scuttle her own reputation in order to preserve that of the party. She refused to toe the party line, to the exasperation of her judges and the outrage of the people of China. She remained the sole member of the Gang of Four who never confessed to a crime, and thus is held to this day as the worst of the offenders. But the truth is she was one of many and hardly the leader. Terrill predicts:

"One day, Chinese Communist history will open up as Soviet Communist Party history did during the late 1980's. When that happens, JIANG QUING will be seen not only for her evils, but for her loyal support of MAO over many decades, and some of the sins now laid at her door will be transferred to MAO's door and the door of the Communist political system."

But the fact remains that, despite her loyalty, MADAME MAO was not merely following orders. She loved what she did, basked in her power, and never denied a moment of it. “JIANG revealed in the new lust to combat old things; she fueled the drive to smash temples, ransack the homes of intellectuals for ancient books, and in general to ban everything not born since JIANG QUING’s Phoenix like rise from the ashes.”

For all her crimes, LENI REIFENSTAHL never directly ordered anyone’s death or torture; MADAME MAO did and with relish. So perhaps it is after all just that MADAME MAO’s honesty did not save her. For surely there is a difference between direct action and mere artistic support. The German court seemed to think so when, after four separate denazification trials, they eventually convicted Leni only of being a “fellow traveler,” a sympathizer with the Nazis with no direct knowledge of or participation in their atrocities. But then again, maybe this too is inaccurate.

There are a handful of instances that cast doubt on LENI’s claim not to have known of the existence of HITLER’s deadly concentration camps. The first took place during the filming of TIEFLAND, based on the opera by EUGEN D’ALBERTS; LENI used gypsies from MAXGLAN internment camp as extras. Although she claimed not to know the conditions in which they had been held, eyewitness accounts have her personally selecting cast members that fit her physical requirements from the camps.

A then seventeen-year-old Gypsy girl named ROSA WINTER recalled, “We were all there in the camp. And then she came with the police and chose people. I was there with a lot of other young people and we were what she wanted.” A Gypsy boy named JOSEF REINGARDT, then thirteen, recalled overhearing her tell an official, “I can’t take these people like this; they need to be re-clothed.” Rules on set were made to conform to those in the camp and payment was not given to the Gypsies themselves, but to MAXGLAN officials, something that LENI could not help but have known. Many were sent to their deaths in AUSCHWITZ immediately following filming.

LENI was also present at a mass shooting in the town of KONSKIE in 1939. HORST MAETZKE, a military radio operator, described the event vividly:

“I was (in KONSKIE) with several other radio operators when LENI RIEFENSTAHL arrived and wanted to film about twenty to thirty Jews digging a grave in front of the church, some with shovels and some with their bare hands. An officer of the Whermacht dispersed them, saying we will bury our comrades ourselves. Everybody got out of there fast. Suddenly a woman in a window fired a shot at the German soldiers and, at that moment, a lieutenant ordered the soldiers who were standing there to fire. The Jews who had been fleeing the scene fell in the street, shot down by the German soldiers. LENI RIEFENSTAHL was standing in her car in front of the church, and when she saw the massacre happen, broke into a sobbing fit.”

LENI was photographed looking deeply distraught, evidence that at least she was not callous to the carnage. Afterward, she refused to create another film for the NAZI party. She maintained, however, that she had no idea that all the victims in the shooting were Jewish, a crucial detail she alone appears to have missed.

Despite these incidents, LENI insisted that she had no idea what was happening in the camps. In a telling interview with the American scribe BUD SCHULBERG in 1946, LENI described sometimes being forced to do favors for GOEBBLES against her will, out of fear of being sent to a concentration camp. SCHULBERG shrewdly asked how this would be possible, if she did not know such camps existed.

While both “I did not know” and “I was only following orders” seem paltry defenses when viewed against the scale of human horror to which these two women contributed, one thing remains true: “Work won’t set you free, but denial just might.”

“Most cultures eroticize some form of female torture and most women  
are only too happy to participate”-

MADAME MAO, GOOSE-STEPPING WITH BOUND FEET

For all the crimes LENI RIEFENSTAHL and MADAME MAO are guilty of- and there are a great many- the question remains of the role of gender and power. Both women lived and thrived in time periods where options were limited for women and the path to success almost always involved aligning oneself with a more powerful man, whether through sex or marriage.

In truth, not much has changed today, and if the #METOO movement has taught us anything it’s that many men in power still consider sex to be the currency with which women must pay to advance. There was then, and is now, a tacit expectation that women should use their bodies to climb to the top. While there are a great many women who refuse to participate in this system, or who directly fight against it, LENI and MADAME MAO were no such women. They both reached exemplary levels of power and influence for women in their time, and they were both comfortable using sex to do so. Leni is even said to have seduced the American Olympic star and first portrayal of TARZAN, GLEN MORRIS, during the 1936 games.

Can we, from the advantage of our current period in history, blame LENI and JIANG for doing what was necessary to be successful? The verdict of public opinion differs in many ways whether each of them were either complicit or victims of the far more powerful- and far more malicious- men in their lives. Their only sin, some might argue, was ambition. It was not their fault, according to this line of logic that the powerful men in their time and place happened to be evil.

While locked in their damp cell, the fictionalized MADAME MAO of GOOSE-STEPPING describes the practice of foot-binding to LENI, with its myriad sexual connotations, and the lengths women are willing to go to achieve physical perfection in the minds of men. LENI is

horrified, but MADAME MAO defends the practice, arguing that it is only LENI's prejudice that repels her. After all, the practice is no different than corsets or plastic surgery. Women, she insists, are willing to put themselves through just about anything for the cultural currency that comes with beauty and sex- if they are able. Both LENI and MADAME MAO were considered beautiful by their cultural standards, and neither of them thought twice about leveraging that beauty, regardless that this method of social climbing may not have been available to most women. LENI and MADAME MAO were not feminists, although some later feminists might claim them, because they had no interest in foraging safe paths for other women. Instead, they did what they could to break into the inner circles of power, and then slammed the doors closed behind them.

There is a striking parallel between the way MADAME MAO and LENI RIEFENSTAHL navigated sex and power, which is exemplified in two quotes from their biographies. "JIANG's relations with men were not primarily driven by lust," writes Terrill, "but by an excitement at companionship on the basis of equality with a man." Similarly, Bach writes, "When she had sexual relations with a man, it was not for purely sexual reasons. It was always the personality of the man that interested her, that made the man attractive." Sex for each of these women was goal oriented, and not necessarily driven by love, lust, or passion. Whatever the end, whether a moment of temporary equality, a part in a play, or an invitation to an elite social circle, they understood their bodies to be currency and used it as such. It was only for men to view sex as pleasure.

This is not to say that neither of these women suffered at the hands of their sexual partners. LENI described her first sexual experience as feeling like a rape, having not followed her carefully laid plans and lacking any of the pleasure she had desired. She was instead humiliated when the man threw twenty dollars at her, in case she might need an abortion. MADAME MAO's second marriage to the volatile Tang Na was emotionally abusive- at least. Indeed, virtually all of their sexual liaisons, with their uneven power dynamics and implicit trade, would likely be considered non-consensual by today's standards. But LENI and MAO did not see them that way, at least not for the most part. They accepted that to be desired was in itself a sort of power, perhaps the only power that they were guaranteed as women, and they were not afraid to wield it.

"Why bother to rank and judge if this fate is inevitable?"

-LENI, Goose-Stepping with Bound Feet

GOOSE-STEPPING WITH BOUND FEET ends with a trial, as did the lives of both our heroines. While they both continued to live beyond their trials, their lives, as they knew them, were irredeemably changed. They would no longer be admired, respected, and adored, but condemned, at least in the minds of the people. LENI was able to live out a sort of second act, stubbornly insisting on the creation of further art, although her problematic and inaccurate representations of the African NUBU tribe did little to defend her from accusations of racist

ideology. For MADAME MAO, the remainder of her days were to be spent in a cell. She'd spend years locked away, with only her bitterness to keep her company, until finally she would succumb to suicide, refusing to go out by any means other than her own.

The role of The Attendant, the third character in *Goose-Stepping with Bound Feet*, comes to fruition in the final scenes of the play, when he serves as the judge, lawyer, and witness in the hellish show trial. Throughout the play, he has slowly come to embody the various wrongs of both women, gaining new wounds and metals with each consecutive entrance. As he finally takes the stage to punish the two women for the pain inflicted upon him, it becomes apparent that all the real power in this world rests with him- unsurprising, as he is the only man in the play. So the man whom the women believed to be their lackey easily overpowers them both and takes the opportunity to punish them for their evils. As the representative for society, he will never have to be similarly questioned for his own crimes. Instead, he will revel in scapegoating his female prisoners, pick apart their various crimes, and force them to participate in his dance- literally and figuratively. Eventually, even the unflappable Madame Mao will beg to have his unique form of humiliation cease, to which he will coolly and accurately reply, "No. I'm making a metaphor of you."

Without spoiling the final moments of the play, the metaphysical trial is a fitting end for the lives of two women who leave so many open questions. It is further fitting that there is no perceptible upside to "winning," only further trials in further places.

It is inevitable that we will continue to discuss the questions of guilt and innocence, complicity and absolution, again and again. It's also fitting that, despite the lack of concrete reward, both women desperately hope to win. As in life, they want nothing more than to prove themselves to others, to convince the world at large that they are worthy of admiration and praise. The trial at the end of the play bears a striking resemblance to MADAME MAO's own trial, one in which the very lack of a positive outcome emboldens the prisoner to truth. TERRILL writes, "During trials the accused often try to behave well because they fear death and hope for leniency. But the premise of such conduct- that the authorities have a degree of reasonableness- did not exist in MADAME MAO's opinion." LENI was given legal leniency in her lifetime, but she paid for it dearly with her reputation and the story she could tell about herself, a story that was as precious to her as any film she could ever make. She was granted freedom, but stripped of her version of the truth. Here, in this play, for the first time the burden of having something to lose is stripped from LENI and she is able to speak freely, if only once, in fiction.

"I was not involved in generating propaganda!...Or, if I was, I wasn't  
aware of it."

-LENI, GOOSE-STEPPING WITH BOUND FEET

Who do we hold accountable, how, and for what? Our culture has been warring over these questions for centuries, but they seem to have taken on new urgency today. As women fight for their rightful place in contemporary society, and as we reevaluate the way women and men

relate, we are realizing that we never truly grasped onto these concepts. The truths we stand on are not and never have been solid, and we continue to flounder in search of secure footing. *GOOSE-STEPPING WITH BOUND FEET* uses the histories of LENI REIFENSTAHL and MADAME MAO to provide an exciting portrayal of the ways that women have both participated in and benefited from their complex relationships with men, how they are both demonized and infantilized, so that they are both the cause of every atrocity and innocent of all possible crimes. Exploring their stories will not answer these questions, but they will give greater insight into the struggle society faces to rectify itself to itself. If we are unable to do so, we may one day find it is we who are on trial.