

## Arts

## Showbiz Mishmash

*Rotstein's poetic images are polished like diamonds*By  
FRANK RASKY

There once was a word popularly in vogue known as "chinoiserie." It meant works of art reflecting Chinese style.

This week I'd like to recommend two such chinoiseries that I think you'll enjoy.

One is *The Horses of Heaven*. It's an exhibit which has galloped into the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art at 111 Queen's Park (593-9300) for a stay until Sept. 4. It consists of 67 prancing, dancing tomb figures, assembled from the renowned Chinese collection of the Gardiner's sister Royal Ontario Museum, directly across the road from it at the southwest corner of Bloor.

The clay stallions, dating from the 2nd century BC to the 8th century AD, are exquisite and varied. Some are riderless. Others carry warriors, musicians, polo players, hunters and elegantly attired ladies (not seated genteely sidesaddle, but directly athwart their mounts).

I was fascinated by the accompanying 50-minute documentary film, *The Silk Road*, shown at noon daily except Monday at the Gardiner. It reveals that the Chinese aristocracy used to kill and bury their slaves and horses to accompany their entombed masters on the journey to heaven.

Happily, these bloody sacrifices were abandoned in later dynasties. Instead, the royal egotists were buried with substitute human figures of terracotta (in one case, 6,000 lifesize soldiers to guard the emperor's tomb).

And their horses were represented by fantastic earthenware glazed steeds. Poets described them as having "backs formed with their markings, bones made from dragon wings . . . with hooves so hard they left imprints in stone."

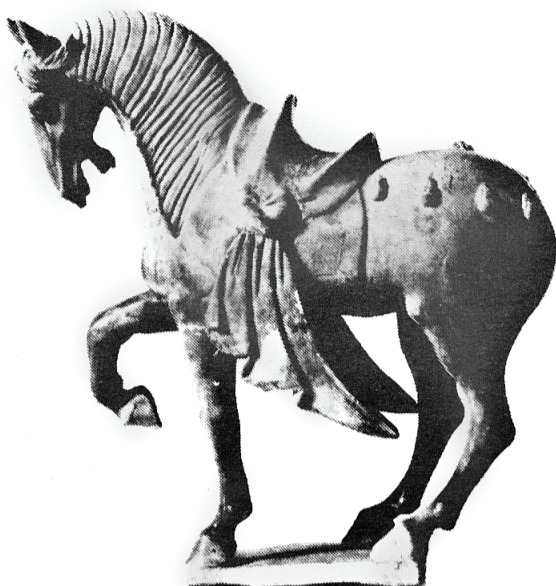
**But those were the days of imperial China. For an insight into modern Communist China, I recommend *China: Shockwaves* (McClelland and Stewart; 80 pages; \$10.95).**

It's by the Toronto-born Jewish poet, Nancy-Gay Rotstein. I discovered her illuminating book recently when flying to Shanghai and Beijing on Air China's newly inaugurated direct flights via 286-passenger Boeing 747 jets from Toronto. I'll be writing about my search for Jews in China in future articles for *The CJN*.

But meanwhile, let me introduce you to the remarkable Rotstein, who bowled me over with her manifold talents.

Her third collection of poems, currently in a second edition of 3,000 copies, has been aptly praised by a reviewer from the Canadian Press news agency: "She uses words as if they were diamonds, selecting them sparingly, and polishing them until they capture the exact image of the Chinese character or landscape that she wants."

Her mentor, poet Irving Layton, was equally rap-



Chinese horse

turous about her first book of poems, *Through The Eyes Of A Woman*, published in 1975. "Her poems give pleasure by their display of intelligence, sensitivity, compassion and warmth," wrote Layton. "Her eyes see clearly, and sometimes impishly, what others never see at all."

I felt that Layton's description fitted her nicely when we met for a luncheon interview the other day at the Inn on the Park's chic Seasons Restaurant. At 44, she is an intense, elegant, and highly literate blonde, with penetrating brown eyes, a beacon smile, and a friendly manner that is utterly engaging and unaffected.

"I've always fought against the image of the stereotype poet as a brooding, Byronic romantic, completely detached from society," she said. "I believe that poets should speak of issues of today in the language of today."

Certainly nobody could accuse her of assuming lade-da airs and alienating herself from contemporary life. A graduate of Forest Hill Collegiate, she holds an MA in Canadian history from the University of Toronto and last year was admitted to the bar as a lawyer specializing in entertainment law.

She has been an outspoken board director of the Canada Council, crusading on behalf of Canadian ownership of the book publishing industry. She has also found time to be a member of the Canada-Israel Cultural Foundation, of Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple, and the Writers' Union of Canada.

**If she ever threatened to become toplofty with a swollen ego, she doubtless would be brought down to earth quickly by her family, which she regards as the hub of her life.**

She says her most perceptive critic is 13-year-old Tracy, the youngest of her three children (the others being Stephen, 17, and Marcia, 19).

And she says her husband, Max Rotstein, a jovial, intellectual lawyer, who operates the Municipal Savings & Loan Corp. in Barrie, Ont., never even knew she was a poet when they got married.

It wasn't until four years

later that he accidentally came across a poem she had written when somebody had chopped down her favorite tree in the neighborhood.

"Who wrote this wonderful poem?" he asked. And he was amazed when she answered blushing, "I did."

She says she has always considered poetry-writing a private process, done for herself and not the prying eyes of strangers. She defines her poetry as "my illogical passion and grand compulsion. It involves putting down language imagery with an extra layer of music on top of it. I write it because it's part of my life, my essence, like breathing." And she insists, "I never wanted what I write to be published."

She remembers struggling against publication of her poems as early as the age of 12. Her grandmother, Ida Berk, now at 98 still a cultured woman with an alert mind, happened then to be shown one of Nancy-Gay's lyrical poems titled, *I Am Rain*. Without telling her granddaughter, she submitted the poem to *Chatelaine Magazine*.

"I didn't know it had been published until our school principal announced it over the PA system," she recalls. "I was scarlet with embarrassment. Everybody in my class was staring at me."

She continued to resist publication after her husband encouraged her to study poetry-writing technique for three years at workshops conducted by Irving Layton at York University.

Layton finally put it on the line: "Nancy, you can't grow any further, until you share your poems with the public and expose yourself to the critics."

Nowadays, in her concern for getting the fine details of her images exactly right, she may polish a poem as often as 50 times. Her lapidary care with the language may be seen in her *China: Shockwaves* book. She began writing it in 1980, when, by a fluke, she was granted a special literary visa allowing her to travel anywhere in China unimpeded, because she was a poet like Mao Tse-Tung.



Nancy-Gay Rotstein

**In a typical poignant scene, she recounts what it was like to be one of three "foreign devils" transformed into honored guests aboard a ferryboat on the Yangtse River. At each meal, she and the other two privileged foreigners would be escorted to a posh dining room which had balustrade windows on three sides.**

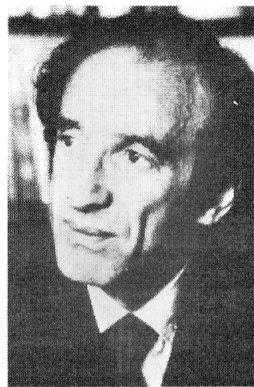
"While we dined grandly from white tablecloths with ivory napkins, hundreds of Chinese passengers would press their faces against the windows, holding their children close," she recalls. "I could feel their eyes gobble the remnants of food — the last skeleton of a fish as it was scooped into the garbage."

She titled the poem *Glass Brothers*, and ended it with the image of the compliant comrades withdrawing to their "rust corridors and crusted rice bowls."

I suggest that those interested in sampling her travel poetry begin with Rotstein's 1979 Longman book, *Taking Off*. It deals with what she terms "my Jewish heritage which is steeped in my bones" and her experiences when touring Israel, which she calls "my spiritual motherland."

I found particularly haunting her imagery in *The Guide*:

*He drives his car wherever They tell him to Masada or Bethlehem, Ben Yehuda or Hayarkam. He jokes in five languages English, Arabic, and Italian, German when necessary. He plays his cassette, Goodman or Shaw for his Americans and Caruso for others.*



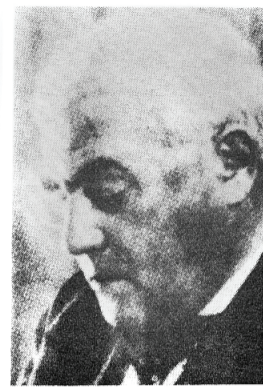
Elie Wiesel

*He opens doors, waits in marble lobbies, explains history tirelessly. In his pocket, a Gun on his arm, a Number in his heart, Steel.*

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We bow out this week with some quotes on writers and the art of writing.

Poet Ezra Pound:



Ferenc Molnar

"Literature is news that stays news."

U.S. anthologist Leonard Louis Levinson: "Books are what they make a movie out of for television."

British writer Frederic Raphael: "Truth may be stranger than fiction, but fiction is truer."

French writer Simone De Beauvoir: "The original writer, as long as he isn't

dead, is always scandalous."

U.S. poet Edna St. Vincent Millay: "A person who publishes a book appears wilfully in public with his pants down."

British humorist P. G. Wodehouse: "Every author really wants to have letters printed in the papers. Unable to make the grade, he drops down a rung of the ladder and writes novels."

Hungarian playwright Ferenc Molnar: "I became a writer in the same way that a woman becomes a prostitute. First I did it to please myself, then I did it to please my friends, and finally I did it for money."

Ernest Hemingway: "People who write fiction, if they had not taken it up, might have become very successful liars."

Holocaust writer Elie Wiesel: "One well-written sentence is worth 800 hours of film."