

Bitter Cane

By Genny Lim

Wing Chung Kuo, 16; Li-Tai, mid-30s

Genny Lim's *Bitter Cane* is set in Hawaii in the mid-1800s and concerns the coming of age of sixteen-year-old Wing Chung Kuo, a Chinese immigrant who's come to the islands to work on a sugar cane plantation. Like so many before him, Wing believes that the freedom and potential riches to be gained by working in this new land will be a welcome elevation, far superior to the meager existence in his homeland village in China.

Wing discovers, however, that the exploitation of the Chinese immigrants leads to indulgent and destructive behavior, as evidenced by the reckless activities of the older workers who spend all of their free time gambling, smoking opium and paying for sexual favors from prostitutes. The play follows Wing's journey into manhood in a most theatrical way, including scenes with the ghost of Wing's father, who too was a sugar cane cutter and died shaming his family.

In this first scene, Wing is led to the room of Li-Tai, a local prostitute, hoping for his first adult experience with a woman. Lau Hing Joo, the ghost of Wing's father, shadows Wing through the scene – he too was a partner of Li-Tai in life.



LI-TAI: (*Calling from inside.*) Who is it?

WING: (*Clearing his throat.*) My name is Wing Chun...Kuo.

(*The light inside the cabin comes up as Li-Tai slowly opens the door. She motions him to enter. He stands there awkwardly.*)

LI-TAI: (*Stares at him with immediate recognition.*) You?

WING: (*Captivated.*) I hope it's not too late.

LI-TAI: (*Glancing around nervously.*) I thought I heard voices.

(*Returning curiously to Wing.*) You new?

WING: Yes. Three weeks.

LI-TAI: Hoi-ping?

WING: (*Surprised.*) Yes. How did you know?

LI-TAI: (*Matter-of-factly.*) By the way you talk.

WING: (*Impressed.*) You're clever.

LI-TAI: (*Examining him.*) You're good-looking. You look mixed.

WING: I'm Chinese, same as you. I was the best farmer back home.

LI-TAI: I believe it. (*Looks at his hands.*) Are you good with your hands?

WING: (*Surprised.*) Yes. I can carve things.

LI-TAI: (*Impressed.*) Ah, an artist! (*Sounding his name.*) Wing Chun. My name is Li-Tai.

WING: Li-Tai. That's pretty. (*Pauses.*) Where you from?

LI-TAI: (*Abruptly.*) Look. I know you're not here to gossip. You have two dollars? (*He fumbles in his pocket and without looking hands her several bills. She smirks at his naïveté and quickly tucks it in her kimono pocket.*) Sit down. (*He sits.*) Want something to drink?

WING: Some tea would be nice, thank you.

LI-TAI: (*Amused laugh.*) Tea? How old are you?

WING: Twenty.

LI-TAI: (*Frowning.*) You're lying.

WING: (*Embarrassed.*) Sixteen.

LI-TAI: This is your first time? (*He nods with embarrassment. She takes a whiskey bottle, uncorks it, pours a glass, and hands it to him.*) Drink it. It'll give you confidence. (*He takes a big swallow and chokes. She laughs at him.*) Slow down. What's your hurry? (*Smiling.*) Talk to me.

WING: (*Still embarrassed.*) About what?

LI-TAI: About you.

WING: (*Blushing.*) There's not much to tell.

LI-TAI: Why not?

WING: (*Takes a gulp, then blurts . . .*) My name is Wing and I like to eat duck gizzards. (*She bursts out laughing, then he laughs, too.*) On the first day of school, I remember the teacher asked us to introduce ourselves.

LI-TAI: And that was what you said.

WING: I couldn't think of anything else!

LI-TAI: (*Mockingly.*) You still can't.

WING: (*Frustrated.*) I don't know why I'm so tongue-tied. (*Finishes his glass.*)

LI-TAI: Talking is not important. (*Refills his glass.*) There are other

ways to communicate. (*Pours herself one, clicks his glass, then slumps on the bed with her glass in a provocative manner.*)

Your parents have a bride picked out for you yet?

WING: No. (*Pauses.*) My parents are dead.

LI-TAI: I'm sorry.

WING: My father died here. At Kahuku.

LI-TAI: Oh? (*Surprised.*) What was his name?

WING: Lau Hing. Kuo Lau Hing. (*She freezes at the recognition of his name.*) He was one of those Sandalwood boys who never made it back.

LI-TAI: (*Trembling.*) How old were you when he left?

WING: I was just a baby.

(*Struck by the resemblance, she cups his face with her hands.*)

LI-TAI: Let me look at you!

WING: (*Embarrassed.*) What's the matter? Why are you looking at me like that?

LI-TAI: (*Marveling.*) You remind me of someone.

WING: I'm as good as any man on Kahuku.

LI-TAI: (*Disdainfully.*) The average man here is a pig. You don't want to be like them, do you?

WING: One flop in the family is enough. It's no secret. Lau Hing was a bum.

LI-TAI: How can a son talk about his own father in that way?

WING: And how can a father treat his family that way? Why should I pretend he was somebody he wasn't? (*Somberly.*) He was nobody to me. Nothing.

LI-TAI: (*Stung with guilt.*) Your mother? She loved him?

WING: (*Disgustedly.*) She died. He lied to her. He lied to her every month for two years! When he got tired of lying, he stopped writing altogether. She didn't hear from him again. Then one day, she gets this letter saying he's dead. (*Bitterly.*) You want to know what killed him? (*Pauses.*) Opium. The money he should have sent home, he squandered on himself! (*Pauses.*) They shipped his trunk back. She thought it was his bones. When she opened it, she fainted. The box was empty except for his hat and a few personal belongings. His body was never

recovered they said, because he had drowned in the ocean. (*With cruel irony.*) That's why I'm here. To redeem a dead man.

LI-TAI: You think you'll succeed?

WING: I'm not sending my ghost in an empty box home. Life is too short! (*Listening to the sound of rain.*) It's raining again.

LI-TAI: It's always raining. There's no escape. (*With a sense of foreboding.*) You do what you can do to forget. And survive. (*Picks up a fan and begins moodily fanning herself.*) I can't decide what's more boring. Living out here in the middle of nowhere or raising chickens in a puny plot back home.

WING: Why did you come here?

LI-TAI: A lady in the village told me that Hawai'i was paradise. She said there was hardly anything to do there but suck on big, fat, juicy sugarcane – sweeter than honey. I was crazy for cane and waited for the day to come here. When my mother died, my father remarried. My new mother didn't like a girl with bound feet who talked back. So I told her to send me to Hawai'i. She sold me to a rich old merchant on the Big Island. I cried and begged to go back home. But I was his number four concubine. His favorite. Four is a bad luck number. So when the old man suffered a stroke in my bedroom, they, of course, blamed it on me. Number one wife, who was always jealous of me, picked up my red slippers and threw them at my face. Then she beat me with a bamboo rod and called me a good-for-nothing slave girl! (*Laughs bitterly.*) They lit firecrackers when Fook Ming took me. To rid my evil spirit. Some paradise. (*Moved by Wing's look of compassion.*) Tell me, what do they say about me?

WING: (*Blushing.*) Who?

LI-TAI: The men. What do the men say about Li-Tai?

(*Lau Hing crosses from the wing toward Li-Tai.*)

WING: Nothing. (*Admiringly.*) Just that you're beautiful.

[LAU: (*Passionately.*) You're beautiful! (*Li-Tai turns and sees Lau.*)]

LI-TAI: Who sent you here?

WING: No one, I swear!