



The White Snake

IN PRODUCTION

Dedicated to Team Snake, Malcolm, and Mary.

Storytelling.

In ancient times, storytelling was the one true form of communication. There were no written traditions ascribed to communicative exchanges yet, and thus the voice was the ultimate power in conveying message. It is for this reason today that one is unable to grasp a play until it is both seen and heard. The intimacy of both sound and visuals create an experience that is uniquely empathetic.

Oral traditions are a practice of exchange. At times, it was an arbitrary system of passing information from one person to the next. Perhaps this explains the strange coincidences across mythological traditions – why there are thunderbolt-wielding deities who lead pantheons of gods in Norse, Greek, and Yoruban legendaria, for instance. There were no boundaries that could block the power of the traveling word. Eventually, across the world, the same characters and adventures sprang up in resoundingly different, yet familiar circumstances.

The White Snake, a citizen of the mythological world, is believed to have been first related in the Ming Dynasty, but the idea of humans falling in love with spirits or animals in disguise has been a trope longer than one can pinpoint. It is a story that has had many evolutions, or as the play puts it, many forking “paths.” Some recount Lady Bai as a sinister villain, others portray her in a more sympathetic light. Whatever her origin, she is indeed a product of human fascination with love, hiding oneself, and betrayal.

Shortly before this process began, I had the pleasure of speaking with Mary Zimmerman, the original playwright and director of *The White Snake*.

Mary is no stranger to classical tales or world literature. In fact, she has made quite the astonishing career off of them. I think, in a way, she is the reason why I was so passionate about theatre. I can’t shake the fact that I am drawn to epic, romantic, and expansive texts. I simply want to – as she puts it – live in them.

The astonishing fact that people who have never spoken to one another, or even had contact with one another, could subscribe to the same values and beliefs leads me to realize that these ancient myths – these imagined histories – they are the product of our own identities. They are the wishful aspirations of our national rhetoric, as well as the guiding principles of how we continue to define ourselves.

A lot can be learned in the classics, though I concede that that could be said of any discipline. Still, I am constantly floored by the perilous quests of Odysseus, the sheer resilience of the children of Lir, the incredible wisdom of Scheherazade, and of course, the bravery of Lady Bai. In these characters I find bits and pieces of myself, and I am humbled to remember that they are every bit of me as they are of you.

Greg Strasser
Director

Believe Me

PREPRODUCTION + CASTING

The Approach

The thesis, or through line of the play follows the white snake and her desire to be seen for who she truly is. The spirits remark that, despite her experience and fortitude in studying the Tao, she cannot transcend because she has not yet come to terms with herself, nor has she found her place in the world. *The White Snake* is about finding ones home, wherever that may be, and **being seen for who we truly are**. With that approach, my designers were off!

Camille Charara in costumes worked on differentiating the spirit world and the human world. We decided to set the human world in modern-dress, and the spirit world would have remnants of ancient China, to pay homage to the story's origins.

I always like contributing to the design of my own shows, so I picked properties and sound. The show had few sound cues, as it was my intention to keep all the special effects produced by the performers, but props were a bit tough. I wanted to make sure that I wasn't culturally appropriating objects from Chinese culture, so rather than settle for a massive display of objects, I settled for items that had a universal and cross-cultural appeal: paper parasols, lanterns, bamboo sticks, and ribbons of silk. These items would be utilized for many things, but more on that later.

Casting a play is the bulk of preparation. *The White Snake* demanded performers who possessed multidisciplinary skillsets – from dance, gymnastics, singing, and instrumental ability. The original used around twelve people, I had nine.

I paid particular attention to my two lovers, Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen. I think my choice in using two women was a direct reflection of my own queer identity. The story was about forbidden love and coming out. When Zimmerman first presented the play at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Artistic Director Bill Rauch called it a perfect “marriage play.”

The lesbian, interracial dynamic of my Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen perfectly fit my thesis of the show. In fact, if I were to do this play again, I would make the same choice.

**One cannot find their place in
the world**

**If they cannot
see themselves
for who they are.**

Scenic

As for scenic elements, *The White Snake* featured an impressive display of string lights, hung like a pagoda roof over the playing space. The set consisted of five 8ft x 3ft platforms that sat upstage of the playing space and were masked by muslin fabrics. The muslin was painted and treated to simulate calligraphy panels of ancient China. I actually told Jason Sell, my scenic consultant, to rip it off directly from the opening sequence of *Mulan* in which the great wall of China was painted upon a canvas. Our version, however, did not use any buildings or human-created landmarks. Instead it was a series of landscapes, with Mount Emei, the home of our spirits, at center.



Research

Some images that provided inspiration for design and movement. Puppetry and movement for the crane was largely based around the two images of the crane dancer.

I saw an incredible parasol-dance video. I steal the concept with admiration, respect, but without apology.

Of course, because Guan Yin appears in the story, I knew there had to be a way to incorporate the thousand-handed goddess somehow. Performers learned some of the tricks to create this illusion, led excellently by my cast member Juliana Tassos.



Forking Paths

REHEARSAL + PERFORMANCE

Rehearsal

We had a wonderful rehearsal process. My approach to this piece was to keep it as performer-driven as possible. Anything technical - be it sound, lights, or scenery - would be kept to an absolute minimum.

I divided rehearsal into three distinct periods: the workshop, actual rehearsal, and tech. The workshop phase consisted of my ensemble and I looking at the major images of the piece and experimenting with different pictures and ideas.

GUAN YIN:

(Pg. 10) Guan Yin is a thousand-handed goddess whom, in one story, delivers the White Snake's origin story in the form of an edict. Zimmerman had expressed she grew tired with her staging of Guan Yin, so I thought why not portray her how she was meant to be?

PROPS:

(Pg. 11-13) We had several categories of props that actors used to convey a variety of things: parasols, bamboo poles, silk ribbon strips, and other miscellaneous props. The props would double for various objects. For instance, a row of parasols undulating together would be a large snake body; silk strips served as fishing lines, the fall of rain, storm winds, waves, and bandages; and bamboo poles were used as weapons, oars, and walls of a labyrinth.

DOUBT:

(Pg. 14-15) Doubt is a spirit we encounter later into the play whom literally represents the doubt Xu Xian possesses towards Lady Bai and in himself. Jo Ellen was perfect for this role, a creepy yet seductive thing that sensually manipulates Xu Xian like a puppet.

PARASOL SNAKE:

(Pg. 16) Xu Xian annoys Lady Bai into drinking realgar wine in order to prove to him that she is not a demon spirit, as the vile Buddhist monk Fa Hai has been espousing around town. Thinking she can suppress her true form, she ingests the poison, to no avail. She transforms into the snake and Xu Xian dies of shock. As mentioned before, we used a line of undulating parasols, capped by a white umbrella with a red ribbon tied around its tip and the Chinese characters for "eyes" painted on its body.

THE THUNDER PEAK PAGODA:

(Pg. 17) I knew I wanted a series of recurring images to serve as "bookends" of the play. I recalled a YouTube clip I watched for research, and I loved the image of the fortress of parasols (Pg. 7, top right) The performers were hidden beneath a large hive structure that would blossom open occasionally. I knew this was the image I wanted to open with, mostly because it was metaphoric. The "hive" was created twice in our play, at the top of the opening sequence and then again at the end when the White Snake is imprisoned. The idea of creating these bookends was to convey to the audience that they were approaching something like a novel and opening the cover to reveal the story. In addition, the image also represented the Thunder Peak Pagoda. Thus, the audience arrives at the site of our heroine's destruction and it opens up to teach them her story.

WATER BATTLE

Rather than try to show images of the battle, which we created from devising movements based on violent gusts of wind (with parasols) and fearsome waves (with silk strips) you can watch the clip in the reel.



Guan Yin

Right: Juliana Tassos as Guan Yin, ensemble as Guan Yin hands





Village Scene

From left to right:
Tiffany Wu, Shenell McCrary,
Aditya Das, Logan Davis, Jo Ellen
Pellman

Here, the parasol is the basket of a merchant and the silks are sold as scarves (they are later used to outline of a red roof).



The Ribbon Dance

Left: In performance with Shenell McCrary, Allie Reynolds, Mason Van Gieson

Inset: In rehearsal with Shenell McCrary, Allie Reynolds, Mason Van Gieson

The red blanket are simultaneously bed sheets and a bond of love entangling Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen



The Boat

Right: In performance with Juliana Tassos, Blake Griffey, Shenell McCrary, Tiffany Wu, Allie Reynolds, Jo Ellen Pellman

Inset: In performance with Allie Reynolds and ensemble (Glowing moon operated by Mason Van Gieson)

Here, the silk strips act as rain, a bamboo pole is used as an oar, and a white parasol is lit with a flashlight as an actor slowly walks it across the stage to represent the moon.





Doubt Jo Ellen Pellman as Doubt, Allie Reynolds as Xu Xian



Doubt

Jo Ellen Pellman, Allie Reynolds, Logan Davis

Parasol Snake

Right: Shenell McCrary and ensemble, Allie Reynolds

Below: Tiffany Wu and ensemble

The snake was created twice, first as Greenie, who steals gold from a corrupt magistrate to fund her and Lady Bai's life in Hangzhou. The second, as a massive writhing snake that scares Xu Xian to death.





Thunder Peak Pagoda The opening and closing image of the play, this is where Lady Bai was imprisoned by Fa Hai.

Time Disappears

PUPPETRY



White Snake

Operated by Shenell McCrary
Dryer hose, silk noil, beads, bamboo,
and wire.

Construction by Sarah Norton

In addition to the building, Sarah Norton designed my puppets, creating the snakes from dryer hose and colored silk noil. She used bamboo sticks as the rods for the actors to control the body.





White Snake and Greenie

White Snake Operator: Shenell McCrary

Green Snake Operator: Tiffany Wu

Dryer hose, silk noil, beads, bamboo, and wire.

Construction by Sarah Norton



Crane & Ganoderma

Our stag and crane puppets were amazing -- the stag was constructed from a mask and adorned with golden leaves for ears, strips of white silk for its beard, and bits of golden branches as the antlers.

Left: Crane Operator: Logan Davis
Feathers, velvet gloves, silk strips
Construction by Sarah Norton

Above: Ganoderma Operator: Allie Reynolds
LED lights, flower frames, scarf
Construction by Greg Strasser

Don't Be Afraid

PRODUCTION + REHEARSAL PORTFOLIO



Left: Jo Ellen Pellman and Allie Reynolds
Bottom L-R: Jo Ellen Pellman, Juliana Tassos, Mason Van Gieson
Right: Aditya Das and ensemble



Shenell McCrary, Allie Reynolds, Jo Ellen Pellman, and ensemble



Jo Ellen Pellman, Allie Reynolds, Logan Davis



Juliana Tassos and ensemble



Left: Juliana Tassos, Jo Ellen Pellman, Aditya Das, Mason Van Gieson

Right: Logan Davis 27



Shenell McCrary and Allie Reynolds





Shenell McCrary and ensemble



Credits

ARTISTS

Directed by: Greg Strasser
Puppetry: Sarah Norton
Scenic: Jason Sell
Lights: Chris Simko
Costumes: Camille Charara
Art: Sara Eskandari
Choreography: Jo Ellen Pellman
Original Score: Kirsten Mossberg, Jake Smith
Orchestrations: Celia van den Bogert
Props & Sound: Greg Strasser
Asst Director: Zoha Bharwani

STAFF

Stage Manager: Caroline-Michele Uy
Asst Stage Manager: Cameron Marsh

Co-Produced by MOSAIC
Creative Director: Aline Mayagoitia

Additional Music Credits: Derek Zhao for "The Duel of the Gods"

Photography by Lily Cole and Gwen McKee

CAST

(In order of appearance)

Jo Ellen Pellman, Juliana Tassos, Mason van Gieson, Shenell McCrary,
Tiffany Wu, Blake Griffey, Allie Reynolds, Logan Davis, Aditya Das

MUSICIAN

Celia van den Bogert

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With enough time and distance all forking paths come to the same place.

Don't be afraid. It is impossible to die alone.