

Lifetime Fairytale

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[Sophia Bushong](#) · October 22, 2009

Playwright Zhu Yi tells us in her program notes that *Lifetime Fairytale* was "inspired by the director's fantasy" of "a moon, a lake, and a beautiful girl" and "an old Chinese myth." Watching the piece brought to my mind (I read program notes afterwards) everything from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the children's show *Fraggle Rock*, to Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* and the structure of an epic Greek tragedy. In his MFA thesis presentation for the Columbia University Theatre Arts Program, director Marios Theocharous challenges himself to blend many influences into a cohesive play and, for the most part, he succeeds beautifully. This charming and moving show is a credit to the talent of the whole creative ensemble, and especially to the solid foundation provided by Yi's skillful writing.

The tale, set in 12th century China, follows Liu, an unhappy husband, young father, and scholar of Confucius. Liu feels compelled to leave his family and journey to the city in order to take the Imperial Exam. His goal is to become an imperial minister for the Emperor. He dreams of changing the world through his noble acts and of being remembered for all time. However, in traveling through the forest he encounters a sprite that tempts him with a golden cup he instantly covets. He follows the cup and the sprite to another realm beneath the lake. Here he finds true romantic love with the tree fairy, Peach.

Each one of Yi's characters is thoroughly drawn. Moses Villarama as Liu and Anita Anthonj as the fairy Peach have the talent to play the flaws and virtues of their characters with depth and commitment. It's delightful to watch the chorus of five Fraggles-like "Blossoms" who

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attend Peach dance, play, and tell their personal love stories. One Blossom's monologue about her devotion to her lover, a snail determined to climb the tree she grows on, left me totally convinced of their reality. Theocharous gives each player room to bring individuality and humor to their parts. The comedic timing of Mi Sun Choi and Andrew Taliano, in particular, makes for some priceless moments.

The play is not all fantasy and whimsy, though. Serious questions are being asked. How may one satisfy the need to be loved or a burning personal ambition? How does one choose a lifetime path if the two impulses cannot coexist? Is our greater responsibility to humanity at large, or to the individuals we cherish? And if indeed we are eternally connected to those we love through time, space, and dreams, how can we escape an everlasting sense of loneliness?

Yi and Theocharous do not attempt to have definitive answers. They do convey a point of view on these questions, and usually keep the story moving steadily forward, with compelling results. The scene in which Liu and Peach decide the fate of their relationship is poetic, heartfelt, and thought provoking.

Where the show occasionally loses itself is when the Blossoms and Peach are left to talk among themselves. The charm and clarity of the Fairy reality gets muddled when the Blossoms expound on issues of race and gender. When they talk about how they would resolve racial injustice and improve the fate of humanity, are they speaking as Blossoms or humans? Such issues are relevant to Yi's overall themes. Unlike with her main characters, however, these sentiments do not transform those who speak them, nor move the plot forward. Plunked down in the middle of otherwise focused and inspired storytelling, the effect is jarring and confusing.

Aside from these hiccups the play has a wonderful momentum and dynamic staging. With the help of set and lighting designer Ji- Youn Chang and costume designer Paul Carey, Theocharous creates a vividly imagined world and one gorgeous tableau after another. The movement and fights, designed by Maja Wampuszyc and Christian C. Chan respectively, create a clear narrative and keep these tableaux flowing from one into the next. The Lion Dance, performed by Jiasi Chen and James Kwan, pivots the action of the story in a new direction and is an exciting highlight. The show also owes a great deal to the subtle sound effects and scoring. Stavros Makris is credited as the music supervisor. The sound design supports the actors and dancers beautifully and invites the audience to

empathize with our hero.

All of these artists have distinct and interesting points of view. I hope they will keep asking worthy questions, keep writing, and keep playing.

Opened: October 21, 2009

Closed: October 24, 2009

Artists Involved

Cast: Anita Anthonj, Jiasi Chen, Mi Sun Choi, Manuel Fihman, R. Paul Hamilton, Kirsten Hopkins, Caitlin Johnston, Jose Kim, James Kwan, Gustavo Obregon, Evangeline Reilly, Sarah Billington Stevens, Andrew Taliano, Moses Villarama

Author: Zhu Yi

Director: Marios Theocharous

Costumes: Paul Carey

Music: Stavros Makris

Sets & Lighting: Ji- Youn Chang

Fight Director: Christian T. Chan

Stage Manager: Pisa Waikwamdee

Producer: Columbia Stages

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