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West Meets East

Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig is introducing China's Guan Hanqing to William Shakespeare. This is a neat trick, given that the two playwrights are separated by more than 300 years and 5,000 miles.

Cowhig, an assistant professor in UC Santa Barbara's Department of Theater and Dance, has adapted Guan's 13th-century tale of injustice, "Snow in Midsummer," for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), which will perform the play at its Swan Theatre in the Bard's Stratford-Upon-Avon in February and March. The production is the first in the RSC's Chinese Translations Project, which will bring Chinese classics to the West.

It's a singular honor for Cowhig, a playwright who came to the attention of the RSC with the production of her "The World of Extreme Happiness" in 2013. The company approached her in late 2015 about adapting a Chinese play and offered her some options. "Snow in Midsummer," with its tale of a wronged woman who is killed and returns as a ghost, stood out. A fan of contemporary horror and thriller stories, Cowhig jumped at the opportunity.

In Guan's original story, a father sells his young daughter as a child bride to satisfy a debt. After the husband of the girl, Dou E, dies, she is framed for his murder. Before her execution she says her innocence will be proved when, among other things, it snows in midsummer. After her predictions come true, she appears to her father as a ghost and tells him what really happened. In the end, Dou E is exonerated and the real killer executed.

With the help of translator Gigi Chang, Cowhig adapted “Snow in Midsummer” in a way that was true to the language but tweaked the story in unexpected ways. “I told her I wanted a super-literal translation,” Cowhig explained, “kind of word-for-word so I could preserve the strangeness and the poetics when I adapt it to contemporary language, because there’s a lot of really interesting figures of speech.”

The first draft, “an extremely liberal adaptation,” Cowhig noted, caught the RSC off guard. “The artistic director, Gregory Doran, said to me over dinner, ‘It was as if I had asked for a translation of “Hamlet” and you gave me “Rosencrantz and Gildenstern Are Dead.” ’ ”

Adapting “Snow in Midsummer,” Cowhig said, demands some creative work to appeal to a modern audience. The original is highly repetitive because it was common for the audience to eat, chat and sleep while they watched the play. “Thus, in the original play, you essentially hear the same plot several times, mostly through song. So to translate, adapt and modify that core story into a two-hour play required I write a new play around the core story that held onto some of the spirit and theme of the original, but is a very different piece.”

Cowhig’s new version, while still reworking the original, was a better fit for the RSC and its Chinese Translations Project, she said. “It’s not quite at the level of working with a commercial producer who knows exactly what they want and what will sell, because that’s not [the RSC’s] concern,” she noted. The RSC is “more concerned with how to preserve the essence of this project, because it’s not just about this one play; it’s a 10-year-long initiative and they’re launching the project.”

Rehearsals for “Snow in Midsummer,” which will feature an all-Asian cast, began Jan. 9. Cowhig is on hand. The play runs Feb. 23 through March 25.

Meanwhile, in Chicago

Another play by Cowhig, “The King of Hell’s Palace,” was featured as a developmental production at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. Based on a true story about an AIDS epidemic in rural China among peasants who sold plasma, the small-scale production was a kind of test before the theater commits to a full-scale production. Cowhig expects to hear in January what the next steps will be in developing the project.

About UC Santa Barbara

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