

THE TIMELESSNESS OF INJUSTICE



IKIN YUW © RSC

Tianyun (Wendy Kweh, far right) observes Worker Chen (Lucy Sheen), Fei-Fei (Emily Dao), Worker Huang (Richard Rees), with Dou Yi (Katie Leung) and Rocket Wu (Andrew Leung) seated behind, in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2017 production of *Snow in Midsummer*.

In *Snow in Midsummer*, the ghost of a wrongly accused woman curses her town with a cataclysmic drought.

By Diep Tran

Playwright Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig and director Justin Audibert have similar stories for how they came to work on the play *Snow in Midsummer*. Each was contacted by the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon in England, in 2016, with the same query: Were they interested in participating in the Chinese Translations Project? The project was “a long-term collaboration with China,” explains Cowhig, “in which [the RSC] would commission new translations of Shakespeare into Chinese and also commission contemporary dramatists to adapt plays by Shakespeare’s approximate Chinese contemporaries.”

RSC Artistic Director Gregory Doran gave Audibert a “huge bunch” of these stories, recalls the director, and asked if he could read them. Cowhig was given the same assignment. Both of them gravitated toward one play, a 13th-century work by Guan Hanqing called *The Injustice to Dou Yi That Moved Heaven and Earth*, commonly known as *Snow in Midsummer*. Cowhig, whose work has been awarded the Wasserstein Prize and the Yale Drama Series Award, is based in Santa Barbara, where she is head of the dramatic writing program at UCSB. Audibert, who is based in London, is associate director at the Unicorn Theatre, a creative associate at Wilton’s Music Hall and was awarded the 2012 Leverhulme Bur-

sary by the National Theatre Studio. The pair then “match-made via Skype,” says Audibert, chuckling. He describes the two of them as “like the Odd Couple. I’m garrulous and ebullient and often say whatever comes into my head, whilst Frances is much more reserved, intelligent, thoughtful and measured.”

Despite their differences, the two of them clicked over the play and decided to partner on the world premiere of Cowhig’s adaptation, also called *Snow in Midsummer*, which ran at the RSC in 2017. The two are reuniting for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production.

First impressions

What drew Cowhig to the story was the woman at the center: Dou Yi, a poor widow who is executed for a crime she didn’t commit. Before she dies, she curses the town she lives in. In Cowhig’s version, the town is called New Harmony, and Dou Yi says: “It is the hottest time of the year, but soon snow will tumble down like cotton. And New Harmony will experience the wrath of a drought for three years.” The catastrophic weather events will end when Dou Yi’s innocence is revealed; the world will be right again when justice is restored.

"It was in essence a female revenge ghost story about a wronged woman whose angry spirit causes a drought," Cowhig says. "I have always adored Asian horror/thriller films and hoped to bring some of those elements into my adaptation." Cowhig is no stranger to the supernatural; her play *410[GONE]* takes place partially in the world of the dead.

Similarly, Audibert found the themes of the original story as resonant today as they would have been in 13th-century China, and not unlike other Western classics. "When I read this play, I thought, oh my God, it's like *Antigone*," he exclaims. "The idea of a strong female voice being silenced by a plethora of men in an oppressive patriarchal society is both completely new and yet depressingly, totally familiar all at once." To him, the idea of "fairness and inequity exists in every culture known to man," so this Chinese tale would not be much of a stretch for Western audiences.

An adaptation for the 21st century

In adapting the play, Cowhig wasn't interested in presenting a period piece. She set her *Snow in Midsummer* in modern-day China, in New Harmony, a remote factory town. Cowhig describes the original as a "sung variety opera," which was "very repetitive." This is because the experience of going to the theatre during the Yuan Dynasty [1271–1368] was more akin to our experience of going to a sporting event today: "Audiences were free to chat, eat, sleep, come and go as they please," she explains, which meant that the plot points needed to be reiterated over and over (Cowhig is part Taiwanese and has lived in Taipei, Okinawa and Beijing). In the adaptation, Cowhig scrapped the music, opting instead for a mystery. The play opens with the arrival of a newcomer to New Harmony, Tianyun, a new factory owner with a prescient young daughter, who tries to break the curse.

And while the original was a morality tale about the perils of injustice, with clear heroes and villains, Cowhig gave her characters more dimensions. "In the original play Dou Yi is a very one-dimensional 'good widow' archetype, which I don't think would be very interesting to a contemporary audience. Thus I chose to give some of her character traits to another character from the original, Donkey Zhang, who became Handsome Zhang in my adaptation," she explains.

In the original, Donkey Zhang is purely diabolical. In the adaptation, Handsome Zhang is more complicated, a gay man who is motivated by his love for his partner, Rocket Wu. By contrast, while Dou Yi retains her defining trait in the original—a widow who is determined to honor her husband's memory by never remarrying—in Cowhig's version, Dou Yi becomes less "good" after her death; she haunts the characters to make sure that she isn't forgotten and that those who wronged her will be punished.

"That's the real difference with Frances's version to the original," says Audibert. The original, which was influenced by Chinese Buddhist cosmology, he says, "is just about restoring the natural order of things," whereas the new *Snow in Midsummer* takes its influences from Japanese ghost stories like *The Ring*. "Dou Yi, she wants vengeance as well, it's not justice alone; it isn't quite enough," he says. "People need to pay for what they've done." And no spoilers, but Dou Yi demands payment partially in blood.

In her adaptation, Cowhig was determined to make this tale bigger than just one woman and one crime. "I was more focused on the injustice of global capitalism and the way we in the West profit/benefit from the exploitation of the global poor," she says. In fact, when Dou Yi is executed, her organs are harvested and sold around the world, bringing to mind current practices such as illegal organ donation and cheap factory labor, the building block of modern capitalism. "This young girl, because she's poor, she literally loses her heart, and what does it mean?" ponders Audibert. "It's an incredible metaphor for what late-stage capitalism is—the powerful can literally take your heart from you."

Snow in Midsummer builds on a theme that Cowhig previously explored in *The World of Extreme Happiness* (produced at Manhattan Theatre Club and the Goodman Theatre), about the dismal lives of factory workers in

China. For Cowhig, the exploitation of the poor by the rich continues to be urgent. "It seems to me like the most important story of our time—the impact of global capitalism on vulnerable populations/ecologies," she says. And to her, it is even more urgent now. After all, developed countries are still dependent on cheap labor. And numerous reports have cited that climate change will disproportionately affect poor countries, even though developed countries are the ones responsible for a majority of carbon emissions.

And the criticisms within *Snow in Midsummer* aren't just directed at 1 percenters but also at anyone in the developed world, including theatre artists. "We in the theatre are used to being global nomads who fly everywhere for gigs, supposedly in the name of 'the greater good,'" Cowhig says. At the same time, artists "don't often look at the environmental devastation we are contributing to in terms of air miles and also the amount of waste that is often involved in creating shows. It is far easier to tell ourselves we are just doing it for our 'cause,' when in fact I think if we looked at our industry structurally, I am not sure we are a net 'good' ecologically."

Snow in Midsummer runs August 2–October 27.

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