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Snow in August (review)

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Asian Theatre Journal, Volume 23, Number 1, Spring 2006, pp. 214-215 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2006.0009>



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Western ideologies. As such, Gao's "Omnipotent Theater" is conceived as a new expressive mode that promotes artistic and intellectual freedom for this very private person who brings his life experience to bear upon his art. Quah's view of Gao's work is consistent with response from most critics, including Gilbert Fong, one of the major writers on Gao's *oeuvre*.

Chapters 1 and 2 trace the development of Gao's aesthetic programs side by side with a contextualized, chronological account of Gao's life. Chapter 1 delineates the influence of socialist realism based on Stanislavski's method, a pervasive mode of representation on playwrights in the pre-1980s China. It argues that Gao's spirit of revolt is evident in his early embrace of both the Brechtian tradition and traditional Chinese theater during this time. Chapter 2 traces how Gao emerged as an avant-garde playwright, hailed by many in the West as the first playwright to introduce the Theater of Absurd to a Chinese audience in the 1980s. This chapter examines Gao's early plays, such as *Alarm Signal* and *Bus Stop* in relation to Beckett, and Gao's ideas of multivocality and polyphony.

In chapters 3 and 4, Quah turns to Gao's creation of alternative space, temporality, and voices on stage. He argues that Gao's conception of theater as an intellectual space re-establishes the artistic subjectivity of the playwright, actors, and the audience. *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theater* ends with an optimistic picture of transcultural theater and Gao's drama. Quah believes that the coldness and ambiguity of Gao's drama signifies Gao's preference for a peripheral position from which he is free to engage "the problems of humanity" (p. 187) without the burden of such ideologies as nationalism. As Gao's works become central to courses on world literature and drama, Quah's book will be a valuable reading.

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**SNOW IN AUGUST.** By Gao Xingjian. Translated by Gilbert C. F. Fong. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003. 83 + xxiv pp. Cloth \$15.00; Paper \$11.00.

Gilbert Fong's lucid translation of the Chinese Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian's *Snow in August* is a welcome addition to the growing body of Gao's works available in English. Fong has already translated a number of Gao's plays and published them as a collection under the title *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999). *Snow in August* is both readable and suitable for performance. Therefore, like *The Other Shore*, this single play volume lends itself to use in both drama and acting courses. Fong has retained most of the wordplay and puns and has preserved the sudden changes in register and the style of Gao's original Chinese.

*Snow in August* comes with an informative introduction to the play

and its author, but does not include a bibliography. For further reading, readers will have to turn to Fong's *The Other Shore*, which comes with useful appendices of selected criticism and major productions of Gao's plays. *Snow in August* contains eight color plates of the production in Taiwan (2002) and a number of black and white reproductions of Gao's paintings inspired by Zen Buddhism. These illustrations help readers envision Gao's ideas of staging and visualization.

The introduction connects the biographies of the hero and the playwright. Huineng, the subject of the play, was an unorthodox Zen Buddhist master and the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism. Gao is an unorthodox intellectual and playwright. Fong observes that both Huineng and Gao are exiles and outsiders to the established orders. The play adapts Beijing opera performing idioms. Huineng, an illiterate Chinese Zen Buddhist master, is the quintessential representation of intellectual freedom and spontaneous Truth. Gao's creative impulse has, likewise, led him to a long search for freedom. The introduction provides outlines and critical analysis of each act.

Gao's ideal theater, as represented by *Snow in August*'s premier in Taiwan, was not well received. It would have been helpful if the introduction addressed the reception of *Snow in August* and its controversial use of Beijing opera style. A balanced representation of the promise and problems of *Snow in August* would save the unsuspecting and nonspecialist readers from missing an interesting part of the history of a complex and provocative play. Nonetheless, this compact translation of a single play with a brief introduction is both portable and useful.

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**VISIONS FOR THE MASSES: CHINESE SHADOW PLAYS FROM SHAANXI AND SHANXI.** By Fan Pen Li Chen. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University East Asia Program, 2004. 284 pp. Paper \$24.00.

Many years ago, I was presented with a small collection of translucent Chinese shadow figures. Contemplating the detail of one especially magnificent scenic piece, a scholar's study, I became fascinated by its intricate carving and rich, saturated colors, still vibrant after many, many years. As my interest in Chinese shadow puppets grew, I became frustrated by my inability to locate scripts in translation. Those that I first encountered were short sketches or excerpted scenes, presented with minimal commentary or notation. Most anthologies are now out of print, with the exception of Sven Broman's *Chinese Shadow Theatre Libretti* (Bangkok: White Orchid, 1994), which is beautifully illustrated with color photographs of figures, set pieces, and reproductions of the original Chinese pages. But it is intended for a general audience, with a brief introduction and only sporadic footnotes. Fan Pen Li Chen's translation