**Review of stage@leedstouring, *The Sun is Not for Us***

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**Adele Lee (University of Greenwich)**

Elegant, understated and deeply moving, *The Sun is Not for Us* condenses and weaves together four plays by the oft-hailed ‘father of modern Chinese drama (huàjù)’, Cao Yu:*Thunderstorm* (*Leiyu*, 1933), *Sunrise* (*Richu*, 1936), *The Wilderness* (*Yuanya*, 1937) and *The Family* (*Jiā*, 1941). All of these dramas are primarily concerned with issues of domestic abuse and oppression and with the relationship between the individual and society. Particular attention in *The Sun is Not for Us*though is given to the fate of Yu’s female characters who are bound, both figuratively and literally, by the strictures of patriarchy and feudalism. The performance opens, poignantly, with the hideous image of ‘lotus feet’ – the name ironically given to the bound and therefore deformed feet of Chinese women. In this sense, the production is a feminist adaptation of Yu’s works, and draws attention tothe May Fourth intellectual’s ‘sympathetic interest in the fate of women [and the poor] in modern China’ (Denton, 449).The writer once said,

‘I very rarely depict a female villain. I have great sympathy for the fairer sex. Almost all my women characters are more or less sympathetic… I'm a great supporter of Women's Lib!’ (quoted inMao Dun, 50).

It cannot but be significant that Cao Yu also frequently played female roles during his years as an actor, earning him the title ‘flower of the Nankai drama troupe’.

The women in *The Sun is Not for Us* are all victims to varying degrees,and often deceived, deserted and destroyed by the men in their lives: Bailu (originally from *Sunrise*) is compelled, by both her rejection at the hands of her lover and her desire for fun and material wealth, to become a courtesan; Fanyi (*Thunderstorm*) is seduced by her stepson and goes insane when he falls in love with the family maid who turns out to be his own sister; and Jinzi (*The Wilderness*) is mistreated by her mother-in-law, trapped in a loveless marriage, and pays dearly for eloping with her former lover. It was ambitious, however, to imagine this amount of drama could be crammed into the space of one hour (or indeed one play) and the main shortcoming of this production is that it is simply too fast-paced. As a result, it is easy to become disoriented and difficult, particularly for those unfamiliar with Cao Yu’s *oeuvre*, to extract one story from another. Then again, history is a confusing jumble of events and cacophony of voices and the fact none of the women in *The Sun is Not for Us* are granted enough stage time to develop fully their individual plights and personalities is quite appropriate.[[1]](#footnote-1) By condensing the action, *The Sun is Not for Us* serves to demonstrate the ways in which women have/are deprived of the spotlight and rarely allowed the opportunity to shine. The production, intentionally or otherwise, effectively underlines the extent to which women in China have historically been subjugated and forced into the shadows: the practice of foot-binding, after all, literally prevented them from leaving the house.

Oddly, though, all the women in *The Sun is Not for Us* performed barefoot which implies a certain freedom of movement and slightly jars against the opening scene in which they are shown undergoing the painful process of foot-binding. Being without shoes, on the other hand, also serves to illustrate the extent to which women were confined to the home and did not socialise outside of its parameters. In addition to being barefoot the women were attired in plain, white dresses making them appear humble, innocent and almost spectre-like. One is tempted to think of them as hungry ghosts: half living, half dead, and constantly yearning for love and fulfilment. The dimly-lit stage, which lent the production the kind of mystical aura Cao Yu favoured in works like *The Wilderness*, as well as the soft and haunting music, added to the sense of the tragic heroines’ almost ethereal existence. The problem with representing female subordination and suffering, though, is that one always risks reproducing the victimisation of women. As Amy D. Dooling puts it, ‘how can a dramatist depict an exploited woman without inscribing her as passive and pitiful? For, representation will always involve reconfiguration or disfiguration at some level [thereby enacting a sort of "violence"]’(56).

This is as true of Cao Yu’s original work as it is of *The Sun is Not for Us* which, in its portrayal of female suffering runs the risk of inadvertently re-inscribing images of female pathos and disempowerment. Nevertheless, thetalented young actresses from the University of Leeds who embodied the parts did so with such conviction that they elicited as much admiration as they did sympathy from the audience. The cast as a whole, belonging to the stage@leedstouring theatre company which devised the production under the auspices of professional director, David Jiang, should be praised for their onstage rapport, naturalistic acting style and ability to play multiple parts (though the latter unfortunately contributed somewhat to the confusion, at times). This British, mainly Caucasian group also managed to play ‘Chinese characters’ without making an issue of it and without altering their performance or appearance to seem racially different.Their names and the occasional use of props such as Oriental fans and paper lanternswere the only generically ‘Chinese’ aspects of the production.

Opting for a sophisticated, minimalistic approach, the company clearly aimed and successfully managed to repackage Cao Yu for a global, twenty-first century audience as well as present his works as ‘universal’ or, at least, capturing something of the ‘human essence’. Thus *The Sun is Not for Us*can be regarded as a transcultural object in the sense that it seems to transcend limited nationalism and is

‘constituted through the bridging of several cultures more or less radically separated in time and space, by borrowing themes, forms, ideologies, etc. from various cultures’ (Roubine quoted in Pavis, 6).

This is apt given the wonderfully intertextual nature of Cao Yu’s drama and the fact many of his plays are rich tapestries already threaded with transnational/transtemporal themes and motifs from Aristotle, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill, Shakespeare and traditional Peking opera (*jingju*). By subtly mixing and matching theatrical conventions, including dance and shadow theatre, setting the action in an indeterminate time and place (with the exception of the opening scene),and keeping the production relatively free of Oriental flourishes, the company successfully subscribed to the transcultural aesthetic of Yu himself.

What is particularly refreshing and timely about *The Sun is Not for Us*, of course, is the fact that it isbased on the works of a renowned Chinese playwright and performed by a British theatre group. For, while we have all become fairly familiar with Chinese versions of Western Classics, with stage adaptions of Shakespeare’s works, to take an obvious example, by East Asian companies,forming a staple on the international theatre festival scene, rarely has the exchange worked in the reverse direction and most people in the Anglophone world still struggle to name more than a handful of canonical Chinese writers. To see a group of British students appreciate and actively engage with Cao Yu was a welcome change, suggesting that the global cultural axis is indeed tilting evermore eastward. The project, initiated by Yu’s stepdaughter, Ruru Li, also falls in line with theBritish government-backed drive to increase the number of young people in the UK either studying Chinese culture or taking courses in China. Hopefully, then, *The Sun is Not for Us* marks the start of many more such collaborations in the future.

**Works Cited**

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1. Cao Yu himself, by ‘using the trope of female emancipation as a signifier for the emancipation of the individual’, may in fact have ‘stripped women of their unique identity and subjectivity’ (Denton, 449). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)