



**DREAMLAND:** An immersive bilingual theatre experience inspired by the works of Chinese playwright and poet Tang Xianzu and the works of Lewis Carroll.

**DREAMLAND** an introduction by Steve Ansell (Artistic Director Stage@leeds)

I started working on DREAMLAND in 2017 but the seeds of the production started much earlier. In 2015 I started work on 'A Midsummer Night's DREAMING Under the Southern Bough' a project commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Deaths of both William Shakespeare and Chinese writer Tang Xianzu. This was the first time I had been introduced to Tang Xianzu's work. To mark this anniversary we decided that an international collaborative project involving artists, academics and students from the UK and China could highlight the work of Tang Xianzu (who was barely known outside of China) and generate exciting creative and research opportunities whilst providing a foundation for intercultural study. A group of students from the University of Leeds, under my direction; and a group of students from Beijing under the direction of Professor Li Jun from the University of International Business and Economics embarked on a joint project around the theme of dreams that saw English students performing a contemporary adaptation of the work of Tang Xianzu and Chinese students performing a contemporary adaptation of the work of William Shakespeare. Both shows were presented as a single evening's entertainment in Leeds, Edinburgh, Shanghai and Beijing.

At the start of the project I hoped to achieve three things:

1. To share the work of Tang Xianzu to a western audience unfamiliar with his work'
2. To create an environment where students from the UK and China could work together in a creative and supportive environment
3. To create a piece of theatre that was bilingual.

On points one and two 'To share the work of Tang Xianzu to a western audience unfamiliar with his work' and 'To create an environment where students from the UK and China could work together in a creative and supportive environment' I think we were successful but on point three 'To create a piece of theatre that was bilingual' we fared far less well. 'DREAMING under the Southern Bough' used English as a main language with some characters speaking in Mandarin. It was clear during our tour in China that without surtitles an audience of Mandarin only speakers would have struggled to understand the majority of the narrative.

I returned from China at the end of the project feeling conflicted. I had just been involved with an incredible theatrical experience that I was hugely proud of but I also still felt a nagging sense that there was unfinished business. DREAMING Under the Southern Bough had been great success but it didn't achieve all its goals and from my perspective it didn't achieve the goal that was most important to me – bilingual theatre. I once again found myself thinking 'How can we tour theatre internationally and share our stories if language remains a barrier'.

DREAMLAND was conceived and is being developed at all stages as a piece of bilingual theatre. In 2018 an excerpt (one scene) of an early draft of DREAMLAND was presented at Newcastle University at a colloquium on Translation. The aim of this presentation was to see if audiences could engage with a bilingual script as English speakers, as Mandarin speakers and as bilingual speakers and each receive the same narrative and emotional message. The presentation was well received with the immersive elements of the presentation really heightening the audiences connection to the work, however, there was also a feeling that some of the constraints imposed by a dual language piece might hinder the flow and emotional impact of the work across a full show.

Tang Xianzu wrote poems and Chinese Opera. For Tang, verse, music and movement were central to his work. One of the things missing from our DREAMING Under the Southern Bough was the musicality, lyricism and movement associated with Tangs original form. For me this is the key to creating a new Bilingual Theatre/performance style. Two differently spoken languages augmented by the universal languages of music and movement will be combined in an immersive environment to create a theatrical world that can be accessed and enjoyed whether you speak Mandarin, English or both.

In July 2019 I invited multi-instrumentalist Zenghui Qiu and composer and folk musician Marcus Hill to stage@leeds for two days of musical experimentation to see if Chinese Traditional instrumentation and form could be combined with traditional western folk instrumentation. The results were very exciting both in terms of what we achieved but also as a starting point for what else might be possible by embracing other musical and movement forms from both cultures.

DREAMLAND is still very much in the early stages of development but the work done so far with the support of the Staging China network has allowed us to test and prove the basic concept. The next stage of development will be to bring together a creative team from the UK and China to look at how dance, music and the spoken word can be combined to deliver a singular message in two languages.