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## Deep challenge

Ronald Gilliam directs the unconventional 'Nocturnal Wanderer'

By John Berger

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One of the University of Hawaii at Manoa's most important contributions to Oahu's broad and vibrant theater scene is presenting works by major playwrights that might otherwise never be seen here. The university delivers again this weekend with director Ronald Gilliam's production of Gao Xingjian's "Nocturnal Wanderer."



COURTESY RONALD GILLIAM / KENNEDY THEATRE  
Michelle Boudreau plays a prostitute seducing a sleepwalker, played by Nicolas Atiburcio, in "Nocturnal Wanderer."

Gilliam admits that the work is challenging -- so much so that he'd like to survey the audience after each performance to get individual reactions -- but in the absence of one-on-one feedback, he hopes Honolulu will enjoy Gao's unconventional "rapid, high-paced" work as much as he does.

"The play itself is quite deep; it has many issues that it addresses," Gilliam said last week.

"Deep" need not be taken as "difficult to understand," Gilliam added. Previous exposure to Gao's work or contemporary Chinese theater in general isn't necessary to appreciate some of the main issues, "especially the spiritual issues -- man's relationship with woman (and) man's relationship with himself."

"It appears very abstract on the surface level, but there are key elements that I think appeal to wider audiences, and I want to share that with Honolulu," he said.

If experience counts for anything, Honolulu audiences are in good hands. Gilliam directed a full-length production of another Gao play, "Between Life and Death," at Butler University in 2003.

"My undergraduate honors thesis was on presenting Chinese theater to Western audiences," he said. "(Gao) has three plays that are very similar -- 'Between Life and Death,' 'Nocturnal Wanderer' and 'Dialogue and Rebuttal.'

"They all involve one central character with supporting characters that are either

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manifestations of that person's dreams or just elements of the main character."

"Wanderer" revolves around an unnamed man whose nocturnal excursions bring him in contact with a prostitute, a thug and a ruffian. Gao has described the play as "a nightmare in three short acts."

Gilliam said the nameless man "represents mankind and the choices that we make."

There is no intermission.

Gao Xingjian was born in China in 1940, grew to adulthood amid the chaos of the "Great Leap Forward" and was forced to work as a peasant in a rural commune during the Cultural Revolution. He was eventually allowed to return to Beijing, and was later permitted to leave the People's Republic permanently.

Gao's works -- novels and poetry as well as plays -- were banned following the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Eight years later he was granted French citizenship. In 2000 he received the Nobel Prize in Literature.

One highly unusual element in "Wanderer" is that the characters refer to themselves in the second person -- as "you" rather than "I." Gilliam said that unconventional device reflects Gao's belief in the importance of "tripartating" the character.

"The actor on stage should be the actor, just a normal human being, but he should also be in the character, and he should also be the actor commenting on the character," he said. "The (use of the word) 'you' forces the actor to go in and out of character naturally, and to organically get attached to the moments that he would naturally be attached to instead of forcing (the attachment)."

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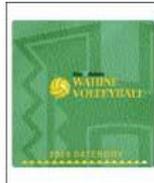
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