

# honoluluadvertiser.com

Posted on: Wednesday, February 10, 2010

## 'White Snake' a glimpse of another world

*Although in English, it's still Chinese in pace and inflection*

By Joseph T. Rozmiarek  
Special to The Advertiser

It seems that when you're immortal, you have time on your hands and a hankering to see what it's like to be human. The experience usually causes trouble and pain.

That's the underlying conceit in "The White Snake," a Beijing opera being produced for the first time in English at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa. The plot arises from oral history and has enjoyed many variations, but — as Chinese operas go — this 50-year-old version is fairly recent.

In it, White Snake takes human form and falls in love with Xu Xian, a handsome young man. Although he proves to be inconstant and something of a coward, their love is true. But — since the line between immortal spirit and demon is open to wide interpretation — White Snake is pursued by a powerful monk and defended by her sister Green Snake.

The production culminates a six-month training period for 60 university students who have been learning performance technique from Chinese master artists. English dialogue is intoned in traditional style, and requires sharp listening. Lyrics to the more difficult arias are projected on screens at the sides of the stage, where changes in scene and locale are also noted.

The three central roles are each split among four

performers during the same performance, with costume cues and a continuing action line to keep us on track.

However, the intoned domestic melodrama is played out at a tedious pace for Western audiences. Fortunately, there are enough stylized action sequences to add variety and keep the story perked up. Color, movement, and sound dominate these big scenes and are the strong points in the production.

One might expect red to dominate in a Chinese opera, but set designer Joseph Dodd designs against stereotype with a bare stage awash in greens and blues, with spare and icy white cutouts of clouds and pagodas that fly in and out to provide backdrops.

Costumes are coordinated to their wearers and range from cool but sparkly whites and greens for the central characters to startling red and gold for the avenging monk and his devilish lieutenant. Instead of the expected black pajamas, the stage hands wear pristine white.

Color and movement blend in the spectacle scenes where clashing armies meet in stylized combat, flinging spears and performing acrobatics in controlled choreography. A chorus carrying banners with a wave motif creates a

Advertisement

**BE A PART OF HISTORY**  
Follow the 2010 Winter Games

View photo galleries, blogs, instant results, video reports and more.

**vancouver**

**USA TODAY**  
usatoday.com

[CLICK HERE](#)

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

# honoluluadvertiser.com

surging flood, later swapping them for fans trailing red and yellow fabric to create an engulfing fire.

A sizeable orchestra is corralled at stage left, adding strings, percussion and wind instruments to create an exotic and often atonal underscore to the action.

While it offers a lot to see and hear, understand that "The White Snake" is not for the casual or undisciplined audience. But, if you are willing to surrender to its conventions and pace, it can offer a window into another world.

*Joseph T. Rozmiarek has been reviewing Hawai'i theater since 1973.,/i>*

Advertisement

**BE A PART OF HISTORY**  
Follow the 2010 Winter Games

View photo galleries, blogs, instant results, video reports and more.

**vancouver**

**USA TODAY**  
usatoday.com

[CLICK HERE](#)

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™