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Love and the snake

3 actors playing the same role bring life to a traditional story about love, Beijing opera style

By **John Berger**

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Feb 05, 2010

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A basic requirement for any encounter with theater is being willing to accept what we see as "real" even though we know it is only a representation of reality -- that performers who "die" are not really dead, and so on.



COURTESY DAVID BEALES

Michelle Boudreau, left, is one of three actors sharing the role of the White Snake in the University of Hawaii-Manoa's Beijing opera production. Meg Thiel plays the Green Snake.

With that as a starting point, it might not be that much to ask of an audience to accept the sight of three people of various sizes and genders playing the title role in the UH-Manoa's Beijing opera production of "The White Snake."

Michelle Boudreau is the second snake in the show.

"We're all completely different sizes, we all look different and the third white snake is actually a male, so there's going to definitely be a lot of diversity, but I kind of see it as a good thing," she said during a quick phone call last Friday. "It might seem a little weird, especially if the audience isn't familiar with it ... but I think each person who plays a part in a triple-cast role, they each bring something very special to the character. I think it works out in the end."

Most audiences will see Boudreau sharing the role with Elisa Diehl and Sami Akuna. Diehl appears in scenes 1, 2 and 4; Boudreau, in scenes 5, 7 and 8; and Akuna, in scenes 10 through 12. Jillian Blakkan-Strauss, previously seen in the Kennedy Theatre Main Stage production of "The Homecoming" in November, is officially Diehl's understudy but is expected to also get some stage time during the run.

'THE WHITE SNAKE'

Where: Kennedy Theatre, University of Hawaii-Manoa

When: 8 p.m. today; continues at 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through Feb. 14

Cost: \$22 general admission; \$20 for seniors, military and UH faculty/staff; \$15 for students; \$5 for UH-Manoa students

Info: 956-7655 or visit www.etickehawaii.com

Web site: www.hawaii.edu/kennedy

The story is one of many about a love affair between a mortal man and a beautiful woman who is, in fact, a supernatural being. Some versions position the conflict as being between the snake spirit and someone who is trying to save the man's soul from the snake. In others the snake's motives are legitimately romantic, and the couple is the subject of attacks by malevolent humans or supernatural beings with other agendas.

Boudreau describes the story as "a little strange at first if you're not familiar with the style, but I think it's a really beautiful story."

THE KENNEDY THEATRE production is the latest in a series of fully costumed English language Beijing operas to be presented there. The original Chinese script was translated by UH professor/production director Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak and Hui-Mei Chang for what will be the world-premiere run of the English-language production.

Boudreau trained for six months with visiting Chinese instructors to acquire the skills necessary for the dance sequences and combat scenes in "The White Snake" while also mastering the delivery of English-language dialogue in cadences and inflections representative of the original Chinese style.

Each member of the cast also applies his or her own stage makeup according to the precise traditions of Beijing opera. At first the process took Boudreau "at least an hour" to complete.

Now it takes no more than 45 minutes, sometimes less, although getting "every little nuance" right is more important than speed.

"It gets easier when you do it every day," she said. "We've been doing dress rehearsals for a while so we've all gotten pretty good at putting on the makeup. Once you get the hang of it, it goes by quicker."

Of all the skills she had to master, Boudreau said stage combat techniques were the most fun. "I've really enjoyed learning to fight in the jingju style. It's very interesting. There are a lot of different components (in jingju). There's singing, there's specific movement styles, but the most enjoyable overall has been learning how to use weapons like spears and swords. It's very fun."

"There's a term that the Chinese teachers use that means 'persevere,' and I think throughout this whole process we've done that," she said.

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