

# UC Riverside

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Snow In Midsummer Production

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SNOW IN MIDSUMMER PRODUCTION

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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University Honors  
University of California Riverside

APPROVED

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## ABSTRACT

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Snow In Midsummer Production

*Snow In Midsummer* is a 13th century Classical Chinese Drama by Guan Hanqing that was recently adapted into a contemporary piece by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig. This production is a University Honors Capstone Project led by Lillyanna Lopez featuring a UCR Asian undergraduate and graduate student cast and complete student-led crew. Performing this play gives representation to Chinese and queer communities whilst highlighting female empowerment. Acting as the Executive Director, Producer, and Production Manager, my vision when creating the world was of a contemporary horror piece which researches how student based creative thought can come together to produce a truly bold and historical undertaking. My message to the audience is rooted in the textual quote, “Men in this town were born with mouths that can right wrongs with a few words. Why are you too timid to speak?” This powerful question I hope to ask the audience. I want to use the stage to reflect upon the male domination of power in the world and the injustice rooted in our current political system alongside the commentary that large problems like Climate Change tend to be purposely ignored regardless of the catastrophic effects. Audience members should reflect on their own abilities to right wrongs in future situations in which they have the power to fight. There are two performances of this production occurring in Winter Quarter. Orally, I presented my research findings post-production via a Creative Research Production based discussion at the Undergraduate Research Symposium this Spring.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research piece was supported by a variety of interdisciplinary individuals associated and nonassociated with the University of California Riverside. Firstly, I would like to honor the financial contributors to this production, without whom we would not have been able to produce as large a student production as was completed-marking a historical feat within the performing arts at UCR. Financial supporters include the Chancellor's Research Fellowship, the Chancellor's Performance Award, the LGBTQ+ Resource Center with the Highlander Empowerment Referendum, and post-production the University Honors Excellence in Research Scholarship. Secondly, I would like to recognize the generous donors to this performance with the distributions collected via GOFUNDME include Merlene Campbell, Sara Lara, Maksil Lorenzo, Bella Merlin, Robin Russin, and two anonymous philanthropists. Thirdly, I would like to highlight the academic and logistical backers of this work which include the University Honors, the UCR Theatre, Film, and Digital Production Department, and the UCR Dance Department. A special acknowledgement to the incredible aid provided by Gladis Herrera Berkowitz, Richard Cardullo, Brandon Jay, Jose Reynoso, Ben Tusher, Johnny Macias, Sara Cassaro, Kimberly Guerrero, and of course, to my marvelous faculty mentor, Donatella Galella. Additionally, I am exceptionally grateful to playwright Frances Ya Chu Cowhig for approving the license of this play to a student for the first time in history. Thank you to all the benefactors of *Snow In Midsummer*, we truly appreciate your support of STEAM research. Lastly, I want to credit my amazing cast and crew of interdepartmental students who all contributed phenomenal work to help to fully develop the research, vision, design, performance, and event of *Snow In Midsummer*. Every single one of them worked as professional researchers who elevated this piece to the historical achievement it is today.

## BEGINNING OF CAPSTONE

Becoming a researcher in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) was an incredible journey that the University Honors allowed me to pursue through their capstone project. Despite the Capstone project being a requirement for graduation with Honors, I knew as a Theatre, Film, and Digital Production student that I wanted to turn this research into an enormous event within the performing arts which could not only showcase my skills but also allow other talented individuals the opportunity to showcase their abilities. Winter quarter of 2022 began just as I was deciding what type of story I wanted to tell on stage for my Capstone.

This is when I met the phenomenal Professor Donatella Galella who introduced me to the play, *"Snow In Midsummer,"* by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig. Initially, I read this piece as part of my school work requirements for Professor Galella's course: Literature and the History of Theatre: The Elizabethan Period Through the Nineteenth Century. Upon encountering the text, I became enthralled with the story of Dou Yi, a ghost who haunts the industrial town of New Harmony after being unjustly framed and executed for the murder of public figurehead Master Zhang. Her wrath consumes the town via environmental rages of drought, dust storms, rain, and more. The play begins three years after Dou Yi's passing in which we follow a new family of two, Tianyun and little Fei Fei, who are new residents in New Harmony. It is Ghost Month, an important spiritual belief within Chinese culture where spirits of the deceased can return to the mortal world and Fei Fei has made a friend in the shadows who she calls, "The Snow Girl." Eventually, Tianyun, Fei Fei's mother, discovers this ghost's true identity as Dou Yi. Tianyun investigates the spirit's previous life associated with the Zhang family and reveals the truth of the tale to gain justice for Dou Yi which saves her daughter and their town from the ghost's wrath. Immediately

when I read this piece, I saw it as a traditional horror story. After sharing my take on the story in class, Professor Galella informed me that I had a unique vision for this work as it had never been performed as a contemporary horror story before.

In fact, this adaptation of *Snow In Midsummer* had only ever been performed four times in history as a classical Chinese drama. Additionally, the rights to perform this show have only ever been provided to mainstage theatres with extreme budgets which include: The Royal Shakespeare Company, The Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Classic Stage Company, and The Manhattan Theatre. The story of *Snow In Midsummer* is an adaptation of Guan Hanqing's play, *The Injustice to Dou Yi That Moved Heaven and Earth*. Guan Hanqing is one of China's first ever recorded playwrights in history. Much of his work in the thirteenth century, including *The Injustice to Dou Yi That Moved Heaven and Earth*, uses strong female characters that fight against the social and political norm of their time as well as emphasizes female empowerment. Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig developed the original piece as a version that entertains the same themes with a modern twist. Historically, both versions of this production have never been licensed to public institutions or performed by students. I had fallen in love with Cowhig's work and knew that this story combined with my unique telling of it was important art that needed to be researched. Producing *Snow In Midsummer* was an extremely significant feat for our university and the theater industry.

This play created a world that shows our human history. *Snow In Midsummer* was originally entertainment in the 13th century. Producing this story now showcases how the world has not changed since much as many themes and characters of this production are still applicable today. Also, this Chinese story was produced for primarily American student audiences which educates them about theatre outside of cis, white, male (english) playwrights and their

perspectives. Stories on American stages should be diverse and educate the masses on other beliefs, cultures, and practices. Regardless of its origin, *Snow In Midsummer* is a piece that connects all audience members together as human persons that strive for justice. The undergraduate and graduate storytellers contributing were diverse. My team and I told an old story that reconnects to the present as it revolved around characters who identified as queer, of minority (Asian) descent, and with female protagonists. By using theater as a medium to tell an important story like this allows hundreds of people to experience my research instead of limiting the scope of the piece.

Not only did I secure the license to produce *Snow In Midsummer* making history as the first student to ever have been granted the rights to its performance, but my team and I also broke the glass ceiling on what is considered ‘student performance’ and ‘research’ at this institution. I personally secured a total of eleven thousand dollars worth of funding from interdisciplinary sources around the university as support for my performative research. Utilizing a complete cast and crew of UCR students, we produced a professional full-fledged production with complete design and direction. Personally, I acted in the roles of producer, executive director, production manager, and primary researcher. Our pre-production work began in the summer of 2022 where my production team (including but not limited to all designers, stage management, marketing, TFDP staff, and Professor Donatella Galella) met via ZOOM to plan the concept of the show under my vision. Under my direction, all students operated to create this show as a contemporary mixture of Chinese culture with an American horror story twist. Main themes I wanted to highlight in the art was climate change and global warming (an aspect of Dou Yi’s power and wrath which the town ignores until it is too late), the unjust current political system between

gender identities, horror related to death, folklore spirits across cultures, and body horror specific to grotesque decay relating to human biology.

My hypothesis for my research was a question posed by Dou Yi to the audience. Before her unjust execution, she screams, “Men in this town were born with mouths that can right wrongs with a few words. Why are you too timid to speak?” This question resonates throughout the entire play and is the poetic idea that led the foundation of my direction and research. Every single person on this Earth has the power to right the wrongs they see by speaking up against injustice. Why do people hesitate to speak out and use the power of their voice when they know a wrong is being committed? This question was the key to the performative research I created alongside my production team of forty students.

Fall quarter of 2022, my team and I continued to develop the story and finalized all designs. At the end of the quarter, I held auditions and callbacks and cast eleven Asian American actors from departments all over the university. The following quarter, Winter 2023, the entire team worked incredibly hard in our nine weeks of rehearsal (equating to a total of thirty six days of work not including performance dates). During this time, there were seven production meetings with the design team as their concepts became reality as we transitioned into the build phase of the show. All design elements that were not loaned by the TFDP department were crafted by students specifically for this project. For example, the moving walls for the set were built from the ground up by the set designer, technical director, and our team of carpenters and artists, all costumes were hand selected and tailored by the costume designer, and all soundscapes were original pieces created by the sound designer. These are just a few instances of the dedicated work that my entire student led team accomplished within only a few weeks time. Also, the entire cast had a total of three days of professional Chinese Dragon Dance rehearsal



with the use of legitimate Dragon Dance puppet under choreographer Brandon Jay. There were a total of one week of technical rehearsal, dress rehearsal, and at the end of the week were two grand performances. Our run consisted of two show dates, March 10th and 11th, in which we made UCR history selling out every seat within the ARTS Studio Theatre with lines of over four hundred guests requesting access to view the research.

Both nights of performance, I behaved as a researcher within the audience and psychologically analyzed guest's real time reactions to the piece. The unprecedented reaction of the public inspired an overwhelming appreciation for art and STEAM research. Guests encouraged longer performance runs and requested filmed copies of the story for their personal records. Data collection reflects that audience members from all walks of life stated their need for exposure to new stories, different cultures, minority representation on stage, and empowerment of female and LGBTQ+ relationships. The telling of this tale on a thrust stage with the horrific vision in place created an intense, blurred relationship between the frightful events on stage versus off stage. My question to the audience, who behaved as my research subjects, resonated deeply with them. Many people post-performance communicated to me that they felt a fight or flight effect when faced with dangerous or 'wrong' situations. Therefore, when they are 'too timid to speak,' it is out of personal fear of being shunned or hurt. Dou Yi calls them to action with this question and forces them to see the larger consequences of their silence which inspired many guests to want to behave more outspoken in difficult situations in the future.

After the final performance, my team and I came together for a final discussion about their experience working on the show. All cast and crew members were asked to submit an anonymous survey with their research responses to me as well. Every cast and crew member

apart of the production were researchers helping me to forge a new path for student art at UCR. Each one of them expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to work on a professional production with this particular story and the newfound chance to operate in different roles than initially available to students at the undergraduate level. All of them gained networking opportunities with each other and some have even developed personal, friendly relationships throughout the process. Everyone gained a new understanding and appreciation of the theatrical arts, professional experience, and additional skill sets. Being student led did lead to discoveries of improvement for future work investments in theatre as well. This production did have several technical elements that were tricky to master within the span of a two day technical rehearsal period.

On a personal note, I believe that I did great work considering the several titles I held for this piece alongside being a full time student with part time employment. Passion and dedication fueled my direction for this show and I am incredibly grateful to everyone who believed in my vision and was willing to work with me as an undergraduate student. Of course, post-production I know there are several ways I can improve myself as a theatrical team member. For example, in the future I plan to adjust my production calendar to better support my next show. Overall, *Snow In Midsummer* was an amazing experience. I am so glad I turned this requirement into a research opportunity for so many others. Being part of this show provided meaningful lessons in the performing arts which I will take with me post-graduation into my theatrical career.

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