



CENTRE: Director Dr Wang Xiaoying.
L-R: Assistant Directors Chen Tao and Felix Ching Ching Ho, former Black Swan Artistic Director Kate Cherry, Costume Designer Zhao Yan and Prop & Mask Designer Professor Zhang Huaxiang. Photo: Philip Gostelow

COLLABORATION

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

Black Swan State Theatre
Company
and
The National Theatre of China

In August 2016, Black Swan State Theatre Company presented a two week season of Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* marking the 25th anniversary of the Company. Black Swan collaborated with the Vice President of The National Theatre of China, bringing together Chinese and Australian designers and Western Australian actors in a unique production with cross-cultural opportunities.

THE PARTNERS

Black Swan State Theatre Company

Natalie Jenkins – Executive Director

Black Swan was established in July 1991 and in 2004, was given status as Western Australia's flagship theatre company and in 2008 transitioned to its current title. In 2011, Black Swan became a resident company in the State Theatre Centre of WA and in that same year, was the first Australian theatre company to broadcast to the regions a live stage performance.



The National Theatre of China

Dr Wang Xiaoying – Vice President

The National Theatre of China is the state performing arts organization of the People's Republic of China. It was founded in 2001, combining the former China National Youth Theatre and China National Experimental Theatre. The company is dedicated to exploring new development forms and areas of dramatic art, offering an open stage for talented artists.

How did the collaboration come about?

NJ: The groundwork for the collaboration can go back as far as 15 years or more, when Black Swan's then General Manager Duncan Ord visited China for the Shanghai Performing Arts Fair and introduced the Black Swan brand. In 2013, our previous Artistic Director, Kate Cherry, travelled to Beijing and Shanghai attending meetings facilitated by well-known philanthropist and passionate supporter of Australian Asia arts partnerships, Carrillo Gantner. Kate met with Dr Wang and they agreed to explore ways for both companies to work together and our international partnership was established.

DW: The reason I wanted to work with Black Swan and direct this play is because Bertolt Brecht got the inspiration from an ancient Chinese drama. At the beginning of the performance it would be stated that it was a story from ancient China. When I came to Australia for rehearsals, I wanted to bring with me some of the Chinese ways and Chinese styles.

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Why did you decide to get involved?

NJ: It is a strategic imperative to establish state economic and cultural links with Asia and one of Black Swan's strategic goals to establish global collaborations, breaking down the isolation of Perth and Western Australia.

China makes sense as it shares our time zone and there is a significant trading relationship between us. The Black Swan Board seeks, through strategic projects, to engage new audiences and our collaboration with the National Theatre of China acknowledges the large Mandarin speaking community in Perth. The collaboration provides audiences from both backgrounds an insight into each other's culture through theatre.

DW: It is a Chinese fable, adapted and written by a German playwright, brought to life in English by a Chinese director using a mixture of Western and Chinese techniques for an audience in Perth! After decades of trade, it's nice to be elevating the exchange between WA and China from the commercial to the cultural. I hope that people in Perth do not just know that China has Perth's steel. I hope that they want to know more about Chinese theatre, through this combining of Chinese theatre with Brecht's theatre.



What was involved in the working process and how did you share knowledge?

NJ: Brecht sits in Black Swan's established repertoire and there is a strong cross-cultural resonance. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* presented the opportunity for an international relationship that could provide a real fusion of Chinese and Australian culture. Our company is committed to engagement with Asia and this production offered the ideal opportunity to learn new work processes and aspects of cultural knowledge and practice.

DW: There was much shared knowledge. The cast was Australian, the score written by West Australian born composer Clint Bracknell and lighting design provided by Black Swan resident company member Mark Howett with traditional Chinese props and masks made by renowned Chinese costume designers Zhao Yan and Professor Zhang Huaxiang. The acclaimed Australian set designer Richard Roberts was engaged to bring the production to life. It was a true circle of cultural exchange.

What issues arose during the process that you hadn't expected or needed to be further negotiated during the

NJ: Getting to know your collaborator is vital. The working process on *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* taught us a great deal about the collaborative process – especially with the language and cultural differences. We were going to present the play in 2015 but we made the decision – wisely – that we needed more time to acknowledge each company's needs and processes.

Dr Wang made three visits to Perth, to get to know our company and we realised we would need an interpreter on hand at all times. Although in the same time zone, communication methods between our companies were different from Australian norms. For example, we generally use email as our primary form of communication, but our contacts at The National Theatre of China preferred phone and Chinese social media (WeChat).



DW: Originally, I wanted the cultural cacophony of the production to feature traditional Nyoongar songs. During the process, I found it too hard to conduct, so I changed it to Australian songs, not Aboriginal. The style and rhythm of the Australian Aboriginal singing has some distance to the style and rhythm that was needed for the stage in this production.

Also, it was important to me that audiences knew these were Australian actors and actresses. When the performance begins the actors and actresses wear ancient Chinese costumes and masks in front of the audiences, and then start the play. The masks are related to the facial masks in the traditional Chinese opera. Actors and actresses use costumes and masks to hide their Western faces. Sometimes they will take off the masks in front of the audiences, and let everyone see that this is a performance by Australians.

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Has the collaboration provided new avenues for future work?

NJ: We certainly hope to tour to China next year. Perth has sister city relationships with the cities of Chengdu and Nanjing. Western Australia has a sister state relationship with Hangzhou, which is located in the province of Zhejiang and is celebrating 30 years of that relationship in 2017. Next year marks the 45th anniversary of China-Australia diplomatic ties and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has also announced that Australia and China have agreed to designate 2017 as the Australia-China Year of Tourism. So the stars are aligned!

DW: I hope so. I've spent a lot of time researching Aboriginal traditional songs and storytelling and it's something I'd very much like to include in a future production. I hope there is such an opportunity and that there will be a chance to find a suitable play and work with Aboriginal artists.



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Has it given you new ways of working?

NJ: China has a network of impressive new cultural infrastructure and has a real desire to learn through international collaborations the best ways to use its state-of-the-art facilities. There is a lot of importance in connecting and learning to build skills and capacity. And the wonderful thing about collaborations such as this one is the benefits that flow through to all the participants, including new ways of working. For the actors, there was an exchange of skill sets with classes taken by assistant director Chen Tao in Peking Opera style of movement, wearing Chinese masks, manipulation of Chinese style puppets and stage craft.

DW: For me, the most interesting part in this play is for Australian actors and actresses to interpret the Chinese story with their own understanding. One of the actors asked me if he should perform in the way he understood the Chinese culture and I said that was exactly right. What I want is the Australian actors and actresses to perform from the angle they understand the story. I also needed to consider the right style for the performance. I did not want the actors and actresses to imitate the Chinese actors and actresses when playing this classical Chinese drama. It is absolutely not necessary, and if they did, the outcome would not be that good. The audiences can see the shadow of Chinese traditional opera in all the scenes.

Is collaboration always a good idea?

NJ: Always, but it requires a significant amount of preliminary work. In terms of our international collaboration with The National Theatre of China, we could never have done this alone. Our partners included - amongst many - the Playking Foundation and The Myer Foundation, Australia-China Business Council, the City of Perth, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (though the Australia-China Council), the Australia Council for the Arts, the Western Australian Department of Culture and the Arts, Singapore Airlines and KPMG – a mixture of government, business, philanthropic and community partners that all assisted. You need organisations and people that can open doors, provide contacts and advice and facilitate international relationships to achieve the best possible cultural and artistic outcomes.

DW: In the international world of commerce, there is a lot of collaboration. There should be more collaboration in the realm of culture, not only for getting people to know each other better but for other reasons as well.

A few examples: in 2014, I was invited to direct Italian opera *Il Trovatore* for an opera theatre "Opera Hedeland" in Denmark. With artists invited from around the world, I directed this opera using Chinese-style stage settings and characters' costume designs. The opera was very well received both by the public and the media of Denmark and neighbouring countries.

A number of years ago, I also had the pleasure of directing the Chinese theatre work *Butterfly Dream* for Yangtze Repertory Theatre, an Asian heritage theatre company in New York. This show was presented in both Chinese and English with artists from the Chinese community and local New Yorkers. It turned out to be a success too.

Currently, National Theatre of Greece approached me and discussions regarding me directing an ancient Greek tragedy in a Chinese way are being done.



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Have artists improved their career pathways and development as a result of the collaboration?

NJ: Absolutely. There were lots of challenges that took our artists, crew and admin team outside of their comfort zones. They learnt to work with a different cultural language and cultural program. Through this they learnt new techniques that will give them an additional edge in the industry.

DW: I think the artists' challenge would be to learn Chinese theatre and opera techniques so the play could be taken "home". I expect they will be quite excited to pursue these possibilities.

Did the collaboration develop a target audience?

NJ: It was a fantastic result for our audiences - people are still talking about it. It was a true fusion of Chinese and Australian culture involving traditional Chinese opera, music and comedy traditions. As a point of access we also were determined to provide surtitles in Mandarin which enhanced the appeal for the local Mandarin speaking community and, through our own box office tracking, a proportion of that community is continuing to engage with *Black Swan*. In fact, many of the Chinese audience for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* came to our co-production with Queensland Theatre of Molière's *Tartuffe*, in a new version by Justin Fleming in October this year.

DW: A lot of Chinese audience and theatre professionals have shown great interest in my article on the social media about *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Black Swan State Theatre Company. If performances by Black Swan in China can be realised as planned next year, I am pretty sure that quite a number of Chinese theatre-goers will go to see it.

All production images
by Philip Gostelow