

MAMA WHITE SNAKE by Wild Rice

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“Vanilla Vipers“

Reviewer: Isaac Tan

Performance: 12 December 2017

Having watched *Monkey Goes West* last year, I was excited to see where Wild Rice will take the pantomime.

Sadly with *Mama White Snake*, it has taken a nosedive.

Alfian Sa'at adapts the Chinese legend, *Madam White Snake*, by focusing the plot on the titular character's son, Meng who is frustrated with his sheltered life and wants to explore beyond the medical hall on Ermei Mountain. He meets Mimi, daughter of Fahai and Madam Ngiao. A relationship soon develops. When Mimi's parents find out about Meng, Fahai sees this as his chance for revenge.

An adaptation whereby the writer decides to spin a tale of his own, and relegate the original plot to a short scene, has the potential to cast a new light on a well-known tale. Unfortunately, *Mama White Snake* casts no such a light.

Apart from a tender scene between Mimi and Mama White Snake where they discuss love, none of the characters truly learn anything. The whole plot of Meng going on a journey seems much ado about nothing.

Additionally, the recurring message of a family comprising a boy and two women is no different from any other feels forced. At no point do we see the villagers object to Mama and Auntie Green Snake bringing up the boy alone. Furthermore, Fahai's hatred for the snake sisters — as portrayed in this version — does not stem from his opposition to them as a family unit.

Acting-wise, the performances from many of the actors are serviceable and entertaining, but generally unremarkable.

Andrew Marko constantly bumbles about as Meng, and barely reacts to the fact that his mother has been kidnapped. Despite having a decent vocal range, Cheryl Tan's Mimi is solely pitched as a girl-next-door with a tinge of feistiness. Although she sings a whole song about it, she does not enact the conflict and tension in her character when she is pressured by her parents to implicate Meng in their ploy for revenge.

Other than a different costume and a longer beard, Siti Khalijah's gruff voice and theatrics in portraying Fahai is no stretch from her portrayal of Sandy in *Monkey Goes West*. (Is there a term for women playing crusty men in pantomimes?)

Zelda Tatiana Ng, as Madam Ngiao, has the shortest end of the stick as her role appears to be a convenient invention to contrast both families. She does not have manoeuvre room apart from playing a stereotypical Cantonese woman. Her character's name is an odd choice, given that her dialogue is peppered with Cantonese and she is not exactly very "ngiao" (a Hokkien adjective meaning stingy or picky).

Naturally, the stars of the show are Glen Goei and Ivan Heng as Mama White Snake and Auntie Green Snake respectively. They carry their roles as effortlessly as they float around in their stunning scaly gowns. The banter between the sisters and their maternal instincts towards Meng are heartfelt, which keep the show afloat once the novelty of the stage effects, jokes, and cute children wear off.

While I am not saddened by Ivan Heng's Facebook post that there will not be an extension or a restaging any time soon, it raises an interesting question: where is our next generation of pantomime dames?

No younger actor springs to mind. As Heng and Goei prove in this production, a bloke in a frock does not a pantomime dame make.

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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

MAMA WHITE SNAKE by Wild Rice

24 November – 16 December 2017

Drama Centre Theatre

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Isaac started reviewing plays for the student publication, Kent Ridge Common, and later developed a serious interest in theatre criticism after taking a module at university. He is also an aspiring poet, and has a passion for acting and flamenco dancing.