

DANCING WITH SHAKESPEARE

A CONVERSATION WITH ERIKA CHONG SHUCH AND JONATHAN MOSCONE

BY PUBLICATIONS MANAGER STEFANIE KALEM

The week before rehearsals began, I sat down with Tempest director and Cal Shakes Artistic Director Jonathan Moscone and choreographer Erika Chong Shuch—who is also playing Ariel in the production—to discuss the differences and similarities between dance and theater, Prospero and Ariel as theater makers, and taking stuff apart to see how imperfectly you can put it back together.




Stefanie Kalem: When did you two first work together?

Erika Chong Shuch: On John Steinbeck's *The Pastures of Heaven* (Cal Shakes, 2010).

Jonathan Moscone: And then I saw her piece that she did at Intersection, *Sitting in a Circle*, and I was just in awe of her ability to make theater out of nothing—nothing except bodies and ideas and music. It seemed so organic, and because some of the dancers were, I thought, members of the audience, sometimes it seemed to come out of the audience. And there were all these very diverse bodies—age, size, height—all dressed like just regular folks—and they did some extraordinary, very emotive, and emotionally-based movement that seemed so natural.

I was so exhilarated, and I kind of wanted to get inside her brain. So I thought that the best way to do that was to have her come inside my brain and we'd both figure out *The Tempest* together.

I had originally thought of her to choreograph, but as it became a bigger and bigger idea, I thought that maybe she would be Ariel. I started to think that what I do as a director is not unlike what Prospero does, and what Ariel does is not unlike what I think Erika does: She does the actually beautiful thing; I just have the books, the "power" to demand the artist. But she is the real artist. And so I thought, that is a lovely and very real connection between us and the play. I asked her to choreograph and she said yes; and when I asked her to do Ariel, she said, "Sure, but don't you think I should audition, because I've never done Shakespeare before?"



ERIKA CHONG SHUCH'S
SITTING IN A CIRCLE,
PHOTO BY PAK HAN.

She does the actually beautiful thing; I just have the books, the “power” to demand the artist.

ECS: Never been in a play before. I've performed in dance theater work. I've been making and performing in my own work and I've performed for different companies, too. But it's movement-based work that has text in it.

JM: There are people who say to me, “Jon, your work is so choreographic at times.” And then I see your work and I think it's like theater.

ECS: But the fact that your work is so choreographic is what makes me interested in working with you. When I first started working for Jon as a choreographer, I thought his approach to directing was incredibly kinesthetic; he was working with the text as a choreographer might work with music—the way that he was building the shapes onstage and the way that he was connecting, so that the physicality was always inspired by a sense of intention, which is what I want to do with my own movement. I never want to have movement for the sake of movement. A movement that's not connected to some sort of deeper theatrical impulse doesn't satisfy me.

JM: The cathartic nature of *Sitting in a Circle* was so essentially theatrical to me that I felt that, if I can bring that into my work, maybe pull myself away a little bit from feeling like I'm being irresponsible to my role as director by becoming so choreographic—if I can break those lines down and work with someone who's done that so beautifully—it might free up my imagination and my capacity to take on this sort of really gnarly, beautiful, dark, multidisciplinary kind of play that Shakespeare wrote. There is dance in the play, there is song in the play, there are moons who are dancing in the play. It is not a straightforward play.

ECS: And in the same way that you're stretching out of your comfort zone, I love being able to really be part of the conversation with you about the whole play, just to be able to be around you as you're conceiving the work has been so exciting for me. When I'm making my own work, it's essentially starting from a vacuum: There's a series of images or there's a bunch of ideas that are only existing in my own imagination or in the

imaginings of my collaborators. But to have this structure, a play that has words, that feels like it's freeing up *my* imagination.

JM: Right, and for me, what has been difficult up until, I hope, this process, is that I have all these images and ideas in my head, and at some point I settle into a very traditional process of how to make a production: You find a world in which a play lives, you figure out who's playing what character, you figure out everyone's through-lines. And then all these ideas and images in my head start to fall away because they don't fit into how to tell the story of this play; one has to give over to the other, and of course the writing is more important.

But in this play, the story is so much about character. The plotlines are almost pulled out of a grab bag. How do we get rid of Trinculo and Stephano? Dogs! Plot is a very manipulable thing in *The Tempest*. Shakespeare just throws it around

very quickly so he can explore themes of aging and revenge and identity and growing old and letting go—all of these deeper things that are more character-driven. So as I put myself into this particular play I was able to imagine ways of telling the story that could work with the text in an organic way, where I didn't have to go, “This doesn't belong there, the text can only be there.” So there are times when the text is the primary thing, and there are times when the movement can work with the text, and there are times when the movement takes over. We need a world that allows all of those things to happen, and for us to traffic between those rooms freely and not think “I'm being an irresponsible director here,” or “I'm just creating such a meditation on the play that I'm not doing the play.” The point is to do the play, but it's how we do the play, right?

ECS: It's about creating a moment that allows one to feel a variety of feelings. It sounds so simplistic, but words allow us to feel things in a certain way; music allows us to feel things in a certain way; and movement allows us to feel things in a certain way.

JM: We're just expanding our vocabulary.

ECS: To have a world where we can move along that spectrum of feeling clearly is just about broadening that spectrum.

SK: I want to go back a little bit to you being in the production, Erika, and whether or not you have reservations about choreographing the show while playing Ariel.

ECS: I'm terrified right now (laughs).

SK: How are you approaching it?

ESC: My terror? I'm hiding it from Jon so he doesn't realize what he's gotten himself into.

SK: What are some of the ways you're hoping to use to find your way into the role?

ECS: First of all, I've always believed that choreographing something you're in is a really bad idea. But the thing that's a really good idea is doing that when you have a director, when you have somebody whose eye you completely trust. So I actually feel quite free; I feel that I can spout 10,000 ideas and I can try 10,000 things and it's not up to me to decide what's working or not. I really trust that Jon will find something that will work. It feels kind of like a playground where I get to mess around with a bunch of different toys and let him be the one to

say “yes,” “yes,” “no,” “no,” “no.”

SK: It's a little bit like having an editor.

ECS: Yes. There's also something about being inside of it that's allowing me to imagine the choreography differently. When I'm on the outside I'm imagining what something looks like; and when I'm imagining doing something I'm imagining what it feels like. So certain ideas that we've talked about, they sound really great when I imagine them from the outside but then when I imagine doing them, something might not feel right. So I'm being guided more by my own search for a kinesthetic honesty, more so because I'm guiding my own body through it, rather than just building it from the outside.

SK: Jon, have you directed this play before?

JM: No. I've never directed this play before. And I think choosing to do this with fewer actors and with an ensemble of real dancers... I mean, there is always the financial consideration of how to do these massive Shakespeare plays in our economy now, and there's also opportunity for finding a very personal doorway through which one can walk into the particular story. Shakespeare, being the largest storyteller in the world that I brook in, he carries so many stories within each play, it's impossible to do all of them. To do all of them is to read it, and to read it alone. And even then you're going to skip over parts of the play that you don't really attach to, and you're not going to hear a certain line. So we're always interpreting through our particular lens.

The lens through which I felt connected to this play is the relationship between Prospero and Ariel. That to me felt like the love story at the center of the play. Ariel is written in kind of an androgynous architecture, but it always felt to me that the relationship between Prospero and Ariel was a male and female relationship. The love that they share is so complex, somewhere between beautiful and dysfunctional at the same time, and one that feels mutually respectful while at the same time completely power-based. And it feels theatrical—Prospero feels like a director, she feels like an actor. And there are times when I thought, “she's his wife, she's sort of a specter of his wife,” who is never talked about in the play. But he lost her. He talks about her to Ferdinand: “You have one-third of what matters to me.” And it made me cry when I read that. I think that a big part of this is about letting go of death, of somebody who died. And that's my prism, that's my lens through which I see this play right now. The play has one of the most beautiful speeches about life ending, which has to do with plays ending at the same time. “We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep.”

There's no judgment as to any part of the story being less important, or even less interesting to the play on the page, but this is the one that connects to me. And I think it's OK for me to own that. We did *The Tempest* five years ago, and we'll do it again. And I hope that everyone brings their own particular response to it, the one that matters to them. I'm just trying to own that more as a director of Shakespeare than I have in the past, when I tried to do what matters to me, but do the entire play: Make sure every story is told. And it's a much more complicated road for me that way. I've always let a lot of other directors have more fun with their interpretations, and I have more of a duty to make the play. I try to do it in a way that feels more complete because I'm an Artistic Director; so I thought that maybe, as an Artistic Director, I can give myself that permission, and bring somebody on like Erika to hold my hand, and make it move and carry me on in a way that ultimately respects Shakespeare deeply without trying to get approval from him.

So in a way it's about trying to have a more full relationship with Shakespeare, to have one in which I am not the student and he is the master, or he is the father and I am the son. So maybe my play *Ghost Light* had something to do with letting go of that part of it, and that's where I'm now, that's why I'm doing this play this way.

ECS: I love that Jon is adventurous in his thinking. Personally, it's just exciting to be around that. Because we always talk and write and try to convince ourselves that we're taking artistic risks, but how often do we really do that? It takes a lot of muscle to pull yourselves out of your habits. So I really admire him for doing that, and I just think it's important in a larger way, that people in big important theaters take big important risks. It feels like that's what has to happen in order for the form to evolve into something more relevant: We need to figure out how to get messy; we need to tear stuff apart and risk not being able to put them back together in order for our work to live in new way, to breathe in a new way. There's a lot of honest evaluation in terms of what Cal Shakes and the work that comes here can do. I love that we see that in an organizational way, and then we also see it in a very personal way, in terms of how Jon is thinking about this play.

JM: I do that all the time with the staff, and there are times when they want me to stop doing that. So now I'm going to join them, and challenge the way I do Shakespeare. The first Shakespeare I ever did was *Twelfth Night*, and I had no assumptions. I had song and dance all through that thing. And now I'm finding a new way of having a great relationship with Shakespeare, which can regenerate itself so many ways

and so many times if you tear it apart, and aren't afraid that it can't come back together perfectly. Shakespeare is wonderfully messy and it's never going to be perfect: The only perfect thing about Shakespeare is what's bound inside of the book with the book cover. Everything else is a mistake because it's human. So let's just let that be human, and let everybody share in that and celebrate that and not judge it because it's not perfect. Judge it if feels real and it connects, judge it if it doesn't, judge it if it delights and surprises you. When I saw Erika's play, I didn't know what it was: dance, dance theater, what ... and I didn't care. It was an hour and half of joy, which was all I needed. It was good for me.

SK: *Tempest* is a great piece for tearing things up and put them back together, considering the storm and the shipwreck.

JM: That's right.

ECS: I've never been a Shakespeare person, so it's been really amazing to realize how simple the story is. There's all this assumption about Shakespeare being complicated and intellectual, and you have to have gone to college to understand it. This is the first Shakespeare play that I've ever studied, and there are so many layers to study; then underneath all those layers are just simple relationships, these painful loves, painful wanting. And we've been talking about theater that has 5,000 things that you can do with rope—building a theater that's based on tricks. It feels like if we can distill all of that research and all of that study and all of those tricks to just arrive at these simple, painful, magnetic occurrences...that would make me really happy.