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A Cursed Queen's Swan Song : Retelling A Fairy Tale in Crafting 900 Years

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A Cursed Queen's Swan Song : Retelling A Fairy Tale in Crafting *900 Years*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

In

Theatre and Dance (Playwriting)

By

Preston Choi

Committee in charge:

Professor Naomi Iizuka, Chair
Professor Veronica Shubayev
Professor Vanessa Stalling
Professor Deborah Stein

2023

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The Thesis of Preston Choi is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego
2023

DEDICATION

This play is dedicated to my family.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Cursed Queen's Swan Song : Retelling A Fairy Tale in Crafting *900 Years*

By

Preston Choi

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Playwriting)

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Naomi Iizuka, Chair

900 Years serves as a theatrical adaptation of an Irish fairytale known as *The Children of Lir*. A wicked step-mother fails to murder her step-children/nieces and nephews and instead curses them to be swans for nine hundred years. Discovered by the king she in turn is cursed to be a demon for eternity. The swan children endure nine hundred years of suffering as their father and kingdom fall into ruin. When the curse is finally broken the children die from old age, but they are baptized, their souls departing to heaven. The original story operates as a proselytizing moral tale from post-Christianisation 14th century Ireland, avoiding a total tragedy by encouraging

conversion with hopes of paradise after death to make up for the day to day suffering of life. This play serves as my attempt to subvert the trope of the wicked step-mother by centering Aoife and her fate in the narrative, critique the Christianisation of Irish folklore, and to tackle the personal playwrighting challenge of adapting a fairytale into a contemporary theatrical narrative.

The choice of where to depart and where to stay true to the original story stayed a continuous exercise from rough draft to production. The straying sprang from straightforward interrogation of the original story as told; once Aoife is cursed to be a demon of the air for eternity she is never heard of again, but what if we did know what happened to her? New but congruent events between the major tent poles were built in, while major ones were revised to offer a balance between the original perspective and this play's characterization of Aoife. In addition to plot exploration, the original tone is poetically tragic, to which I endeavored to find moments to juxtapose humor, dark comedy, and anachronistic language to provide theatrical levity and carve deeper insights and specific perspectives on family and suffering into mostly flat trope characters while still staying true to the fairy tale's given circumstances.

Searching for contemporary resonance, I focused on the major theme of being cursed. Curses are at the core of the play: to be a swan, to be a demon, to be kept out of the afterlife, to be a peasant, to lose your history, to lose your family, to lose your children, to be alone. The magical suffering gives way to grief innate to the human experience. The play too starts broadly in the genre of fairy tale and over time becomes specific to the history of Catholicism and colonization in Ireland as Aoife's punishment continues on into the fairy deficient 21st century. The play begins with Aoife telling us a "once upon a time..." and ends with her beginning the tale once

more but telling it to Hag's Descendant, the only fairy tale remnant being the future generations of the peasants from her past. The invention of Hag/Hag's Great Great Granddaughter/Hag's Descendant, not previously in the story, offers a populist perspective in this narrative centered on a royal family that, while cursed, are still proponents of monarchy. It is the real people, the "peasants", who must live with the consequences of the fairy tale kings and queens once the magic is long gone, those who will tell the stories, and those who will listen.