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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Silence and Screams: Building the Horrific World of *Hells Canyon*

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

in

Theatre and Dance (Playwriting)

by

Nicole Keiko Green

Committee in charge:

Professor Naomi Iizuka, Chair
Professor Marisa Abrajano
Professor Jennifer Chang
Professor Deborah Stein

2022

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University of California San Diego

2022

DEDICATION

Hells Canyon is dedicated to the thirty four unnamed Chinese men who were brutally murdered by a group of white men for their gold in 1887. I hope this play acts as a way to bring this long-forgotten story into the light.

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Finally, a very special thanks to my tiny family here in San Diego: MJ and Gus. You have kept me sane during a rollercoaster of a time both on and off campus. Thank you for reminding me to write from love and hope.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Silence and Screams: Building the Horrific World of *Hells Canyon*

by

Keiko Green

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Playwriting)

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Naomi Iizuka, Chair

My first instinct to write a horror play came from a superficial impulse. I wanted to capture the electricity of a roomful of strangers sweating, screaming, and giggling all together in a genre largely overlooked and underestimated by live theatre. I knew I wanted to write something that acknowledged tropes and homages from film yet fully took advantage of the magic of theatre. Unlike film, which moves from action to action to action, *Hells Canyon* lives in the inbetween moments. It lives in the dread leading up to a screaming outburst; It lives in the silent consequences.

Hells Canyon takes place in a single location, a rental cabin hidden atop a hill overlooking Snake River, where thirty four Chinese men were once brutally murdered and tossed aside in the name of gold. The play follows the story of Ariel, a seven months pregnant Chinese American woman, arriving to the cabin with a group of friends. Within a small cast of five, we have a series of complicated relationships: a surrogate mother and intended parents, brother and sister, ex-partners, and an indie rock band on the verge of implosion. The tension in these relationships are found in what is left unsaid.

Silence exists in the play on many levels. First, there is the musicality in the script itself. I had to discard my usual methods, structures, and software, so I could instead write in multiple columns, carefully placing each stage direction and piece of dialogue to create the perfect amount of chaotic action and dialogue that would immediately overwhelm Ariel and in turn, the audience. In rehearsals, we collaboratively found the balance of story-telling and chaos-building so we could ultimately build moments of rest even more complex than emotional dialogue.

The history behind the play also lives in silence. The victims of the Hells Canyon Massacre remain anonymous, yet we know the names of the murderers. We cannot say the victims' names or remember them in the same way. It is only by Ariel giving voice to these lost souls that anyone can find peace, which makes it imperative she find voice for herself. Over the course of the play, Ariel is consistently ignored and talked over by those around her. Ariel represents the silent rage that many BIPOC people feel and carry in their bodies; her rage is further fueled by the inherited trauma of the Chinese men murdered in Hells Canyon.

Screams contrast the silences of the play. Twins are brought into the world, one silent and one screaming. Screams interrupt potential moments of relaxation. Ariel gives voice to the screams of those long gone. Finally and most crucially, there are the joyful and fearful screams

of an audience enjoying horror, which act as an outlet for the tension within our bodies. When we have a vocal reaction, we are sharing a primal impulse and emotion with the rest of the room. By building in moments for vocal release, the audience is given an opportunity to connect and be in community with each other, something that we have been lacking in our pandemic-induced isolation over the last two years.