



Script for *StageWorks* Episode 1, by Katrin Redfern

I'm Katrin Redfern, and this is *StageWorks*. Today we're going to be examining *Chimerica*, a remarkably ambitious new play by Lucy Kirkwood that explores the fast-changing and complex relationship between the United States and China, and which recently transitioned from the Almeida Theatre to the West End.

Lucy Kirkwood's lightning-paced personal and political drama, which took six years to write, traces the twisting relationship between the East and West, starting in 1989 – the year the Berlin Wall came down – but also the year crowds of unarmed protesters taking part in pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square were gunned down by the military. The photograph of a lone Chinese man refusing to budge from the path of a tank became an iconic image: a David-and-Goliath symbol. But who was he and what happened to him? Kirkwood's epic play takes the form of a quest as a fictitious American photojournalist, Joe Schofield, embarks on a mission to find him. What follows has the grip of a thriller, but also throws up a host of provocative issues: the true nature of heroism; financial dependency and its effect on press freedom; the changing role and ethics of photojournalism; the inescapable ambiguity of images; and with idealism, ethics and compromise.

The word 'Chimerica' was originally coined by historian Niall Ferguson to describe the co-dependent relationship between trigger-happy America and control-freak China (or is that control-freak America and trigger-happy China). Anyway, here, Chimerica is a fragile web of shifting human relationships, which are severed by corporate greed, state cruelty, and selfish individualism, but still manage to achieve moments of connection.

The show's serious, witty, multi-layered meditation on the cultural contrasts and similarities brought out by the superpowers' co-dependency occasionally puts you in mind of the work of Robert Lepage, but there's more narrative drive here in the queststructure Kirkwood gives to her material. The pull-no-punches dialogue highlights the sharp differences, as well as the similarities, between the twin superpowers. In America, Joe's bolshie individualism as a photographer who records world events is ultimately celebrated even when he wrecks lives to get the story; in China, Zhang Lin, who has already suffered for his involvement in the Tiananmen protests, pays a heavy price for questioning Party information. The action zings between the two countries at a fast pace over three hours and creates a vivid picture of booming China, described as a country that "has gone from famine to Slim-Fast in one generation".

Kirkwood goes even further in examining the nature of capitalism in both countries. China may be open to Western investment and apparently enthralled by its products; at the same time, the character of Tessa, a market researcher working in China, points out in a brilliant speech to her clients that the only way into its markets is to understand

that China is a country that values the supremacy of its own culture.

Director Lyndsey Turner's astonishingly filmic production keeps the action driving forward through 39 scenes, and the splendid company brings an impressive array of performances – Stephen Moore compellingly conveys the charismatic recklessness and blinkered self-absorption of the photographer, Benedict Wong eloquently contrasts Zhang Lin's private grief and public defiance, and there is exemplary work from Claudie Blakeley as the sharp-tongued Tessa and Sean Gilder as a battered reporter.

And of special note, the kaleidoscopic nature of Kirkwood's play is perfectly expressed in Es Devlin's ground-breaking design of a rotating cube that manages to contain almost 40 set changes.

This technical brilliance is carried right through the lighting of Tim Lutkin, the sound design of Carolyn Downing and the video design of Finn Ross – Ross's excellent projections of black-and-white contact sheets are projected over the set, bearing the crossed out or reframed marks of the editor's red pen – a subtle reminder that a photograph is an opinion, not a simple record of the truth.

Now, on the minus side: transferring from the smaller Almeida theatre, the production suffers from a lack of intimacy. West End theatres were built like megaphones for heroic tour-de-force performances and extroverted productions – not this subtle, voyeuristic play-without-heroes, which you have to peer into to appreciate. Scene-by-scene, it's got the originality, intelligence, richness and humor that we've come to expect from the best HBO dramas. But it doesn't always have their entertainment factor, and although I had a large glass of wine during intermission, the second act sometimes lacked the thrills you need to keep you on the edge of your seat for over three hours.

I would also say that sometimes the play has a hard time deciding what's important (which is a lot like our time). And, the characters have a generally one-dimensional feel – you can't always tell what's motivating them. The Telegraph notes that the dialogue has a witty panache but I found it overly abrasive at times (I noticed this in Kirkwood's last play, *NSFW*).

All in all, this epic play brilliantly confronts huge global issues through vivid personal stories, which after all is what theatre does best – it has the extravagant scale and swagger of Lucy Prebble's *Enron*. However, there are a few themes too many and some elbow their way in awkwardly. Even so: this is a thoughtful, wonderfully ambitious drama that, in a world saturated with imagery, considers the truths behind one picture, and sends you out into the night with much more to think about than you had before.

So, catch *Chimerica* at the Harold Pinter Theatre while you can. And, I'd love to hear from you. Let's have a conversation – find us on Facebook, or follow us @StageWorks007 on Twitter. See you next time.

END CREDITS:

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