

Desdemona Chiang Brings the Bard's Truths to Today's Stage

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Cindy Im and Meme Garcia in Seattle Shakespeare Company's production of *Measure for Measure*. •
Photo by John Ulman

Survival was tough in Shakespeare's day, as it often can be today, and director Desdemona Chiang wants to bring that struggle to modern Seattle audiences with Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

"This is a play about a fucked-up place where people like you and me are trying to survive, and the morals we compromise while doing so," Chiang said. "It's gritty, ugly, but teeming with real life."

Chiang has been curious about Shakespeare since her earliest memories. "My interest in Shakespeare started as a young child, primarily for narcissistic reactions," she said. "I knew that my parents had named me after a Shakespeare play, so when I was nine, I picked up a copy of *Othello* from the library and tried to read it."

But this investigation didn't proceed easily. "The play was utterly incomprehensible to me at the time, and I always assumed that Shakespeare was a thing that smart Americans were supposed to understand," Chiang said. "So, as a culturally displaced Chinese immigrant kid growing up, I was determined to figure it out."



Desdemona Chiang. • Courtesy Photo

And figure it out she did, with an eye toward sharing Shakespeare with others. "As I found my way into a life in the theatre, it became apparent to me that the work of Shakespeare is meant for everyone (not just the educated or the elite), and I try to dispel any myths about accessibility or class when it comes to directing his plays."

Chiang has found links to today's social issues in many of Shakespeare's works, particularly her latest project. "Measure For Measure is most exemplary of this as (in my opinion) a populist and social justice play, written about and for the people and the harshness of civilian life in Vienna," she said. "There are no kings and queens here, no gardens, gossamer fairies, or ladies-in-waiting."

She is excited that the opportunity to direct this play arose at Seattle Shakespeare Company. "I was very lucky to have George Mount (SSC Artistic Director) attend a few shows I've directed in the past with Azeotrope (my company with Richard Nguyen Sloniker), and we've been talking about working together for a couple of years," Chiang said. "I've always wanted to direct *Measure For Measure*, and it's been 12 years since SSC produced the play, so it was the perfect fit."

A production of this magnitude entails a number of different elements.

“Shakespeare’s writing is about as good as it gets,” Chiang said. “The tough part is that for most people, it’s indecipherable on the page.”

This is where the director’s work begins, along with that of the artistic team. “It takes work and patience to break down the meaning, grammar, and syntax,” Chiang said. “But when those words are clear and alive in the bodies of skilled actors, they can express some of the most deeply held truths about human existence. You just can’t be lazy about it.”

And a crucial step in creating this translation from page to stage is casting the best actors available. “I find and cast people who look like the people that I see in my daily reality,” Chiang said. “That’s it.”

Concurrently, as director, Chiang also works with the design team. “This is all about design,” she said. “Measure For Measure largely vacillates between what is public and what is private.”

The play also contrasts these two concepts in what is typically considered public space. “Every scene takes place in a civic location,” she said. “We go from a courthouse to a street, to the brothels, to churches and prisons.”

Chiang credits her design team with a significant portion of the necessary translation of Shakespeare’s work for contemporary audiences. “Philip Lineau (scenic designer) has conceived a space that can be played in many formations,” she said.

“Andy Smith (lighting designer) and Evan Mosher (sound designer) use light and sound to carve out the distinct spaces that feel either interior or exterior,” she added. “And Christine Tschirgi (costume designer) has dressed our brilliant cast of 19 actors to cover a wide range of civilians and citizens.”

Chiang hopes that a broad spectrum of Seattle residents will find this play relevant and entertaining. “I think when all the pieces come together, it becomes quite transformative.”

‘Measure for Measure’ runs at Seattle Shakespeare Company from January 6 to February 1, at the Seattle Center House Center Theatre, 305 Harrison Street, Seattle. For tickets and more info, [click here](#).