

# WHAT DREAMS MAY COME

## URBAN APHRODITE'S MIGHTY THEATER AMBITIONS

BY TOM LEE

Since coming to Shanghai last year, director Ann James has been attempting to change up the city's expat theater scene. Having just secured a performance home on the third floor of Sasha's for her Urban Aphrodite company, she's looking ahead excitedly to a year jam-packed with the tragic, the comic and the titillating.

"There are these hurdles that we have to jump as far as moving into a more and more professional aspect for our theater. We're making those moves slowly but surely," she says, the fixed venue for her shows being one of the most recently ticked off items on her checklist.

To inaugurate the space, James is tackling a giant of a play: Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Though confined to just one setting and four characters, the piece looms large thanks to its visceral approach towards relationships and childbirth, constituting some of the stage's most disturbing scenes of domestic dysfunction.

Premiering in 1962, the original Broadway production won the Tony Award for Best Play, Best Actor and Best Actress; it was also set to claim the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, but was denied the accolade by the Pulitzer board because of its profanity and controversial depictions of sex.

No one-trick pony, James has already dabbled in a variety of genres, from one-act Tennessee Williams plays to Irish hostage drama *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, as well as a sold-out anti-Christmas double-bill. Looking ahead to future projects, she's already lined up Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* for May, while simultaneously organizing a glee club-style singing competition for charity in cooperation with local international schools.

Later in the year, there are plans to put on *The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Abridged)*, an ingenious parody of the Bard's oeuvre, and raucous, pastiche-driven musical *Five Course Love*.



Nicky Almasy

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Beyond the shows, James is hoping to employ her educational theater background to offer public workshops and develop a high-school theater festival.

Where many of Shanghai's expat theater companies plan and perform out of a noble desire to provide English speakers with entertainment, Urban Aphrodite is aiming to become a profitable business – a significant challenge considering the market, but James is passionate about her undertaking, in spite of the difficulties that come her way.

"In order for anything to be successful, hugely successful, you kind of have to have a vision," says James, "and you have to have a mission that you can always look to. In the middle of the night, when your stage didn't show up and somebody's banging on the door for their payment or whatever, you have to look at the vision and the mission."

One of the major obstacles facing drama companies in Shanghai is

a dearth of resources, a dilemma that James believes can be alleviated by creating a community that is more unified. To that end, she's trying to get the city's other troupes to participate in a website that would host play announcements, audition notices, ticket sales and other important information for all of the stage groups.

"Kind of a one-stop-shop portal for all things performing arts, English-language performing arts," she explains.

It's been slow going so far, especially since James and her team are, perhaps understandably, perceived as the upstart newcomers – Shanghai Repertory Theater and East West Theatre have been entertaining the city for far longer and have much more experience in how Shanghai's scene functions. Adding to this, some believe that oversaturation might mean everyone loses out by dividing audience numbers.

In maneuvering her way into the picture, James admits that she

may have stepped on some toes, but is keen to build bridges with Urban Aphrodite's peers.

"I think the biggest issue here, without sounding otherworldly, is that people feel very protective of what they have," says James. "In my mind, if we could open it up just a little more and share resources, it would be a stronger community. There's so many expats here that we're not tapping because everybody has their list and they're like, okay, that's my list."

Hearing the multitude of schemes on the table, it's hard not to question whether all the dreams might be just a tad over-ambitious. Robert Applegate, Urban Aphrodite's director of marketing, says that, even though he and James are sometimes giddily enthusiastic, this is counterweighted with sober discussions about feasibility.

"As much as we scream and say yes, yes, yes, we promised each other that we would then say, okay, do we really need this, does it match our vision?"

While it's still early days and there will doubtless be some hiccups along the way, there's still every reason to get excited about any step that brings greater diversity and choice to Shanghai's theater-loving public.

// *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is showing Mar 22-24 & 28-30, 7.30pm, RMB200 presale, RMB220 at door. Free ticket delivery before Mar 15. 3/F, Sasha's, 11 Dongping Lu, by Hengshan Lu 东平路11号3楼, 近衡山路 (187 2152 8625, tickets@urbanaphrodite.nl)

win!

We have a pair of tickets to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to give away. Simply answer the following question:

**Which famous couple starred in the acclaimed 1966 film version of Edward Albee's play?**

Answers with the subject 'Woolf' to [win@urbanatomy.com](mailto:win@urbanatomy.com) by Mar 18. Please specify which dates you would prefer in your email.