



RHINOCEROS IN LOVE

NATIONAL THEATRE OF CHINA
CHINA



AUCKLAND ARTS FESTIVAL

FREE PROGRAMME

POST-SHOW TALK
MON 11 MAR
MAIDMENT THEATRE

RHINOCEROS IN LOVE

NATIONAL THEATRE OF CHINA

MAIDMENT THEATRE

Friday 8 March — Tuesday 12 March, 7.30pm

Writer Liao Yimei 编剧：廖一梅

Director Meng Jinghui

导演：孟京辉

Set Design: Zhang Wu

Lighting Design Zhang Jian

Sound Design Yan Guihe

Technical Management Chen Liang

Lighting Li Zheng

Costume & Make Up Luo Yuan

Set Construction Yang Pengtau

Producer Ge Dali

International Coordinator Zhang Ke

Tour Manager Sun Weiwei

Interpreter Chen Yu

Literal Translation Reference Yimin Wang

Subtitles SBS

This is a dark, edgy production that burns in the memory long after the final curtain. – Australian Stage

这是一个黑色前卫的作品，给人们留下了不可磨灭的印象。——Australian Stage
(澳大利亚戏剧报)

PERFORMED IN MANDARIN WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES.
CONTAINS COARSE LANGUAGE, SMOKE.

CORE FUNDERS



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Rhinoceros in Love is hailed as China's most successful play of all time – revolutionary and refreshing – it is a dark romance that has captivated audiences since 1999.

Chances are you haven't seen a stage like this before – *Rhinoceros in Love* blends a unique approach to theatre with a universal story of unrequited love. Upon a flooded stage, the story of rhinoceros keeper Ma Lu unfolds ...

Ma has developed a dangerous fascination with his neighbour, the unobtainable Mingming. He has tried everything to win Mingming's heart to no avail. Until one night, mad, stubborn and as short-sighted as a rhino, he captures her and holds her hostage. Ma and Mingming's story unfolds among the turbo-charged consumer culture of online dating, Chinese pop, and Mandarin rhyming slang. *Rhinoceros in Love* is an allegory that reveals the maladies of young, urbanised Chinese feeling lost and in love.

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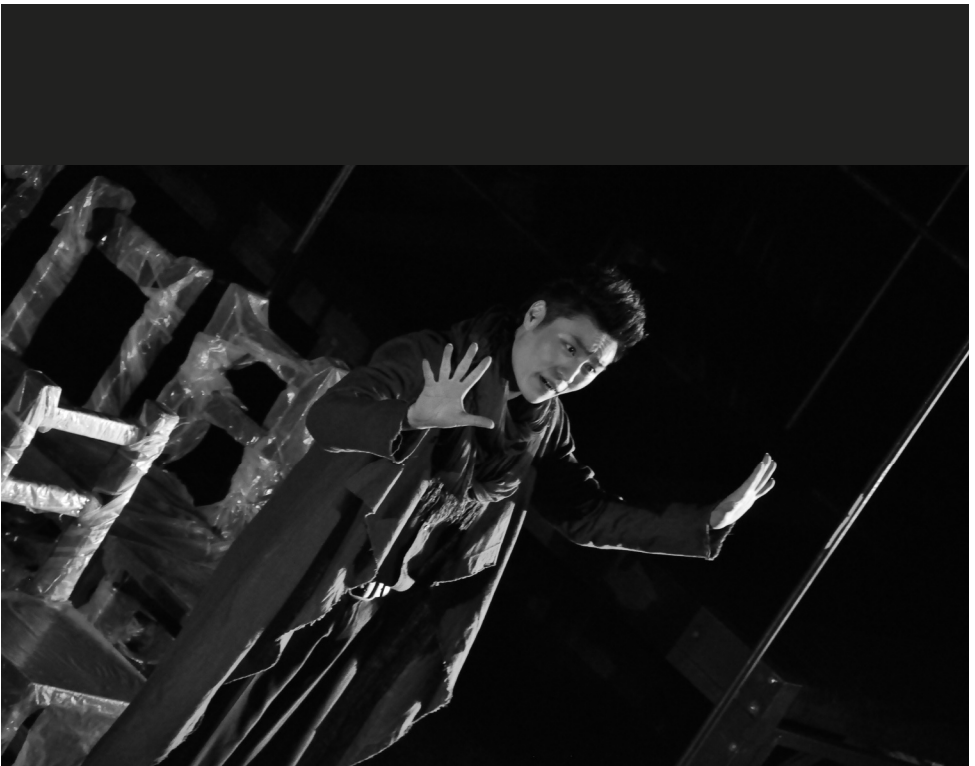
MAJOR GRANTS



The often uncomfortable path to true love is inextricable from the highs and lows of human history and the writer and director used revolutionary methods to express the tragic-comic consequences of the extremes people will go to for love.

The play incorporates a pop music soundtrack and a bold, poetic script – both were a departure for Chinese theatre and considered extremely experimental for its time. The symbolism, metaphors, satire, as well as the waterfall ‘stage spectacular’, broke a decades-old tradition of Chinese drama dominated by simple performances. Despite early criticism, the drama was an immediate success artistically and commercially, and is considered a milestone in the development of Chinese experimental drama. Its director Meng Jinghui is also regarded as the most distinguished representative in this area.

This is unforgettable theatre.



ABOUT THE CREATORS



Meng Jinghui **Director**

Meng Jinghui – known as one of China’s most avant-garde directors – founded the Beijing Youth Theatre Festival in 2008 and has served as artistic director since then, along with his role as Director of the National Theatre of China.



Liao Yimei **Playwright**

Liao Yimei is the resident playwright of the National Theatre of China. Along with *Rhinoceros in Love*, she has also written a number of successful films, including *Chicken Poet* (also directed by Meng Jinghui), which was accepted for numerous international film festivals and won the

FIPRESCI Award at the Hong Kong International Film Festival. *A Tender Song* won a gold medal at the Memphis Women’s Film Festival in the US. Liao has also written novels *Pessimist’s Bouquet* and *Amber*.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL THEATRE OF CHINA

The 60-year old National Theatre of China is China’s largest permanent theatre company with over 600 employees and 300 actors on staff. It has three modern venues in Beijing as well as touring nationally with many productions each year. At any one time they are creating new productions as well as presenting in Beijing and on the road. The Company has performed internationally at many festivals, including Avignon, Edinburgh and Melbourne. In March 2013, it will premier *The Green Snake*, a new co-commission from Hong Kong Arts Festival and the Shanghai International Arts Festival. *The Green Snake* is a collaboration with the National Theatre of Scotland. Both companies are at the Auckland Arts Festival 2013.

ABOUT RHINOCEROS IN LOVE:

an insight written for the Melbourne Festival programme

In her programme note for the fourth production of *Rhinoceros in Love*, playwright Liao Yimei described her opening night nerves. *Rhinoceros in Love* was her first play, 'a work from the impulsive, reckless days of my youth, written in a rebellious way, directed in a headstrong way, performed with fearless disregard for anything that stood in our way'. Thinking back on it, she recalls feeling almost embarrassed by the raw passion and lust, the youthful fervour and unrefined outbursts of angst and emotion, played out in the poetic monologues of the love tortured main character Ma Lu.

She was also worried. In the original 1999 production, the play had electrified audiences with its white-hot outpouring of lust and love. 'We tried to identify the passionate love of youth and to let the passion burn the stage and not think about how long that passion would last'. But what if time had put out the flame?

Rhinoceros in Love is a dark and energetic cult classic, 'a powerful combination of love, persistent pursuit and literary beauty', says director Meng Jinghui. 'It is crazy, rebellious, but not to the extreme'. The play's storyline follows the struggle of Ma Lu, a young rhinoceros keeper who falls into obsessive, dangerous love with a whimsical and unattainable woman, Mingming. Like his disobedient white rhinoceros, Ma Lu is an outcast, stubbornly unwilling to conform to societal constraints, and unyielding in his unattainable quest for love. On the surface, the play can be seen as a pure and beautiful love story, but underlying themes run much deeper.

First performed in 1999 in Beijing, *Rhinoceros in Love* was the first collaboration between playwright Liao Yimei and director Meng Jinghui, now arguably China's most talented duo in the

contemporary theatre scene. The play has gone on to become one of the most critically and commercially successful contemporary dramas ever produced in China, acclaimed as the 'Love Bible' for a generation of young theatre goers. It has been performed over 800 times, and by more than 200 student drama companies.

However, Liao Yimei and Meng Jinghui initially struggled to find funding or any theatre that was willing to present the new play. They finally found a small theatre in downtown Beijing, but just before opening night, they lost their key financial backer, and the lead actor withdrew from the production to star in a TV soap opera that would pay his rent. In desperation, Meng borrowed cash from a friend and carried it to the theatre in his backpack.

'We made a deal that if the play did not make money, Liao would write scripts for TV series to pay it back', the director recalls. 'It was completely reckless and naive of us, or to put it more kindly, brave perhaps', says Liao. 'But it is a testament to our belief that a calculated, planned life is the most boring of lives to live. Miracles can only happen in these kinds of situations.'

The premiere wasn't a sell-out, and the 350-seat theatre was only half filled. Many critics panned it as 'difficult to understand', still a sore point for Meng Jinghui, who retorts that their critiques were 'more of an insult to themselves' than his production. But audiences, particularly young audiences, were quicker to identify with its youthful defiance, its rebellious spirit and its radically new theatrical style.

'We didn't advertise the play, but gradually its reputation grew through word of mouth', recalls Liao, and tickets began to sell out. And have continued to sell out ever since. Now in its 12th year and

fourth production, with a recent season at the prestigious National Centre for Performing Arts in Beijing, *Rhinoceros in Love* is the longest running Chinese contemporary drama in recent years, and shows no signs of slowing down. A whole generation of young audiences has grown up memorising Liao's words and the play has become a cult classic. Fans in Beijing, bursting with pride that 'their' *Rhinoceros in Love* is coming to Australia, compete to describe their favourite production – the younger ones star struck by the latest lead actor to play Ma Lu, the older ones quick to mock them and defend the earlier productions they fell in love with.

Liao is continually surprised by this fan base, recalling sitting in the theatre one night, overwhelmed, as the audience repeated the lines of Ma Lu, the main character, saying 'Loving her is the best thing I've ever done in my life'.

While many define the play as a love story, Liao Yimei explains that the play is much more abstract. 'The ending of the love story itself is not important.' Rather, it is a parable for the human spirit, our relationship with each other and with our world. In a broader sense, it is also about the power of belief, and the need to persevere in the pursuit of one's ideals and dreams.

Throughout the play, Ma Lu is ridiculed and pitied for clinging pathetically to his unattainable goal. His friends mock him for his obsession with Mingming, warning, 'In today's modern age, with all the endless choices we have, having a one-track mind can be classified as a mental disorder'.

His only confidante, the unseen rhinoceros, becomes symbolic of his condition: caged, ailing and stubbornly resisting integration into the false and sanitised world of the zoo's recreated savannah.

And yet, 'If you look at human history', says Liao, 'it was the people who were ridiculed, yet still persevered along their own path, who gave us all the riches we have today. They were the so-called fools.' And so it is Ma Lu, the outcast, love struck fool, who becomes the play's unlikely hero, a hero whose self-inflicted anguish is all too easy for younger audiences to relate to.

Liao's raw, colloquial and yet stunningly poetic prose is radically different from the traditional Chinese theatre with which audiences are familiar. Her words give this work its immediacy and universal appeal, and ensure its longevity. The explosive partnership of Liao's prose with Meng Jinghui's pioneering direction makes this play such a benchmark for Chinese contemporary theatre.

Meng Jinghui, often called 'the godfather of avant-garde Chinese theatre', has been accredited with reviving the Chinese contemporary theatre scene with his experimental productions. He is less sure of how to describe his style. 'Innovative, spontaneous,' he offers. 'Actually it is not something easy to define. It's more of an attitude'. Meng's work is known for its fearless pushing of boundaries, his black humour, biting satire and frequent use of pop culture references, multimedia and live music. He plays heavily with his scripts ('it's not a script, it's source material') and toys with artistic conventions in a way that leaves audiences sometimes bewildered but always exhilarated. A lively chorus is often used to portray his tongue-in-cheek parody of social trends, such as in the 'Love Tutorial' scenes in *Rhinoceros in Love*, where youngsters are taught to express their feelings through pop songs and Hollywood clichés.

Meng cites Charlie Chaplin, Bob Dylan and Mayakovsky as his idols and seems to share their passion for social commentary, somehow evading scrutiny for his astute social critiques. '

It's not criticism', he adds, 'it's discussion'. And the audience loves it. In the fast developing consumer society of contemporary China, where the addictive temptations of TV, social media and internet gaming are luring audiences away from traditional art forms and into one-on-one relationships with their computer screens, Liao and Meng have accomplished something rare – they have developed their own audience. To enter a theatre in Beijing, on a Tuesday night, and see a packed house full of eager young 20-30 somethings waiting impatiently for the lights to go down, is no small miracle.



When asked about this cult following, Meng comments: 'As Sartre said, drama belongs to young people. But I don't think there is an age limit. Young people just have that certain adolescent restlessness, dissatisfaction and rebelliousness, whereas older people tend to be much more restrained. But some, like me, are born to be non law-abiding, and particularly in my artistic career, never obedient, always wanting to break the rules, and fight against the status quo.'

Meng describes this fourth production of *Rhinoceros in Love* as ‘darker, deeper and more complex’. He was interested in reinterpreting the play through a new generational lens and sets this production in the fast-paced, consumer driven, highly competitive Beijing of Gen Y. He knows their world all too well and plays with it in front of them, deconstructing, parodying and analysing it in ways they have often thought about but rarely heard expressed, especially not in the public realm. He is speaking directly to his audience, and their thrill and delight is palpable. As Liao sat in the theatre watching the opening night of this fourth production, her nerves finally settled. Once again she felt that energy, that lust and the power of a belief worth fighting for.

And she was reminded that for her, ‘the flame had never gone cold.’

For Liao, Meng, Ma Lu and over a million audience members, it seems the fire still burns.

HANNAH SKRZYNSKI

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RHINOCEROS
IN LOVE

