

BOOK WINGS

By Christopher Merrill

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BOOK WINGS



预备……下蛋！
Get ready . . . Lay eggs!

I Am An Eagle Hen by Xu Yaqun. Performed at Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center, March 13, 2013.

BY CHRISTOPHER MERRILL

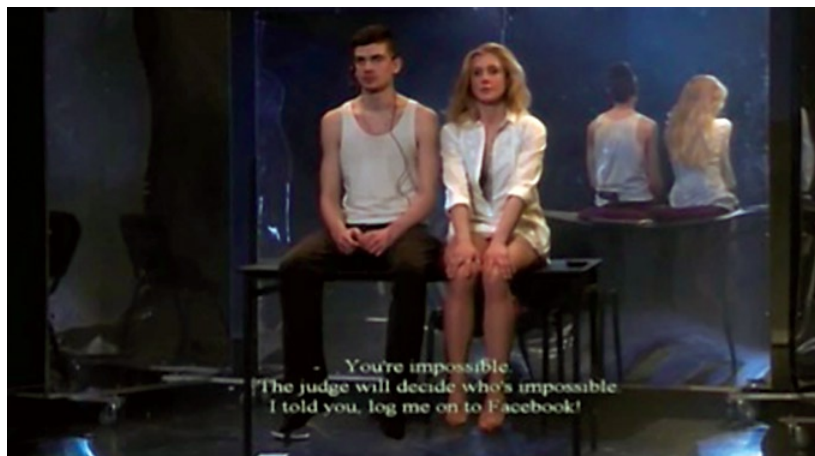
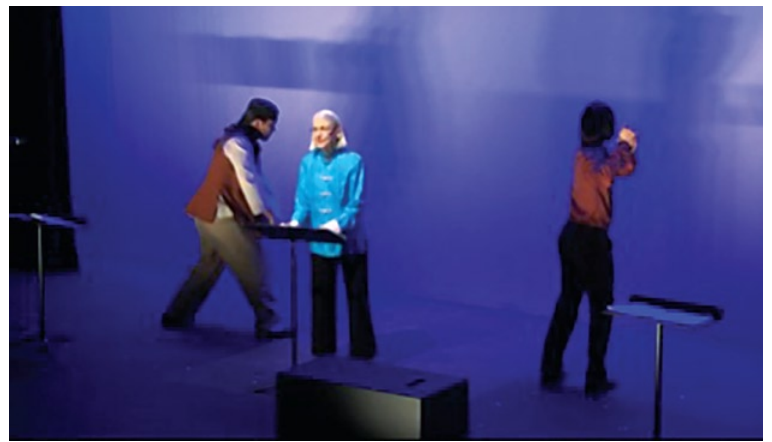
From one stage to the next: this was our vision for *Book Wings*, a project to connect American and Russian playwrights, directors, and actors, in a performance streamed to a global audience. It grew out of the Bilateral Presidential Commission, signed in July 2009 by Presidents Medvedev and Obama to reset relations between Russia and America. Pledging to move beyond Cold War mentalities, the United

States Department of State and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs established working groups to address issues in many sectors, including nuclear energy, arms control, military, counterterrorism, drug trafficking, economic relations, energy, environment, agriculture, science and technology, space, emergency management, health, and civil society. I serve on the working group for education, sports, mass media, and cultural exchanges, and at our first meeting in Moscow, in December 2010, during introductions in a crowded conference room at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a wiry gray-haired man rose from the table to challenge us. He was Anatoly Smeliansky, director of the Moscow Art Theatre School.

“Over the last twenty years,” he said, pacing back and forth, “we’ve trained a thousand American students in the Stanislavsky Method, and now I can talk to my daughter every night in Cambridge on Skype. Can’t we find some way to meet in the virtual world?” I seized on his idea, breaking protocol to answer him directly. “Yes, yes,” I said, and for the next several minutes Smeliansky and I traded ideas about what we might create together over the Internet.

Presently the Russian ambassador and the American undersecretary for public affairs left with their entourages, and the mood lightened in the room. A few minutes later, the undersecretary’s chief of staff returned to tap me on the shoulder. The undersecretary wished to have a word, not to castigate me for overstepping my bounds, as I might have feared, but to ask me to explore the possibility of establishing virtual connections with our Russian counterparts, university to university, theatre to theatre, writer to writer. “You make this work,” she ordered. The Russian ambassador offered to help in any way, and so began an unusual cultural diplomacy mission.

In the coming months, Smeliansky and I designed an experiment for a virtual environment. It was Smeliansky who suggested that we commission writers to create new works for the stage on a common theme. With funding from the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, our two institutions, the University of



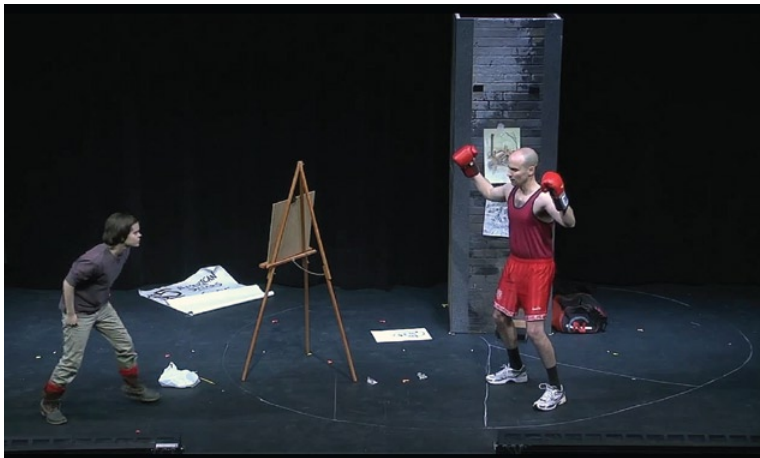
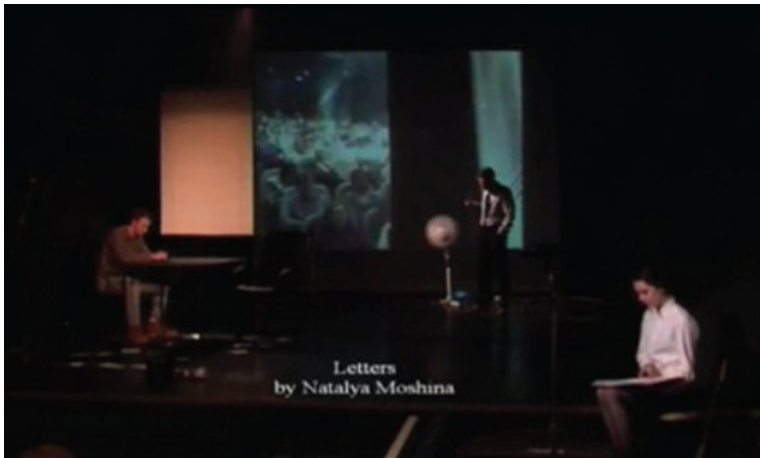
Top. *And Two, If By Sea* by Chay Yew. Performed at Theatre B, University of Iowa, March 12, 2013.

Middle. *The Vorski are Near, But Not Enough* by Maksym Kurochkin. Performed at Moscow Art Theatre, March 14, 2013.

Bottom. *Journey* by Naomi Iizuka. Performed at Theatre B, University of Iowa, March 12, 2013.

Left. *Intimacy* by Marina Krapivina. Performed at Moscow Art Theatre, March 14, 2013.

(All photographs are courtesy the University of Iowa.)



Top. *Subway* by Qian Jue. Performed at Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center, March 13, 2013.

Middle. *Letters* by Natalya Moshina. Performed at Moscow Art Theatre, March 14, 2013.

Bottom. *Subway* by Qian Jue. Performed at Theatre B, University of Iowa, March 12, 2013.

Right. *The Dream House* by Sherry Kramer. Performed at Theatre B, University of Iowa, March 12, 2013.



Iowa's International Writing Program and the Moscow Art Theatre School, created *Book Wings*, a three-year project to foster a cross-cultural conversation, spark dramatic ideas, and produce works addressing different sides of our shared history.

For the first year we commissioned American and Russian poets to write a short play, a poetic sequence, a monologue, a dialogue, or some combination thereof, on the theme of contact, which has both positive and negative connotations: the rush of feeling that comes from constant contact, the loss of personal space, the strangeness of being known and unknown at the same time, and much more. Then the poets were provided with literal translations of their counterparts' work, which they polished into scripts for the actors and directors from the University of Iowa and the Moscow Art Theatre School to perform in their respective black box theatres.

Meanwhile, technical teams in both cities built a virtual stage for a live performance so that audiences in Iowa City, Moscow, and around the world could watch the drama unfold in real time. It was to be a confluence of literature, theatre, and information technology, available to anyone with access to the Internet, which might help bridge the gap between two peoples who for more than four decades had regarded each other as mortal enemies.

How to create and then deliver high-quality audio and video production over the Internet? Les Finken, senior application developer in information technology services at the University of Iowa, decided to use three cameras in a room-based videoconferencing system. In his view this provided the best means of capturing and transmitting the magic that we wanted to create on stage. If we lost the connection between our two theatres, we planned to take a ten-minute intermission to reconnect. We had a backup robust videoconferencing unit at the State Department, just in case the solar flares forecast for March 2012 wreaked havoc with communications. As for the traffic on the commercial Internet system in Moscow? We had to hope for the best.

The show went off without a hitch. The breakfast crowd in Iowa City saw in the Moscow audience men and women dressed for dinner, and there was a general feeling of hilarity, inspired by the Russians' decision to begin the performance with a spoof on the connections between Iowa and Russia, derived from an inventive reading of a Wikipedia entry on Iowa's population. This set the tone for the event. Adam Muskin, an American teacher at the Moscow Art Theatre School, fluent in Russian, and I bantered between plays, as the action moved from one side of the globe to the other, and he brought a light touch to the talk-back after the performance, which concluded with Sme-liansky wishing us well. He and his friends were preparing to take to the streets the next day to protest Vladimir Putin's reelection, but for now all was magic.

Indeed the performance was so successful that for the next year we expanded *Book Wings* to China, with mixed results. Our partnership with the Moscow Art Theatre continued, with six American and Russian playwrights commissioned to write about contact, while we entered into an agreement with the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center to stage plays on the theme of migration. However, from the beginning our Chinese partners resisted what we considered to be a crucial component of the project, the talk-back after the performance, where we would trade ideas and impressions about the different ways in which the plays were conceived and performed. It was difficult for us to discern if the problem was the level of English in the Shanghai audience, as our partners sometimes argued, or something else. In the end they agreed to the talk-back, and then it did not happen. Inexplicably, the Chinese could not dial into the State Department bridge set up for the videoconference, seemingly unable to remember the four-digit code they had punched in for the tech rehearsal the day before. The problem persisted until there was just enough time for the performance to take place before both sides had to sign off. Which was a pity: the plays were interesting, and the production values were excellent. There was much to discuss.

And now? In March 2014 we will stage the final set of plays for *Book Wings* Russia (the twenty commissioned works will be published later in the year, in English and Russian). With any luck we will also stage *Book Wings* Iraq, with six new plays on the theme of courage. The complications of producing any sort of theatre in Baghdad have risen dramatically in the months since we embarked on this project, with daily suicide bombings, the detonation of improvised explosive devices, and assassinations. The level of violence calls to mind the worst days of the civil war in 2006, and yet as I learned on a recent trip to Baghdad, our Iraqi counterparts, who for reasons of security must remain anonymous, are determined for this show to go on.

What a show it will be, in whatever format it takes, recorded or live. (We are exploring a range of possibilities.) Here is a précis of the plays, which have been written

AN INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Book Wings is an international literary and theatrical collaboration between the University of Iowa (the International Writing Program, the Department of Theatre Arts, the Virtual Writing University, Information Technology Services, and UITV) and partners in Russia, China, and Iraq. Writers, actors, directors, and new media professionals work together to exchange creative ideas and develop new work.

Funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the United States Department of State, *Book Wings* commissions writers to produce new works on a common theme (contact, migration, courage). It then translates the works and uses high-definition videoconferencing technologies and projectors to digitally connect stages at the host theatres thousands of miles apart. The bilingual performance is open to the public and is accessible to viewers around the globe via a live stream.

In 2012, the first installment of *Book Wings* partnered with the Moscow Art Theatre and featured poetry. In 2013, the initiative included the Moscow Art Theatre again and expanded to the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center in China. This time, it commissioned ten-minute plays. In 2014 *Book Wings* will conclude its three-year partnership with MAT and will also focus on prose from writers in Iraq. The twenty commissioned plays will be published in a book in 2014. The works in the *Book Wings* Iraq project, each based on the theme of Courage, will be published online.

UPCOMING PERFORMANCES

To view the March 11 and March 13, 2014, performances:
<http://www.writinguniversity.org/page/book-wings-live-streaming>

To host a viewing party:
<http://iwp.uiowa.edu/programs/book-wings/host-a-viewing-party>

PAST PERFORMANCES

To view video of the March 14, 2013, *Book Wings* Russia:
<http://iwp.uiowa.edu/programs/book-wings/2013Russia>

To view video of the March 12, 2013, *Book Wings* China:
<http://iwp.uiowa.edu/programs/book-wings/node/2664/2013China>

To view excerpts of the 2012 performances:
<http://iwp.uiowa.edu/programs/book-wings/2012>



... FROM THE BEGINNING
 OUR CHINESE PARTNERS
 RESISTED WHAT WE
 CONSIDERED TO BE A
 CRUCIAL COMPONENT OF
 THE PROJECT, THE TALK-BACK
 AFTER THE PERFORMANCE,
 WHERE WE WOULD TRADE
 IDEAS AND IMPRESSIONS
 ABOUT THE DIFFERENT WAYS
 IN WHICH THE PLAYS WERE
 CONCEIVED AND PERFORMED.

And Two, If By Sea by Chay Yew. Performed at Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center, March 13, 2013.

and translated into English and Arabic and now await only a stage from which to take wing and fly:

Courage by Amir Al-Azraki: After losing his wife to sectarian violence, will a musician's passion for pursuing his art put his own life in danger?

The Bird Breeder by Sarem Dakhel: Razzaq can't live without his birds, but in a climate of nationalism, is he willing to pay the ultimate price?

Mock Court by Catherine Filloux: When a terrifying post-9/11 reality becomes a schoolyard game, can life go on as normal?

How About These Fires by David Kranes: Can two artistic souls make it work in a dystopian world of megafires?

Shelter Drills by Heather Raffo: How far will mothers go to protect their children?

Train of Death by Hassab Allah Yahya: How much is one life worth? A train conductor faces an ethical dilemma as the lives of fifty-two men hang in the balance.

At its best theatre reminds us that our lives hang in the balance at every moment, whether we know it or not. Such knowledge is general in Baghdad, of course, and no doubt it will shape the experience of those who attend *Book Wings*, in person or online. Now to begin. ❖

Christopher Merrill directs the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. He is the author of nearly thirty books, most recently *Boat* (poetry) and *The Tree of the Doves: Ceremony, Expedition, War* (nonfiction).

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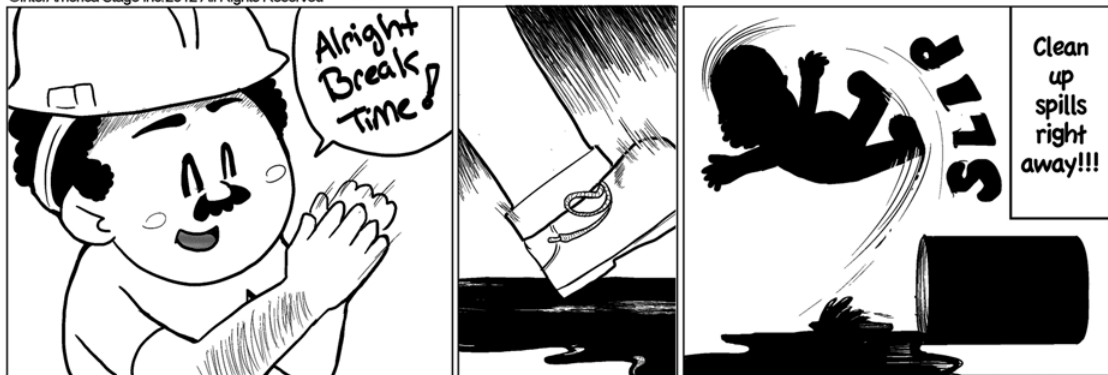
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