

Mary Responds: My Interview with Mary Zimmerman

By Jamil Khoury, Founding Artistic Director, Silk Road Rising
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Silk Road Rising was born of what I like to call an “activist impulse.” We do not bifurcate art and activism. For us, they constitute a continuum. Activism and advocacy is as integral to our organizational DNA as is creating and producing great art. Our commitments to storytelling and to expanding representation on Chicago’s stages emerged as a response to a post-9/11 “cultural order.” Promoting civic engagement and generating public discourse, particularly as it relates to Asian American and Middle Eastern American communities, and advancing a polycultural worldview, characterize what has become the Silk Road Rising aesthetic.

It was in the spirit of generating discourse and dialogue that I wrote “The Trouble with Mary” (June 11, 2013). My essay was in response to an interview that Catey Sullivan conducted with adaptor/director Mary Zimmerman for Chicago Magazine (“How Mary Zimmerman Handled Kipling’s Racism and Misogyny in a New The Jungle Book Musical,” May 15, 2013). Mary Zimmerman is currently in residency at the Goodman Theatre where she is adapting and directing *The Jungle Book*, “a new musical based on the Disney animated film and the writings of Rudyard Kipling.” I had not heard about nor read the Chicago Magazine interview until the morning of June 11. Upon reading it, I felt compelled to respond immediately. I did so by writing *The Trouble with Mary*. Needless to say, it has generated a far greater response than we had imagined.

Yesterday (June 13), at the request of Mary Zimmerman, Malik and I met with Mary at a Loop coffee shop. The hour long meeting was organized by Goodman Theatre Associate Producer (and Silk Road Rising Associate Artist) Steve Scott. Our conversation was frank, open, and respectful. We found Mary to be extremely gracious and forthcoming. Interestingly, Mary had read neither the Chicago Magazine interview nor my essay and she prefers not to. She learned about my essay through the Goodman Theatre and from friends who told her about it. In our meeting, we relayed back to her the main points raised in my essay (without soft pedaling any of my criticisms) as well as the broader context in which I wrote it. She addressed my concerns with the utmost of integrity, honesty, and sincerity. We were, to put it mildly, enormously impressed. As we were leaving the coffee shop, Mary asked “Can we all be friends?” Always eager to be challenged and to learn, we told her it would be an honor to be her friend.

I think it fair to say that Silk Road Rising’s philosophical and political approaches to storytelling and cultural representation are markedly different than Mary Zimmerman’s. We assimilate context and historicity differently. We define authenticity differently. In short, we inhabit a radically different world than Mary Zimmerman. But after meeting with Mary it became abundantly clear that the bridge between our worlds is a shared humanism and a shared love of stories. There can be no better bridge.

In the interests of providing Mary a forum that is comfortable for her (she does not engage social media at all), she agreed to respond to questions that I would email her. I emailed the questions last night and found her answers in my Inbox this morning. The interview is printed below in its entirety.

My essay and this interview form part of a much larger conversation. It is in the spirit of meaningful dialogue that I asked Mary to respond to my questions. To her credit, she answered with an unequivocal “yes.” Honest conversations about race, representation, authenticity and ownership are vital to a healthy, robust, representative American theatre. We join with tens of thousands of fellow sojourners in working to create an American theatre that looks and sounds like a 21st Century America, an America in which the normative is the polycultural.

Let it be known that since Tuesday of this week, my essay has evoked considerable agreement and disagreement. I have found allies and detractors I didn't even know until these past few days. No doubt Mary's interview will evoke an array of responses too.

THE INTERVIEW:

Jamil: In the Chicago Magazine interview you did with Catey Sullivan, you described racism as being "in the eye of the beholder." Can you explain what you meant by this?

Mary: First, let me say that the phrase "Racism is in the eye of the beholder" is completely preposterous and I disavow it. Here is what happened: We were talking about the Disney film and King Louie, an orangutang. She asked me about this character and how he has been sometimes named as a "racist character" which many people believe was voiced by Louis Armstrong, but was in fact conceived for and voiced by Louis Prima, a white Italian American. I challenged the assumption that King Louie is a derogatory depiction of a black man given that what is on the screen is only an ape, drawn in a style consistent with all Disney animation of the period, voiced by a white musician, singing to a little Indian boy. I suggested that it may be the well-meaning observer making the supposedly enlightened remark that King Louie is a racist depiction who was, in fact inserting a black person into that particular equation; and further, that a person doing that might be acting out of his or her own unconscious racist mental formations.

I made a quip that I realize was very ill-chosen in saying that in this specific case, "racism is in the eye of the beholder." It is more accurate to say that the "race" of the animated King Louis is in the eye of the beholder; or perhaps, that conclusively assigning race to an animated image of an animal was a racist move in and of itself, steeped in the same grotesque historical discourse around race and evolution that it is purportedly trying to refute. In no way did I ever mean, nor could I believe -- because I'm not insane -- that racism does not exist, or that it is subjective as in the phrase "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." I was attempting to locate the act of racism, in this single specific example, in the observer and not the observed object -- not to deny the fact of it. My understanding is that in the final version of the interview virtually all of this idea was excised except the ludicrous phrase "Racism is in the eye of the beholder."

Jamil: In the same interview, you seemed to trivialize the impact of the British colonial occupation in India? Many of us took great offense at this. Can you expound upon the notion that the "British occupation was so short in the history of the country?"

Mary: Again, this came from a much longer conversation which began by me saying that most Westerners have pulled most of their ideas about India from the period of the Raj; that when many westerners write novels about India, and what they read about India is Raj-obsessed in a completely ahistorical, dopey romantic-melancholic way, from the point of view of the occupier. What I meant by my remark is that Indian history is unimaginably rich, varied, long, and that the Raj, in terms of such a huge story is not the only story. I was trying to displace what I think of as the typical self-centered western notion that other countries are all about our relation to them; that the only important history of other countries is that which directly relates to us. I did not mean to trivialize the scar of that period and I really do apologize if I gave that impression. I got excited and was overstating my case -- trying to make the point that there is more to India than the western view of the Raj and The Jewel in the Crown.

Jamil: It can be said that an artist who consistently creates work about cultures other than her own is engaging in cultural appropriation. How would you respond to those who accuse you of cultural appropriation?

Mary: I feel that the texts I have engaged -- The Odyssey, The Book of One Thousand Nights and One Night (The Arabian Nights), Nizami's Haft Paykar (The Mirror of the Invisible World), The Journey to the West, Metamorphoses, In Search of Lost Time, Argonautika, etc. are masterpieces of world

literature and the more versions there are of them, the more people get to hear them and experience them for the compendiums of wisdom, humor, passion, poetry and superb story-telling they are, the better.

Jamil: I have heard your work described as "pretty pictures" devoid of political substance and cultural authenticity. How does political praxis and cultural representation figure into your work?

Mary: Well, when I understood that we were actually going to invade Afghanistan, I asked the Goodman to cancel the revival of my Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci that was scheduled in favor of doing Seneca's very brutal version of Trojan Women, about the greatest anti-invasion text I could think of, and they did so. We opened on the 3rd day of the ground invasion and it felt as though the text had been written that morning. It wasn't well received, and one critic wrote, as though this were shameful, "It doesn't make you proud to be an American." In all my work, I inflect what I adapt with my own values; in vast works such as the Book of One Thousand Nights and One Night there is homophobia, racism, anti-semitism and misogyny; but there is also profound, calm wisdom, beauty, poetry, song, tolerance, love and great humor -- it is everything bad and good that human nature can contain. I lean into these latter qualities and do not include the former. That is a vast text, with much to choose from. The same is true of the world of fairy tales and Greek Myth.

That said: yes, I'm interested in beauty and I'm interested in joy, and in manifesting both on stage. I believe that to be persuasive it is sometimes a good strategy to beguile, to charm. Almost everything I do has not-very-much to do with naturalism. It is fantastical, epic, full of dragons or people turning into birds and so on. It isn't realism. It isn't naturalism. The characters are often archetypal with names such as "The Merchant," "The Boy" or "The Princess." It is the realm of the impossible, the imaginative. But it is human beings who create these imaginative worlds -- and I find that act really mysterious and moving, and I have somehow found myself in these texts. The texts I'm interested in, for all their epic adventure and surface sparkle, speak to the fundamental facts of what it is like to be a person: to experience unwanted and unlooked for change, to love and to die; to try to behave well and to fail at that. To forgive.

Jamil: How would you define the term "Orientalism" and how do you respond to charges that your work is Orientalist and racist?

Mary: My understanding of the term "orientalism" is as a kind of fetishized and objectifying drive towards a culture different from one's own. While it is certainly possible to have such fetishes, I also believe that one can love a text from another culture as one can love a person from another culture, with genuine love for the inner self, the true self, and not through perverse and condescending objectification. As to the charge of racism in my work -- I just refute it. That's all I can say. I just disagree.

Jamil: How would you describe your artistic aesthetic and what draws you to the specific works of literature you adapt?

Mary: Almost all my work has been drawn from tales and stories that are ancient enough to come from oral culture; to have been performed originally by the solo performer before they fell into a fixed print form; and often they exist in diverse print versions. I've always felt that the texts I do slip rather naturally into performance because they come from this oral tradition - myths and fairy tales and so on. I like to stage the impossible -- I like the challenge of that: how to do sea-voyages or a boat swallowed by a monster, or a person turned into a bird or into a pool of water often using some of the most simple things a theatre can provide, and relying on the audience to complete the image. I believe that this presentational style unites audience and performers in a symbolic language that creates intimacy. I like great sweeps of time and place; and I like obsessive love and unrequited love. Very, very often the stories I do conclude with an image of transcendence or transfiguration at the moment of death; of the dissolution of the self into the whole; an image of reunion.

I am drawn to poetic language and idea expressed in image. I have decided to do entire texts based on a single beautiful sentence or an image which I find so mysterious, so poetic, so profound as to

be almost unfathomable (in *Metamorphoses* this is the image of Psyche looking at Eros -- although, in fact, that story isn't in Ovid, it is a later myth). All my life I've read obsessively and I believe I went into theatre in order to live briefly in these imaginary worlds; to make them manifest, to try to know them and understand them.

Jamil: What is the responsibility of the adaptor/director when adapting source material that is today considered racist and sexist?

Mary: Not to do them; or to do them in a way that excises them of those qualities or deconstructs those qualities in obvious ways. Not to reiterate or make manifest those qualities.

Jamil: What is the responsibility of the adaptor/director when adapting source material that was written within a colonial context?

Mary: Every word I am writing to you now is written in a Colonial context. Anyone living in the United States who is not fully Native American is a product and beneficiary of a very brutal and rabid colonialism. It is why I am writing to you in English. We conveniently elide that part of our own history, pretending it doesn't exist because it is "so far in the past" and then project our own guilt onto the more recent colonialists. Nothing is pure. No one is pure.

That said, if I believed that the the few stories (the few pages, really) from *The Jungle Book* that Disney took and sweetened considerably to make his film were irredeemably cruel or bigoted, of course I wouldn't spend any time with them. But the story of a little boy who can speak to animals and sing and dance with them has something to say about the wondrous, non-discriminating, wild childhood that every blessed adult once briefly held, and lost.

Mary Zimmerman does not use all of the stories from the original, but does an excellent job of re-imagining several of the tales. As an aside, if you are ever so lucky as to see the play - please do. I was fortunate enough to see it when it was directed by Ms. Zimmerman and it was absolutely amazing. Written in play-format, Mary Zimmerman retells the Greek myths and transforms the stories with a more modern understanding. The title "Metamorphoses" is connected in all stories in the play because every story experiences a change (literal or figurative). This play was very interesting. Mary Zimmerman, *Metamorphoses*, "Baucis and Philemon". #quotes #mary zimmerman #metamorphoses #baucis and philemon. 42 notes. The following conversation is excerpted from Mary Zimmerman's March 22nd, 2002 interview with Bill Moyers from the PBS television series "Now with Bill Moyers." MOYERS: In your story of Cupid and Psyche, and I quote from it Tony Award-winning director Mary Zimmerman speaks with WPRB's Akiva David about working with Philip Glass, directing at the Met Opera, what it's like to be a pioneering female director, and staging her new production, *The White Snake*, at McCarter Theatre. #SoundCloud #Akiva David #Radio #Mary Zimmerman #Philip Glass #Met Opera #Princeton #McCarter Theatre #The White Snake. Grandma Mary - Social Media Edutainer. 28 April 2016. Yeeha - after much technical wrangling I got this fabulous interview edited with the lovely Sue B. Zimmerman. She shares here thoughts on Snap Chat (which was all the rage at #SMMW16) and Instagram! Hot Stuff! Related videos. 5:35. Grandma Mary interviews the fabulous Chris Ducker about his new book - *The Rise of the Youpreneur*. That's right, I'm coming out of my retirement to do an interview - this book is that good. Check it out here: <https://www.amazon.com/Rise-Youpreneur-Definitive-Go-Future-Proof-ebook/dp/B079NL1MKN/>. Grand The director Mary Zimmerman sat down on the Metropolitan Opera's stage during a recent rehearsal for her new production of Dvorak's "Rusalka," a Czech "Little Mermaid" about a water nymph who gives up her voice to become mortal and pursue a human prince. Ms. Zimmerman stretched out her legs in front of her, and for a few moments she just watched the action, looking like a child taking in a bedtime story. But if it were to lull you to sleep, the dreams "Rusalka" inspired might well be nightmares. But for Ms. Zimmerman, the fourth time may be a charm. If she never quite found her footing in the rigid conventions of bel canto, there is more in common with her theater work in the later, dreamier, more epic "Rusalka."