



THE WHITE SNAKE

The beautiful woman in white strolling through Hangzhou's west lake district intends only to stay for a day. It's not that she doesn't like it; she does. But in reality she's a 1,700-year-old snake, and she really ought to be heading back up the mountain.

In this dramatization of an ancient Chinese fable, the incredibly wise White Snake spirit slithers down the mountain with her best friend, Green Snake, to see the world. She falls for a good, if gullible, young man, and uses her magic powers to secure love, prosperity and happiness, until she meets her match in the bigoted Buddhist monk Fa Hai.

Director and writer Mary Zimmerman, one of America's truly great artists, began her remarkable rehearsal process with three pages of script and a carefully culled team of actors and designers. In a process she likened to Michelangelo's sculpting with marble, Zimmerman and her team chipped away at the story until a theatrical experience emerged.

The end result is very beautiful and often funny, but it fell short of my (admittedly high) expectations. Although many people name *The White Snake* as their clear favorite this year, it wasn't mine. Characterization takes a back seat to imagery and innovation. The show is visually stunning, with a soft rain of silk scarves, marvelous puppet snakes and a bamboo forest emerging from the air. Yet I didn't get to know most of the characters well enough to feel deeply for them. The story is marvelous, and the moral Zimmerman concludes with is moving, but the connection between the two is tenuous.

Bottom Line: Like Michelangelo's *Pieta*, it's not perfect, but well worth seeing.



SEAGULL

Real, painful, regret-filled life washes through the insignificant summer home, just as the lake washes up on shores beyond it. Longing for love and recognition, these characters are selfish, shortsighted people messing up their own lives and the lives of others – just another modern family at the summer home.

Any excuse you have for not loving Chekov is no longer being accepted. Director Libby Appel's lucid translation pulls every familiar ounce of humanity from the 19th-century Russian script and lays it lushly across Christopher Acebo's enthralling set. As a result, any of these characters could easily be re-costumed and slipped into an angst-ridden Hollywood drama. The story springs from the painfully convoluted relationship between a famous actress and her aspiring writer son. Vanity wins over love, and heartbreak and longing ripple through the lives of everyone connected.

Kathryn Meisle and Kate Hurster work wonders with the language and tempo of the script, and Al Espinosa and Tasso Feldman create simultaneously hateful and sympathetic artists, longing for everything they don't quite have.

Bottom line: Seagull soars.

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