

GCE AS / A LEVEL

CHIMERICA

LUCY KIRKWOOD



INTRODUCTION

'This is a dazzling, thoughtful, wonderfully ambitious drama that, in a world saturated with imagery, considers the truths behind one picture.'

[Sarah Hemming, *The Financial Times*]



Lucy Kirkwood wrote *Chimerica* over a six year period. It had its premiere production at the Almeida Theatre, in a co-production with Headlong Theatre in May 2013, before transferring to the West End later that same year. It won the Evening Standard Award and Laurence Olivier Awards for Best New Play and Susan Smith Blackburn Prize.

This epic play – told in five acts and thirty-nine scenes – has a running time of nearly three hours but it engages the audience through the sophistication of its writing. At its heart it is a political drama but it plays out on a personal level – it has elements of the thriller, romance and comic genres.

It tells the story of Joe Schofield, who, in 1989, was in a hotel room overlooking Tiananmen Square where he was able to snap a version of the famous 'Tank Man' photograph. In 2012, after a cryptic message is left in a Beijing newspaper, Joe is driven to find out the identity of the man in the photograph. The play moves seamlessly between the two time periods and locations.

Economist Niall Ferguson and Historian Moritz Schularick first coined the word 'chimerica' in 2006 to describe the significant economic relationship between China and America. The play touches on this interrelationship and the differences between Western and Eastern culture.

In an interview with *Time Out* magazine, Lucy Kirkwood said that one of the reasons why she wrote the play was:

'...what kept rearing its head slightly was this liberal carefulness around China, when people thought, "It's not that bad, is it?" And I felt it was.'

Later in the interview, she goes on to add that:

'...it's much more a play about the West than it is about China.'

Critical reception for the original production was outstanding with many touting it the best play of the year. One critic wrote:

Chimerica is dizzying in its scope and invention, exhilarating in the potency and intelligence of its ideas, and relentless in its narrative grip. Part cinematic thriller, part East Asian ghost story, wholly absorbing, it tackles global socio-economics with a verve and visual flair that ensure every second pulses with urgent life.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

There are over 35 speaking roles in the play along with various non-speaking parts. In the original production, this was performed by a cast of twelve. Below you will find an insight into some of the central characters.

JOE SCHOFIELD

The protagonist of the play. At the age of 18 he was in a hotel room overlooking Tiananmen Square where he was able to take the famous 'Tank Man' picture. Now in his early forties, he is idealistic (Tess asks him if he ever steps outside his pious, holier-than-thou, sanctimonious pedestal) and extremely confident. He is single and is the eternal bachelor (Frank suggests that he should 'settle down'). He is used to winning women over with his charm, and one presumes his good looks. When he and Tess go out for dinner (Act One, Scene Seven) he is taken aback when she declares that isn't a date. This would be an interesting scene to rehearse in class, particularly to see the change in his use of voice and gesture after she declares her platonic intentions. As is the nature of these things, their relationship moves beyond this over the course of the play.

MEL STANWYCK

is a colleague of Joe. He conforms to stereotypical masculine behaviour; all talk, cynicism and bravado. His sexism (calling Tess 'sweetheart') contrasts with Joe's more modern manner. He is slightly older than Joe and sees through Joe's recklessness. However, he is friendly and jokey, unlike Joe's more earnest approaches. The relationship between Joe and Mel is one of good mates. In rehearsal, students should consider what their physicality is like around their friends; that is, what sort of gestures, movements, body positions (sitting and standing), facial expressions are used in informal settings. These could be used to rehearse an exchange between Joe and Mel, such as Act Two, Scene One.

TESSA KENDRICK

Joe and Mel first meet Tessa Kendrick on a flight to Beijing. She is English, and is established quickly as a ballsy character with her opening line 'a pansy with hair on his chest' a snide dig at Mel's attitude and behaviour. She works in market research and consumer profiling. She is confident and more than holds her own in conversation with Joe as can be seen in the following exchange:



TESS: Well, you seemed quite fond of me when your arse was banging against the hand dryer of a 747.

JOE: Hey, listen, that was an act of charity. I've been cavity searched on the border of Russia, it was more fun.

TESS: You are so full of shit.

JOE: I don't have to like someone to have sex with them. You were scared, I just met you, what am I gonna do, assassinate your character at thirty thousand feet?

TESS: Mel gave it his best shot.

JOE: Yeah well, Mel's an asshole.

TESS: Yeah well, at least he's honest about that. (p.41)

The relationship between Tess and Joe warms as the play progresses, as they move from their initial business interactions to a messy romantic entanglement.

She is the most significant female character in the play. Act Four, Scene Seven consists of a speech in which she addresses, linked to her work market research, the relationship between China and America. She says:

...China is not the drunk girl at the frat party. She's the business major with an A-plus average, and really great hair. She's in charge of this brave new economic world, you bend to her or you die trying.

She goes on to add:

...China's moving faster than we can collect the data, I mean, this is a nation that's gone from famine to Slim-Fast in one generation.

This is quite an important scene as it makes explicit some of the themes and ideas of the play. It would be useful to spend some time in lesson breaking the scene down and considering what Kirkwood is trying to say here. What does this moment indicate about Tess's own character development?

ZHANG LIN

Zhang Lin is Joe's main contact in China. The audience sees him at two stages of his life: in 1989, as a young man, and in 2012, as an English teacher. He still grieves for his deceased wife, despite the long passage of time and his brother's best efforts to cheer him up. He is haunted by her image; and she 'appears' from inside his refrigerator – the significance of which we find out in flashback. He makes some reckless decisions in his quest to find out the truth about air pollution which results in him being arrested. He is not afraid to speak out against the communist regime, with Act Five opening with him saying:

We call for a Party that refuses to get rich on our blood. We call for a Party that puts its people over its profits. We call for a Party that does not turn a blind eye as young men walking wheezing upstairs. We call for these things, at the top of our voices, while there is still breath in our lungs to do so.

This public dissent has consequences for him with security cameras mounted outside his apartment. It is only at the end of the play that we discover that he is the Tank Man in the picture.

LIULI

Liuli is Zhang Lin's fiancé, killed during the protests. We only see her in flashback: she is young and pregnant. This is Liuli as Zhang Lin remembers her so this is an idealistic vision of this woman. It may be important in rehearsal to consider how these flashback scenes are played. Are they naturalistic like the scenes set in the present or do they have a more 'dreamlike' or hyperreal atmosphere to them?

ZHANG WEI

Zhang Wei is Zhang Lin's brother and Benny's father. He works as a foreman in a factory. Unlike his brother, he believes in the Communist Party and this conflict of opinion creates much drama between these two characters.

FRANK HADLEY

Frank Hadley is in his late fifties and the editor of a major American newspaper. He is realistic about the changes to the newspaper industry (*I don't even have the money for our food critic to review anywhere you don't BYOB. Our revenues are down eleven percent - p34*) and rejects Joe's idea for a story about the 'Tank Man' until there is an American angle to it. This is a man who once protested against Vietnam but is now too caught up in a complex corporate world, where the publication of Joe's story could be dangerous. Despite his confidence, he is world weary and angry about the state of affairs – not that he feels there is much he can do about this.

MARIA DUBIECKI

Maria Dubiecki is a Democrat senator in her fifties. She is a confident woman with a sense of humour (*I'm running on about four hours sleep a night these days, but I sleep in a Tupperware box, and eat nothing but steamed kale so. – p51*). She is an important character as she helps Joe to trace someone who has details about the Tank Man – even if he has to resort to blackmail to get her to reveal the information.

THEMES & ISSUES

'Plays are an inherently political act because you dramatise the experience of individuals who represent something bigger than yourself.'

– Lucy Kirkwood



EAST VS. WEST

As the title suggests, the key idea the play explores is the relationship between China and America. A good starter activity in class would be to get students to brainstorm everything they already know about these two countries and perhaps highlight similarities and clear differences. Some research into both of these countries in the 21st century would be helpful in enhancing a students' understanding of the play.

Kirkwood addresses how much China has changed since the 1980s:

JOE: Very funny. I mean it, you should come to New York.

ZHANG LIN: What for? Starbucks? Cockroaches? I can get both of those here.

JOE: Sure, and Walmart and McDonald's, / I know, it's turning into America, but –

ZHANG LIN: You have Walmart. Why are we not allowed Walmart?

JOE: One with none of the good parts, don't you want those things?

ZHANG LIN: Things here are okay. Better. You know how much has changed, how fast? (p.26)

However, the contrast between the two countries is not presented as a simple binary and it is important that students do not see the China presented in the play as 'bad' to America's 'good'. For instance, Zhang Lin embodies the dissenting side of the Chinese people and we see a

broad cross section of the American population (from prostitutes to a man being arrested in Harlem). The play is effective because it presents a balanced but honest picture of these two superpowers.

ETHICS OF JOURNALISM

Quoting Susan Sontag, the printed text starts with the phrase 'Images transfix. Images anaesthetise.' The play explores the idea of photographs being the evidence of a historical event – and the way in which the public digests them. Are these images disposable? What becomes of the people depicted in them? By setting the play in two periods, in between the importance of professional photographers and the present, when anyone with a mobile phone can record historical moments, it allows the audience to consider the value we place on a news image.

The play also questions the ethics of journalism. There is the complexity of portraying an event accurate and from whose perspective a story is told. Reading the code of ethics from the Society of Professional Journalists, and then linking it to the decisions made by Joe and Mel in the play would stimulate some interesting discussion.

Take for instance the exchange below. What does this say about what is reported in the press?

JOE:...If we find him. What's the first question you'd ask?

MEL: Okay, good, number one: what did he say to the soldier in the tank? Number two: what was in his shopping bags, number three: what does he eat for breakfast?

JOE: You'd ask the Unknown Hero whether he has toast or cereal?

MEL: See, this is what you don't understand about writing, it's the detail, it's the human interest, the small intimacies of great souls – (p.51)

THE ENVIRONMENT

Some of the most interesting scenes are those that do not include any dialogue. In Act One, Scene Seven, Zhang Lin's neighbour, enters:

'She's in her late fifties but has the air of a more elderly woman. She carries her groceries in two shopping bags. Her wheezing breath is audible as trudges slowly towards her apartment. She sounds like a broken accordion.' (p37)

By not giving this character a voice here, the play parallels the situation in China where many people feel powerless. This scene also initiates the theme of the environment and pollution that becomes more significant as the play progresses. We finally meet the neighbour, Ming Xiaoli in Act Two, Scene Eight where she is clearly resigned to her fate as she talks about her own funeral arrangements.

Pollution in Beijing is referred to throughout the text and most damningly, the lack of concern shown by the Communist Party. The fact suggests that what is more important is the front that everything is ok, when the reality is far from that.

TESS: In Beijing. They fire rockets, into the sky, to disperse the clouds. If they don't want it to rain, then it doesn't. Terrifying. (p.64)

STAGING THE PLAY

The original production received much praise for Es Devlin's set design, which was described as '*nimble brilliance*' (*The Financial Times*).

At the centre of the stage was a large cube, onto which various images (video designed by Finn Ross) were projected that helped to indicate the location of the action or that a passage of time had passed.



The other clever use of the cube was that it provided:

'...four internal key sets, which can be interchanged within seconds, a trick that leaves the audience feeling conflicted when it rotates from a scene filled with romance and love to a man being tortured. The juxtaposition leaves the audience with an unsettled feeling of guilt and uneasy self-reflection after being engrossed in the emotions of the carefree couple.'

With its large number of scenes, the transitions between each must be done in a timely manner to ensure the pace of the play does not lag. To aid this, in the original production, furniture and props were kept to a minimum. In its American premiere, at the Studio Theatre in Washington D.C., this was dealt with by having:

'...an impressively compact structure of moving floors and rooms with paper screens to accommodate the swift scene shifts between Beijing and New York.'

In the Canadian Stage production, the set consisted of enormous white walls, with two doors, placed on a revolve to quickly change between the different locations. In the Timeline Theatre production in Chicago, the set design consisted of much more detailed naturalistic elements.

For a comparison, look at the image of Zhang Lin's flat from both this and the original production:



How central is the use of video and projections for the success of a production of *Chimerica*? These have been central to all of the professional productions that have taken place to date, but students should also discuss how a 'smaller budget' production could deal with the numerous scene changes. Does the structure of the play strongly suggest the use of a proscenium arch (or end-on) stage or is there some validity in staging the play in traverse or in-the-round? One excerpt to look at is the transition between scenes four, five and six in Act One (pages 36 and 37). Get students to experiment with different ways to staging this excerpt before discussing which is the most effective way to sustain pace.

Despite the positive reviews, there were a few criticisms from critics (more so from the North American productions) that the play 'traffics in plenty of stereotypes.' The text predominantly suggests a naturalistic acting style (although there are some more stylised moments), so it is important that in rehearsal an actor fully develops their character. It might be a useful exercise to plot a timeline for both Joe and Zhang Lin who we see in both eras in which the play is set. Students could then work out 'the in between time' to flesh out the characterisation. This backstory will help make the character's journey between the two time periods more believable.

Kirkwood also challenges a director's staging with some individual scenes switching between time periods and featuring non-naturalistic moments. For example, Act One, Scene Nine, starts in Zhang Lin's apartment in 2012, before the audience finds themselves in 1989 in an open space. The scene then returns to 2012, when a girl 'dressed as an air stewardess' runs on stage, before running off again. Zhang Lin then opens the fridge and Liuli, from 1989, is inside. How does a director stage this scene so



that not only the switch in time period is apparent to the audience but the appearance of Liuli elicits the right response? What atmosphere should be created here? This would be a good scene to work on in class.

Other design elements, such as sound and lighting, should also be carefully considered. In particular, students should think about how sound elements could be used to establish locations, particularly if they have chosen to have a minimalistic stage design. From a dive

bar in Denver to an interrogation room in Beijing (and a myriad of other locations), a sound designer would need to consider what would be the most effective way to create an audio world that suggests these places. Kirkwood gives some clear ideas in her stage directions of how sound can be used in scene transitions. For example, Act One, Scene One ends with a waitress popping a bottle of champagne with the sound growing in volume to evoke gunfire.

Costuming is important for providing an audience with information about characters; be it their class, gender, ethnicity, and key personality traits. In *Chimerica*, some characters are only on stage fleetingly, with many appearing in only one scene. Therefore it is important that costumes are used as shorthand to indicate certain aspects of a character. A fun activity in a lesson is to provide different options for students to choose from (particularly if you have a costume store at school!) and get them to act out extracts in these. Students could then discuss which costume was the most appropriate and how these helped the physicality of their characterisations.

Chimerica is one of the most significant and acclaimed new plays of the twenty-first century and it has many elements that will sustain student interest, making it an excellent choice for Component 3. As one critic wrote:

'It's blistering theatre; elegant, crammed with wit and insight, and explosively exciting. Essential.'

USEFUL LINKS

Details about the original production: <http://bit.ly/2dd2Bnl>

Timelapse of the set build for the West End transfer: <http://bit.ly/2doDBNo>

An excerpt from the Timeline Theatre production: <http://bit.ly/2d0ycbZ>

Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics: <http://bit.ly/1gKqH69>

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Cover: USA and China Flag; daboost / Getty Images

Lucy Kirkwood; Tim P.Whitby/Stringer/Getty Images.

Tessa and Joe; Headlong <https://headlong.co.uk/>

Theatre set 1; Headlong <https://headlong.co.uk/>

Theatre set 2; Headlong <https://headlong.co.uk/>

Theatre set 3; TimeLine Theatre Company, Chicago, Illinois, USA. Pictured: Janelle Villas and Dan Lin in the Chicago premiere of CHIMERICA by Lucy Kirkwood, directed by Nick Bowling, with scenic design by John Culbert, lighting design by Brian Sidney Bembridge, costume design by Sally Dolemba and projections design by Mike Tutaj, May 3 – July 31, 2016. Photo by Lara Goetsch. For more information, visit <https://timelinetheatre.com/>

Theatre set 4; Headlong <https://headlong.co.uk/>

Production image; Tristram Kenton <http://tristramkenton.com/>

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