



A scene with Kua Fu from Huang Ruo and Basil Twist's new choral-theater piece "Book of Mountains & Seas" at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn.
Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Review: In ‘Book of Mountains & Seas,’ Puppets Embark on Mythic Quests

Huang Ruo and Basil Twist’s new choral-theater piece at St. Ann’s Warehouse borrows from traditional Chinese tales.



By Laura Collins-Hughes

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Book of Mountains & Seas Off Broadway, Play, Puppet Theater | 1 hour 15 minutes | Closing Date: March 20, 2022
St. Ann's Warehouse, 45 Water St. | 718-254-8779

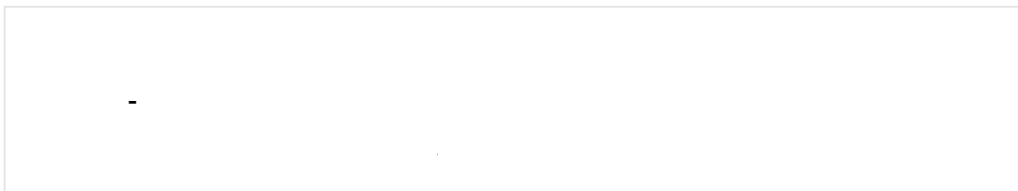
The giant is immense and craggy-limbed, like some primordial creature hewed from the earth or forged from lava. His name is Kua Fu, and in Huang Ruo and Basil Twist’s new choral-theater piece “Book of Mountains & Seas” he is a puppet, towering above his team of puppeteers. When thirst strikes, he lies prostrate to lap up a whole river of white silk, which slips down his gullet and disappears.

This is splendid puppetry, imbued with poignancy and the pulsing, drum-driven drama of mythic quest. A figure from Chinese legend, Kua Fu desires one thing above all, and he will chase it as far as he has to: He wants to capture the sun.

We should be rooting against him, then, if we want the planet to survive. But at St. Ann’s Warehouse on Tuesday night, as “Book of Mountains & Seas” made its American premiere, I found myself solidly on Kua Fu’s side — and feeling consequently like I had aligned my sympathies with Thanos, the ultra-bad guy in Marvel’s “Avengers” movies, which also borrow from mythology to tap into something ancient in us.

Originally scheduled for January at the now-postponed Prototype festival, “Book of Mountains & Seas” is the aesthetic opposite of that blockbuster film franchise — live and handmade, harnessing the power of music, puppetry and human gathering. With a dozen choral singers from the Choir of Trinity Wall Street, two percussionists and six puppeteers — excellent, all — the show retells four Chinese tales borrowed from “Shanhaijing,” a text that is often called in English “The Classic of Mountains and Seas.”

If you’re not already versed in those legends, or fluent in Chinese, you may be lost if you don’t read up on them in advance. The physical program provides two pages of clear, concise synopses. Presented by St. Ann’s Warehouse and Beth Morrison Projects, the performance is sung half in Mandarin and half in a language of the composer-conductor-librettist Huang Ruo’s invention, without English supertitles. Projected Chinese titles give the full text of the stories, but the English text is much briefer — occasional plot updates that generally do the trick if you’ve absorbed those program notes.



For non-Mandarin speakers, it makes for an impressionistic experience, your mind allowed to drift a bit as the vocal tones wash over you. Huang Ruo has said that the combination of song and percussion is as old as humankind, and certainly it feels that way in the first slender myth, about the birth of Pan Gu, who created the world: Out of the primal darkness come the voices, and softly lit faces, of the singers, with percussion sounding from both sides.

Twist, the production's director and designer, keeps the puppetry minimal in that opening scene, but the pieces he uses to make Pan Gu's enormous visage — rice-paper lanterns; large, rough pieces of what look like driftwood or fossils or bones — recur throughout the evening. They are building blocks of this show's world.



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The second myth, “The Spirit Bird,” is about a princess who drowns, transforms into a bird and becomes consumed with her attempt to get revenge on the ocean. But the puppetry — a silken bird, a silken sky that becomes a silken sea — is too simple in its repetition. When an undulating sea creature (made of those driftwood-like bits) swims by, the variety is welcome.

This is also the one section of the show where the precision of Ayumu Poe Saegusa's otherwise extraordinarily meticulous lighting gives way, allowing an errant shadow — of a singer, possibly? — to break the illusion of the ocean.

The last two myths are where “Book of Mountains & Seas” gets exciting. That's partly because they, unlike the others, have built-in drama. There is no conflict in the creation of the world, and the fight between the princess and the sea feels nebulous. But “The Ten Suns” and “Kua Fu Chasing the Sun” have stakes.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

How is it that the 10 puppet suns — rice-paper lanterns bobbing high in the air on long, slender stalks — are quite so charming and mesmeric? Glowing cherry-red when they first appear one by one, they are a happy band of siblings who share the duty of lighting the planet. Their fatal error is to go out together one day, which wreaks disaster. *Twist* makes it a menacing confrontation, with the suns aggressively approaching the audience — the show's one real echo of climate change. Yet when nine of the suns are killed to save the Earth (the program, too, gives this away), the music and the moment have a mournful beauty.

The *pièce de résistance*, though, is the appearance of Kua Fu, the giant we see awakening in the final myth. Never would anyone confuse this stony-looking creature with the mammoth King Kong puppet we saw on Broadway, yet as Kua Fu looks around, getting his bearings, that's exactly who he resembles.

With propulsive, high-tension music to match his urgency, Kua Fu runs in place at center stage, as the sun, a rice-paper lantern, moves around him, out of his long arms' reach. It is mysteriously gripping: this huge, wordless being so filled with longing for what he cannot and should not have; this giant who, if he keeps going, will drink all of the fresh water of the Earth.

He fails in his quest, of course; the program tells you that as well. But here the projected English text, at least, hedges a bit. Because in the legend, when Kua Fu dies, forests of peach blossom trees grow from his walking stick.

The puppet has no walking stick, and no puppet peach blossom trees grow. But wouldn't they have been magnificent?

Book of Mountains & Seas

Through March 20 at St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn; stanswarehouse.org. Running time: 1 hour 15 minutes.