

The Zoonotic Story

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PRODUCTION HISTORY

The Zoonotic Story was originally commissioned by the Stratford Festival (Stratford) and National Arts Centre (Ottawa) in Canada for *The Transformations Project* during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was recorded as an audio drama and released on December 4, 2020 with the following cast and creative team:

WU: Janet Lo
MO: Tom Rooney

Director: Sadie Berlin
Technical Directors: David Campbell and Evan Bonnah-Hawkes
Translations: Sabrina Moella
Sound and Video Editing: Rachel Wormsbecher

CHARACTERS

WU: 70s or older, any gender, Chinese.

MO: 40s or younger, any gender, not Chinese.

SETTING

Bus stop. 2020.

NOTES

Dialogue “in Chinese” means any dialect or form of Chinese: Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka etc.

The playwright is open to compelling artistic choices regarding the characters' race. For example, Wu could be a non-Chinese, Asian character who speaks a language other than Chinese. Or, perhaps a reversal of race, where Wu is played by a non-Chinese actor, and Mo is played by a Chinese actor.

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A bus stop. MO sits on a bench, drinking beer. WU enters, wearing a floppy sun hat and surgical mask, pulling a cart of empty cans and bottles. Wu rummages through a garbage bin. Mo finishes the beer and tosses the empty can, hitting Wu.

WU: *(in Chinese)* Why did you do that?

Mo ignores.

WU: *(in Chinese)* Why did you do that?

MO: Do I look like I understand what you're sayin' to me?

Pause.

WU: Why did you do that?

MO: Couldn't ask me that in English?

WU: I can't speak English.

MO: You're doin' it no problem.

WU: For now. But all our conversation right now, this English... None of this is happening.

MO: What we're saying ain't real?

WU: Treat it as real.

MO: Ooo-kay. You talk this weird shit to everyone you meet?

WU: I've dealt with you people ever since I arrived thirty years ago but never said a word.

MO: Learning English coulda helped. Had thirty years.

WU: I'm speaking to you now. What are you saying to me with that can?

MO: Just givin' you a can.

WU: You're about to do something worse. You don't have to. You can talk to me. I know you have something to say.

MO: Why would I do anything to you?

WU: Same reason you threw the can. The disease.

MO: You have it?

WU: Even if I don't, all you see is your enemy.

MO: Whatever, just don't breathe on me.

Wu takes off the mask.

MO: Put your mask back on.

WU: We are not your enemy.

MO: You're accusin' me of being a— Get outta here with that. This ain't even real.

WU: Imagine it is. I'm giving you this chance to speak to me.

MO: I ain't what you're accusin' me of, if that's what you wanna hear.

WU: Tell me go back where I came from.

MO: When's the bus coming?

WU: Tell me I eat bat and brought the disease.

MO: I don't think you eat bat. Or cat or rat or wombat.

WU: Tell me I've shut down the entire world, you've lost your job—

MO: I DID.

Pause.

MO: Last month. Job at the bar.

WU: My daughter lost her hotel job.

MO: But does she gotta go the Food Bank? Got two kids? Two months late on rent?

WU: We're still waiting for government money.

MO: At least you qualify.

WU: I feel for you. And your family. But I didn't ruin your life. I didn't bring disease.

MO: Someone did. What're you gonna do about it?

WU: Me? Or *we*?

MO: You're playing with my words.

WU: I am going to do this: I will say to you: *(in Chinese)* My son died. *(back to English)* But when I tell you that in a few moments, you won't understand me any more. So I'm telling you now. My son died.

MO: From the disease?

WU: Last month.

MO: Why tell me this in a few moments if you're telling me now?

WU: First you have to say what you want to say to me.

MO: If I had something to say I'd just say it, I ain't afraid of you.

WU: You're afraid of what it reveals about you. To yourself. But you'll say it anyway because it's your truth. Then I will say: *(in Chinese)* MY SON DIED. *(back to English)* And you will stop. I will pick up my hat and keep walking. I will walk the long route home to pick up extra cans and bottles to make an extra one dollar and thirty cents, and to calm myself down, make sure you didn't leave marks on my face. My daughter will ask me, "Why are there marks on your face?" I will say I fell. They will not believe me. I will tell them what happened. My grandson will say, "I'm not putting up with this shit anymore. We always do nothing. Say nothing." I will tell him don't cause a fuss over me. But he'll jump in his car and drive to this bus stop. You will be gone. The bus arrives in six minutes.

MO: Your grandson won't find me?

WU: No. But my granddaughter takes this bus. She fights. I recommend you never use this bus again.

MO: How will they know who to look for?

Wu pulls out a phone...

WU: Smile.

...and takes a photo of Mo.

MO: I would never do what you think I'm gonna do.

WU: You've always stopped yourself. Somehow.

MO: I ain't what you say I am. I ain't capable of doing this.

WU: Today is when you learn something new about yourself.

MO: Whole thing's your imagination. Doesn't need to happen. I can just don't do it.

WU: You're capable of changing. Not sure now talking will accomplish that.

MO: You don't know what's goin' on in my life.

WU: Tell me more.

MO: You still won't understand.

WU: I told you about my son. I understand.

MO: You shouldn't have started talkin' to me.

WU: Before you do what you're going to do—

MO: Accusin' me of being a—

WU: ...I'm giving you people a chance to explain:

MO: Who are *my people*?

WU: Are you going to do this out of Revenge—

MO: What do *my people* look like?

WU: ...or Opportunity. You people who are ugly inside.

Mo hits Wu.

MO: You people're the ones should be explaining!

Mo hits Wu.

MO: YOU'RE THE REASON WHY MY MOTHER DIED.

WU: *(in Chinese)* MY SON DIED.

Mo hits Wu with a final blow. Wu's hat has fallen.

Silence.

Wu picks up the hat.

MO: I understood what you said.

Wu puts on the hat.

MO: I didn't really do that just now, did I?

Wu stares blankly at Mo. Wu puts on the surgical mask.

MO: Can I take it back? Do you still understand me?

Wu shrugs.

MO: Tell me— *Show* me what should have happened.

Wu goes to the garbage bin and pulls out cans and bottles, places them in the cart. Wu picks up the can that Mo threw, places it in the cart. Wu carries on, pulling the cart along, leaving.

End.