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- [March 2008](#) (5)
- [August 2007](#) (2)
- [July 2007](#) (5)

- [May 2007](#) (2)
- [February 2007](#) (5)
- [January 2007](#) (7)
- [December 2006](#) (4)
- [November 2006](#) (4)
- [October 2006](#) (17)
- [September 2006](#) (16)
- [August 2006](#) (18)
- [July 2006](#) (25)
- [June 2006](#) (47)
- [May 2006](#) (31)

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May 15, 2008

## [Review: ME](#)

Filed under: [Reviews](#) — offoffbway @ 2:55 pm



Review of *Me*

A play by Kirk Wood Bromley

Review by Stefan Matthew

Through May 10



[Click here for tickets](#)

I want to preface this review with a personal disclaimer—

I used to live in the backyard of a family of dolphins in Egypt and am very sensitive to the beauty of those creatures and the need for their conservation. I also really, really wanted to like this production.

If in fact as “Me 6” proclaims in Kirk Wood Bromley’s Soho Think Tank/Inverse Theater production of *Me* that, “...we act some more, but the more we act, the less we know what to do”, the playwright of *Me* might have thought to follow his 6th personae’s advice before he reinforced in both script and program notes a vapid American cold-war anti-communism. If as another persona (I counted 12 “Me’s” on stage at any given time in this ambitious but in the last instance politically frustrating piece) recounts—“Belief is the first sign of wrong”, then perhaps the playwright of *Me* might have found it prudent to complicate simplistic arguments indirectly positing ridiculous eco-super human historical super-powers to an already maligned (in a usually racist fashion) Chinese revolutionary leader.

The production note entitled “The Goddess of the Yangtze” asserts that the Yangtze River Dolphin (Bai Ji in Chinese, i.e. white fish) “was targeted by Mao Tse-Tung in his ‘Great Leap Forward.’” The actor playing Baiji asserted the same logic and protested against its being driven to extinction by Chinese revolutionary communist zeal.

There is a huge problem in these assertions, which was part of what spoiled my reception of this production despite its impressive qualities.

Alec Duffy’s direction, Jill Guidera’s choreography, the confident interdependent workings of the ensemble, John Gideon’s suiting score, the lighting, even the puppetry – these elements almost redeem this problem. Bromley’s piece interestingly stretches the boundary of the performative—a bunch of “Me’s” greet the audience and engage you in light conversation prior to the show. I talked to at least two very charming and attractive “Me’s” before the show. Bromley, with great thoughtfulness and care, sets up the entire art space as a “museum of the playwright” for the audience to view on the way to their seats. So why obsess over some flip references to Mao. I don’t want to argue Marxist history, Chinese history, or questions of causality as it relates to ecology; I want to make a point about theater. But in case you were curious—from Brendan O’Neill’ “China’s River of Life”:

The Hungarian Marxist writer Georg Lukacs once said that the essence of opportunism is always to begin with ‘parts and not the whole, symptoms and not the thing itself’. This is an apt description of the current outbreak of mourning over the Yangtze river dolphin. It overlooks ‘the thing itself’ that caused the dolphin to die off: China’s transformation of the Yangtze into a source of nourishment, livelihood and wealth for millions upon millions of human beings. What the Chinese have done to the Yangtze in recent decades could be described as a mini-industrial revolution. Over the past 200 years, and the past 50 years in particular, the Yangtze has become one of China’s main lifelines: its waters support and enable vast amounts of agricultural work, which keep millions of people in employment and produce millions of tonnes of food; the river also allows the transportation of goods – food, medicine, bicycles, computers, furniture – through nine of China’s provinces, which cover 695,000 square miles of land.

The Chinese have harvested the river to make mind-boggling amounts of rice. And as one writer on the world’s rivers points out, rice remains ‘the world’s single most important food crop and a primary food for more than a third of the world’s population’ (6). China accounts for 35 per cent of the world’s rice production. A large proportion of this Chinese rice is cultivated around the Yangtze: each year, the river deposits more than 170million cubic metres of silt, which makes up the fertile plains of the Jiangsu province, and the Chinese use these plains to make ‘abundant harvests’ of rice (7). Millions are employed in China’s rice production industry, and their harvest feeds millions more Chinese as well as

millions of people across the Third World. Remember that soppy Band Aid song 'Feed the world'? Well, China's harvesting of the natural properties of the Yangtze (or what some refer to as its poisoning of the Yangtze) is helping to do precisely that.

The river enables modern industry, too. Tonnes of fish are pulled from the Yangtze every day and transported to Shanghai and other cities across China. Most strikingly, 20,000 labourers are currently working on finishing the Three Gorges Dam. Work started in 1994 and is set to be completed by 2009. At 610 feet tall and one-and-a-half miles wide, the dam is China's largest construction project since the Great Wall. It will be the biggest dam in the world. It will create a five-trillion gallon reservoir which will be 400 miles long and hundreds of feet deep. It will further stabilise the river, allowing freighters weighing up to 10,000 tonnes to navigate their way into the heart of China. The dam's turbines will generate the same amount of electricity as 18 nuclear power plants, and will supply around a ninth of China's electricity. Put another way, they will meet the electricity needs of 150million people. Modern China harvests the Yaghtze for fish, rice production and energy.

Or, for that matter, check out Raymond Williams in his landmark study of the pastoral and counter-pastoral *The Country and The City's* corrective to the nostalgic harkening backwards to "Golden Ages":

These celebrations of a feudal or an aristocratic order...have been widely used, in an idealist retrospect, as a critique of capitalism. The emphasis on obligation, on charity, on the open door to the needy neighbor, are contrasted, in a familiar vein of retrospective radicalism, with the capitalist thrust, the utilitarian reduction of all social relationships to a crude moneyed order.

This leads to an evident crisis of values in our own world. For a retrospective radicalism, against the crudeness and narrowness of a new moneyed order, is often made to do service as a critique of our own day: to carry humane feelings and yet ordinarily to attach them to a pre-capitalist and therefore irrecoverable world...

In fairness to Bromley, at least his representation of the pre-capitalist and irrecoverable world is no idyllic safe-haven. On stage, in the Chinese movement of his work, parents are giving away their children to the rivers and people run the risk of getting 86'd for demonstrating signs of love and compassion. However, Raymond Williams's cautionary point still upholds. Bromley's play interestingly attempts to interrogate the motivations of the playwright — What inspires someone to produce aesthetic representation? This rumination is layered with a personal and at times hilarious examination of aggression in parenting and the often unromantic, unsettling, violent and destructive aspects of intimate unions. As one of the Me's proclaim — "That depends on how you define raped by hippies".

So what is my beef with this show, besides my general hostility to un-savvy hyperbolic attacks on Mao Tse Tung, Marxism, and China in general? (Aside: The US incarcerates the greatest amount of its population per capita in the world and has committed the most egregious war crimes under a false pretext of WMDs, but let's continue to demand China's nonparticipation in the Olympics in deference to Tibet)

"We know the world is dying but we don't know what to do."

It isn't necessarily a play's job to answer that question or prescribe a roadmap for the future. However, aesthetically the play's layering of a Chinese traditional tale from around 200 BC (Was that a white woman with painted eyes in one scene?) with exaggerated flip dismissal of revolutionary Chinese efforts to modernize (however ecologically unfortunate or perhaps misguided) represents a serious limitation in Bromley's latest work.

Its strategy goes a little something like this: Evoke and stage an irrecoverable pre-capitalist myth from a nation to snidely dismiss modern efforts of that nation to improve the life expectancy of its people. All from the vantage point of your host nation (which happens to be the greatest superpower, the largest

purveyor of war, and the greatest consumer of Chinese manufactured goods and home to the theater staging your latest play). All in a grand effort to work out some anxiety you have over the efficacy of performance, the utility of artistic production, and some beef you have with Mommy and Daddy.

Artaud and Brecht used “Asiatic sources” to revolutionize their aesthetic. Bromley re-inscribes a tired anti-communism and Orientalism packaged as dread over Late Capitalist ecological devastation and ennui. T.S. Eliot used the Jews in similar ways, but he didn’t fold a new telling of Fiddler’s source material into his dramatic experiments!

Either way, Mao didn’t kill the dolphins.

On a more pleasant note, Paula Wilson, who plays (yes, you guessed it) Me and Tartalisa rocks. It was a pleasure to listen to her recitation, her singing, and to apprehend her movement. She is an amazing theatrical presence and creative powerhouse. I hope to see her in many a New York production.

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