

MANSION
STRATHMORE

Music in the Mansion

JEN SHYU

Fertile Land, Fertile Body + Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses

solo work-in-progress

Thursday, April 27, 2023, 6:30pm & 8:30pm



Composition, vocals, piano, Japanese biwa, Taiwanese moon lute, dance: Jen Shyu

Director: Alexandru Mihail

Original Lighting Design: Solomon Weisbard

Set and Projection Design: Kristen Robinson

Set and Projection Design: Kate Campbell

Costume Design: Elizabeth Caitlin Ward

PROGRAM & TRANSLATIONS

Fertile Land, Fertile Body work-in-progress + Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses excerpts

1. The Threads of Life

2. “Invocation / Lament for Breonna Taylor” | “Bells for those that can’t hear them”

text by Armen Nalbandian. All other text by Jen Shyu, based on Tamika Palmer’s interview in People Magazine by Christine Pelisek, published June 11, 2020, as well as Tamika Palmer’s interview in *Louisville Courier Journal* by Tessa Duvall and Jonathan Bullington, published Sept. 23, 2020 (all used with permission).

3. “Dad on the Road to Nature”

4. “Body of Tears”

End recording recorded at Oktaven Studios January 10, 2019. Jen Shyu (*piano, vocals, Ableton Live processing*), Ambrose Akinmusire (*trumpet*), Mat Maneri (*viola*), Thomas Morgan (*bass*), Dan Weiss (*drums*)

Translation from Indonesian:

*May 22, 8:57am by phone
after months of silver linings
fading in and out
I’m forced to say
always forced to say, to decide
let’s take it! This break
Agreed.*

5. “When I Have Power”

Chant sung in Resuk language, as taught by Maria de Jesus from Makili, Ataúro, Dili District, Timor-Leste

Translation from Resuk by Nelia Belo and Jen Shyu:

*What a pity
It has cooked but it is now yellow
Summer has arrived
The time has come to clean the farm from front to end*

6. “Backstage Days” / “Finally She Emerges”

7. “En Este Gran Mar de Blanco / El Barrio Chino en La Habana”

Translation from Spanish by Fuensanta Mendez and Jen Shyu / Translation from Mandarin Chinese by Jen Shyu

*I became a woman listening to Chinese but speaking English.
In this great sea of white, there was a drop of yellow.
I remember taking Spanish classes at my school, but there were no Latinos.
I remember walking through Chinatown [in Havana].
And what happened?
I turned to my Cuban love and asked him: “Where are the Chinese?”
“Inside - cooking.” Ah! Then, we chose a restaurant.
It was strange for me - to see a Cuban in Chinese clothes
convincing me to eat the food of my ancestors
He did not have to convince me. But we sat down ... we ate ...
and the waiter said to me: “Ni jiang guo yi? (Do you speak Chinese?)”
Yi dian yi dian! (A little bit!)” But I told him I spoke Spanish better than Chinese.
I’m sorry! And he was disappointed. Oi!
(Chorus) In this great sea of white, there was a drop of yellow.*

8. “With Eyes Closed You See All”

9. “I’ll Not Say Sorry”

(performed on piano and Japanese Satsuma biwa). Traditional Sundanese melody taught to Jen by Acicah, traditionally sung by a grandmother to her granddaughter, comforting her about the mother’s death. I placed this melody in this composition as a declaration to break the cycle of generations of women passing down inherited and internalized patriarchy.

10. “Without These Emotions”

(performed on Taiwanese moon lute) Poetry by Chuang Tzu, translated anonymously into English.
I chose this poem to grace the bookmark of Dad’s memorial service.

11. “Making Love to Nature”

(Korean gayageum recording composed and performed by Jen Shyu)

12. “Life As You Envision”

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Guggenheim Fellow, USA Fellow, Doris Duke Artist, multilingual vocalist–composer–multi–instrumentalist–dancer, **Jen Shyu** is “one of the most creative vocalists in contemporary improvised music” (The Nation). Born in Peoria, Illinois to Taiwanese and East Timorese immigrants, she’s produced eight albums available on her record label Autumn Geese Records on Bandcamp. She has performed at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Metropolitan Museum of Art, National Theater of Korea, Rubin Museum, was named *Downbeat’s* 2017 Rising Star Female Vocalist, and is a Fulbright scholar speaking 10 languages. She has been in residency at the Kennedy Center for REACH’s “Office Hours,” curated by Marc Bamuthi Joseph. She’s worked with such musical innovators as Sumi Tonooka, Terri Lyne Carrington, Nicole Mitchell, Val Jeanty, Ikue Mori, Linda May Han Oh, Anthony Braxton, Wadada Leo Smith, Mark Dresser, Francis Wong, Jon Jang, Vijay Iyer, Tyshawn Sorey, Kenny Barron, Reggie Workman, Bill Frisell, and Immanuel Wilkins. Her *Song of Silver Geese* was among *The New York Times’* “Best Albums of 2017.” She’s currently touring her third solo production *Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses* (commissioned by John Zorn) across all 50 states and has received wide critical acclaim for her latest album *Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses*, with “When I Have Power” landing on Nate Chinen’s “Best Songs of 2021” list for *NPR*. She is a Paul Simon Music Fellows Guest Artist, a Steinway Artist, and the co–founder with Sara Serpa of M³ (Mutual Mentorship for Musicians), a radical model of mentorship for underrepresented women and non–binary composer–performers around the world.

Alexandru Mihail, *director*, is a New York City–based director, originally from Bucharest, Romania. His work, both in Romania and the US—varied in style and genre—is always fueled by the dialogue with the community, unabashedly challenging its fears and striving to redefine with each show the experience of live performance for a contemporary audience. He has directed both new plays and classics, off–Broadway, regionally, and throughout Romania. He also teaches acting and directing at Princeton, New York University, University of the Arts – Philadelphia, and

more. He has won the prestigious UNITER Romanian award for directing and is Drama League Directing Fellow, a New York Theatre Workshop Directing Fellow and a Fulbright Fellow. He graduated UNATC, Bucharest and Yale School of Drama.

Kristen Robinson, *Set and Projection Design*, is a New York City–based set designer. Her work ranges from site–specific installations to outdoor Shakespeare. Selected Credits: *In the Green* at LCT3, *[PORTO]* at WP Theater, *Heart of Darkness* at Baryshnikov Arts Center, *Minor Character* at Under the Radar Festival, *Everybody Black* and *The Thin Place*, Humana Festival at Actors Theatre of Louisville, *Miller Mississippi* at Long Wharf Theatre, *Familiar* at Steppenwolf Theatre, *A Flea in Her Ear* at Westport Country Playhouse, and *Ethel* at Alliance Theatre. She is the assistant professor of scenic design at Purchase College. A Princess Grace Fellow, she holds her M.F.A. from Yale University. Proud member of USA829.

Kate Campbell, *Set and Projection Design*, is a New York City–based designer. Set design credits include: *The Revolutionists*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, *As You Like It*, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, *Stupid Fucking Bird*, *Romeo and Juliet* (Atlantic Stage 2), *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again. Henry VI Part I, The Maids, The Aliens, Dutchman* (Purchase Repertory Theatre Company.) Assistant set design credits include: *Cyrano* under Kristen Robinson (Hudson Valley Shakespeare/Two River Theater) and *Fefu and Her Friends* under Adam Rigg (Theatre for a New Audience.) She holds a B.F.A. in Theatre Design/ Technology from Purchase College, SUNY.

Elizabeth Caitlin Ward, *Costume Design*, works across multiple performance and media platforms, including devised and traditional opera and ballet, spectacle design, dance, acrobatics and aerial ballet, theater, video, film, animation, and classical music concert installation. International: Beijing Music Festival; West End, London; English National Opera; Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet; European Capital of Culture Festival, Lithuania; Simmetrico, Milan/Berlin; Ferrari Museum, Abu Dhabi–Opening Ceremonies; Beijing Olympic Games – Opening Ceremonies (Beijing National Stadium); London International Film Festival; Suzhou Kunqu Opera/Polo Arts,

Beijing; Royal Shakespeare Company; Gonzalo Munoz – Flying Machine and Cirque de Soleil; The Flying Machine Company – Santiago, Chile. US: Adaptive Studios, LA; Artclass – ESPN Creative Projects; Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts – Lincoln Center Festival; Carnegie Hall; Public Theater; BAM – Brooklyn Academy of Music; New York City Opera; Geffen Playhouse; Guggenheim Museum; SITI Company; Signature Theater; New York Chocolate Show; Metropolitan Museum of Art – Costume Institute; Spoleto Festival; Handel & Haydn Society; Sundance Film Festival.

Solomon Weisbard, *Lighting Design*, previously with Jen Shyu on *Solo Rites: Seven Breaths* directed by Garin Nugroho and Nine Doors. Opera and new music collaborations with Robert Wilson (Verdi Festival in Parma, Italy; Festspielhaus Baden Baden, Germany); Experiments in Opera, Invisible Anatomy, Dimenna Center for Classical Music, Maria Chavez, Tri-Cities Opera, Manhattan School of Music, Princeton Opera, Yale Opera. In dance, pieces with Alethea Adsitt, Jennifer Archibald, Joshua Beamish/MOVE, Jonah Bokaer, Christine Bonansea, Ximena Garnica/Leimay, Lane Gifford, LoudHound Movement, Ofelia Loret de Mola, Patricia Noworol, Patrick Lovejoy, Martha Graham Dance Company, Belinda McGuire, Stefanie Nelson, and four major works as associate set designer with Bill T Jones. New York theatre: *Macbeth* (Classic Stage); *Men on Boats* (World Premiere – Playwrights Horizons/Clubbed Thumb); *Duat* (Soho Rep); *America Is Hard to See* (HERE); *The Film Society* (Keen); *Cherry Smoke* (Working Theatre); and four productions with The Barrow Group. Regional theatres: Arden, Berkshire Theatre Festival, Magic, Portland Center Stage, Portland Playhouse, Portland Stage, Quintessence, Westport Country Playhouse, and Yale Rep. MFA: Yale School of Drama.

NOTE FROM THE ARTIST

Tonight is dedicated to my parents who are now reunited in the heavenly realm: Ana Lay Shyu (May 16, 1944–December 8, 2021) and Tsu Pin Shyu (January 19, 1941–April 2, 2019). The evening begins with a short work-in-progress of *Fertile Land, Fertile Body*, which will become a multilingual theatrical work for 20-piece women and non-binary musicians' orchestra who will also act as choir. Based on letters between my parents before they became parents, interviews with environmental scientists, fertility doctors, and women who overcame infertility, or still struggle like myself, and my own notes during Mom's last days in hospice, the full work will use ancient and original music to express intertwined ways of overcoming barrenness in earth and body, and the investigate the meaning of mother.

Flashing back in time, seamlessly transitioning to the invocation for *Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses*, which is dedicated to my father. He passed away unexpectedly during a nap in his favorite chair while I was on a five-month research fellowship in Japan. Unable to wake him, my mom called 911, who arrived with their local Texas sheriff, then sent me an email—which I first thought was spam—that Dad had passed.

Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses is a raw, coming-of-age exploration of grief, legacy, family, race, sexuality, fertility, and technology's effect on our connection with nature and to each other, and our own conflicting ambitions. It's an investigation of life, stemming from the moment my mom handed me my childhood diaries from a shelf in dad's closet. Embodying *Zero Grasses'* closing song, "Life As You Envision," it was my parents who inspired me to live life as I envision it.

Special thanks to Shifting Foundation for commissioning *Fertile Land, Fertile Body* and to Marc Bamuthi Joseph and the Artist Institute at APAP which led to a residency at Kennedy Center's REACH "Office Hours" residency in March 2022 where I first started developing *Fertile Land, Fertile Body*. Also to John Zorn for commissioning *Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses* and deepest gratitude to the original creative team, Alex, Kristen, Solomon, Caitlin, Kate, Neil, and Corinne, for their friendship and dedication to this project. Very special thanks to my dearest late mother, Ana Shyu, who passed away December 8, 2021, and who got to see *Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses* virtually at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also thanks to Arnav Shah, Gregory Wylie, Carla Grande, David Pfendler, Desri Yulita Taek, Nelia Belo, Naldo Rei, Fuensanta Mendez, Rodrigo Parejo, and Garin Nugroho. *Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses* was made possible by the support of Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, United States Artists Fellowship, Guggenheim Fellowship, NYSCA/NYFA Fellowship, Japan-US Friendship Commission's US-Japan Creative Artists Fellowship, Hermitage Artist Retreat, and Civitella Ranieri Foundation.

—Jen Shyu

As part of Jen's partnership with WEARTH, a tree will be planted in the Tsu Pin Shyu | 徐澤濱 Forest in Saskatchewan, Canada for every ticket sold. Interested in participating? Upon arrival at the Mansion at Strathmore, sign Jen Shyu's mailing list in order to virtually plant and dedicate your tree for free.



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