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AN EXOTIC HOLIDAY TREAT

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The Secret of Dongting Lake

Written by Michelanne Forster

Directed by Ben Crowder

presented by THE EDGE in association with The Oryza Foundation for Asian Performing Arts

at Concert Chamber - Town Hall, THE EDGE, Auckland

From 4 Oct 2010 to 9 Oct 2010

Reviewed by [Nik Smythe](#), 6 Oct 2010

The long, wide traverse stage starts out empty save for the large paper full moon hung at one end and a tall oblong paper window at the other, framed by hanging bamboo poles that represent walls, or curtains. As the always-exciting dry ice coats the stage floor and a flock of indigo satin River Spirits appear to leap mischievously about, it's clear we're in for a spectacular experience.

Celebrated local children's theatre director Ben Crowder carries an energetic young all-Asian cast through a flamboyant adventure of wonder and surprise. There's no confirmation of it in the programme but a media release advises that *The Secret of Dongting Lake* is based on a Chinese folk story. It certainly plays out in that classical form.

Playwright Michelanne Forster weaves together a supernatural yarn concerning Chen Yang (Min Kim), a poor village peasant made good. On the way he encounters fearsome armies, Dragon spirits, a beautiful princess and a plethora of hilarious characters to impress and delight the largely waist-height audience.

JJ Fong as Princess Lotus Flower is as strong-willed as she is beautiful. She and Kim are attractive and worthy heroes for the romantics in the crowd.

The matriarch of the island in the middle of Dongting Lake is Lotus Flower's mother, the proud and haughty Empress (Omer Gilroy). Her best friend and comedy sidekick Lady Wisteria (Yuri Kinugawa) is a most amusing sort of clown character, often frantic with confusion and not above physical violence.

Other standouts among the excellent players are top acrobat Mitchell Kwan – whose main role Liang Xing is the unheralded hero of the story, given he concocted the miracle healing ointment with which Chen Yang curries favour with royalty – and Leand Macadaan as the pompous General Wong and the less warranted pompous leader of the prison rats.

The whole ensemble brings all the energy and dynamism needed to serve the eventful tale, with sympathetic characters pitched at a level that ensures we are fully behind the underlying sentimentality.

Philip Dexter's sumptuous lighting design shines and dances on the charming set designed by Simon Coleman (as are presumably the splendidly opulent props). Sara Taylor also has something of a fairy-tale dream job creating about fifty-odd largely flamboyant costumes for a cast of twelve, over half of which play numerous roles.

The original composition and sound design of Andrew McMillan supports and augments the authentic folk-tale atmosphere both with elaborate orchestral soundtracks and simple percussive live tunes played to colourful dance routines, choreographed by Megan Adams. All these elements combine with entertaining characters, splendid acrobatic displays and a smattering of martial arts to produce a satisfying, accomplished exotic holiday treat for the family.

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