



The Enchantress of Evanston
The Transformative Art of Mary Zimmerman
by Jerry James

“One thing I really like is to try to stage the impossible.”

— Mary Zimmerman



The White Snake, The Rogue Theatre, 2017

Mary Zimmerman is a pure product of Northwestern University, located in the Chicago suburb of Evanston. She arrived as a freshman, earned three degrees and currently holds an endowed chair—the CV of an accomplished academic.

But Zimmerman is also a director and playwright, winner of 20 Joseph Jefferson Awards for Excellence in Chicago Theatre and the 2002 Tony Award for Best Direction of a Play (*Metamorphoses*, which she also wrote). Moreover, she is a 1998 recipient of a MacArthur Foundation grant, the “Genius” award. The citation honored her “blend[ing] strong visual images, sensual movement, music and

poetry to create stimulating, compelling and momentous theater.”

Not in the citation but equally important: During the decade before Zimmerman was appointed an assistant professor in 1994, she supported herself by working as an office temp.

Because Mary Zimmerman has had as many plays produced by The Rogue Theatre as anyone not named Shakespeare—*The Journey to the West* (2012), *The White Snake* (2017) and *The Secret in the Wings* (2019)—it seems fitting to examine how she came to a career spent in creating a theatre steeped in both narrative and image, a theatre of transformation.

Early Life



Mary Zimmerman, Age 5

Mary Zimmerman was born in Omaha, Neb., on August 23, 1960, the daughter of two professors at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her father was in physics; her mother, in comparative literature.

When Mary was five, her father won a teaching fellowship in England. There, a teacher read *The Odyssey* to her class every day. “Unbelievably galvanizing and thrilling,” she told the *LA Times*, perhaps because, like Odysseus, she was a stranger in a strange land.

Back home, “As soon as I learned to read, that was it.” (*LA Times*) Mary read like a demon, fairy and folk tales, as well as myths (some of which she would later stage) from her mother’s copy of Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*.

What was it about these tales? “On one hand it’s just the adventure, but it also was sort of, I think, teaching me or helping me try to figure out how to be a person. To this day I sort of feel like I don’t understand the meaning of a lot of those stories, and in staging them I’m trying to get close to their meaning, their mystery.” (*LA Times*)

While in high school, Mary decided to become an actress. She chose Northwestern because it offered \$200 more in scholarship money.

Northwestern University

Entering as a comparative literature student, Zimmerman changed her major to acting before the first quarter ended. Very soon, she was given to understand that a career as an actress would be difficult, because she wasn’t pretty. “I never for a second thought I’d have a career in the theatre. I just couldn’t *not* do it,” she told Anne Bogart. But what was It?

One of her professors was Frank Galati (adapter of *The Grapes of Wrath*, done by The Rogue in 2018). Galati encouraged her to go to grad school in the Department of Performance Studies. “I had this very strong narrative impulse, but then I took this performance art class,” in which she staged the myth of Leda and the swan.

Zimmerman used a big bedsheet and her cat. She flapped the sheet to represent the swan. The cat stayed hidden in another room until its big moment, when Zimmerman popped it into a pillowcase and held it up before the class to represent “the monstrous fetus” that would later cause world destruction. The cat scratched and clawed inside the fabric. “It was pretty effective,” she says. “You couldn’t really tell what was inside.” Until she let the cat out of the bag. (*Northwestern*)

Apprentice Years

There is a strong tradition of Performance in America, dating back to the Living Theatre’s work in the 1960s, work that was heavy on images and short on narrative. Without really knowing it, Zimmerman was moving toward a theatre that would link these two seemingly contradictory ideas.

Her twin epiphanies came in the mid-1980s. First, she saw Peter Brook’s production of *The Mahabharata*. It took three nights to tell the Hindu epic narrative. “Its story was so rich and large and deep and big.” Then, she saw Pina Bausch’s *Arien*, “I think what it might have taught me... was that things can be profoundly emotional that are not narrative...” (Bogart) Narrative *and* Image. She had finally found It,

the reason why she couldn't *not* be in the theatre.

Mary Zimmerman created her first theatre piece, the 20-minute *Godiva*, at Northwestern in 1987. This retelling of the Lady Godiva legend had only one line of dialogue. Half-jokingly, she explained that she came to directing because she couldn't express herself in other ways. She told *TheatreMania*, "I sort of felt like I'd found my vocation, because I used to have fantasies of being able to record my dreams on a machine, or hire someone to paint the images I saw."

She learned her kind of theatre, Zimmerman told WFMT, by "doing every single thing myself and having an idea and being driven by it." In the summer of 1987, she was driven to direct a version of *The Odyssey*, the text that had been swimming in her head for over 20 years. It caught the attention of Lookingglass Theatre Company.

Chicago



The Odyssey, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2017

Lookingglass was founded by former Northwestern students who worked in a "body-is-all" aesthetic derived from the work of Jerzy Grotowski, the Polish director. Zimmerman now had a strong text from which to work; some images that had been with her since childhood; and a physical company—a company that could transform itself into those images.

Transformation! It's at the very heart of *The Odyssey*, an epic in which men transform into swine; gods transform into whatever; and a king transforms into a beggar to extract a

terrible vengeance. Zimmerman & Co. transformed 14 chairs into every locale needed to depict Odysseus' 10-year journey home.

The two-part epic made her name in Chicago. Zimmerman would go on to create 12 more plays for Lookingglass over the course of 28 years. Of these, none was more important than *The Arabian Nights* (1992). Through one of those quirks of the theatre, that play would provide her entrée to New York.

New York and Beyond



The Arabian Nights, Lookingglass Theatre, 2009

In January 1994, the Manhattan Theatre Club announced that because Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* wouldn't be ready for the spring season, a reshuffling had occurred. The *NY Times* reported, "Moving into the vacant slot... is *The Arabian Nights*, a contemporary adaptation by Mary Zimmerman, imported from the Lookingglass Theater."

This production put her on the NYC radar, but instead of staying there, Zimmerman returned to Chicago, where she continued to create new works. Among these was *Metamorphoses*, first produced by Lookingglass in 1998. In 2001, Second Stage brought it to Off Broadway. Based on Ovid and set in and around a pool of water, *Metamorphoses* was a smash, transferring to Broadway and winning Zimmerman the Tony.

Today Mary Zimmerman, a full professor at Northwestern, directs plays, musicals and Shakespeare all over the country and opera at

the Metropolitan. But she still creates her own new works. The latest, with Lookingglass, is a wordless adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* (2018).

The Process



Mary Zimmerman in rehearsal, 2015

When creating her own work, Mary Zimmerman goes into rehearsal without a script. She will write that during rehearsals. But she always begins with three things: a date certain for performance, a text and an image. “I don’t adapt a story unless, as I’m reading it, I have a huge idea of how to do it visually. That’s what draws me to the story as much as its intrinsic meaning and value,” she told the *Chicago Tribune*.

“I will start on the first day, and there will be a scene I’m thinking of doing or an episode or a story. And we’ll sit in a circle and pass the book around, and everyone reads a paragraph or stanza and passes it on to the next person. And we talk about it, talk about what we like in it, what seems to be important about it. So there is always a text that’s backgrounding.” (*TheatreMania*.)

When the script comes, it will *not* be developed through improvisation. “I’m very controlling about that... I’m a real stickler about saying this: I don’t do verbal improvisation. I write it. But what I will do is

tons of physical and imagistic improvisation. Like, I’ve this idea how to do the camel, or I’ve this idea how to do the boat. And then we try it. Usually, 80% works or doesn’t, and then we ditch it or improve, and go on to something else.” (*TheatreMania*)

She will usually have some text by the second day. “Sometimes there’s text because I had to write some scenes for the auditions. Sometimes those scenes end up in the play and sometimes they don’t, but I can start there. I don’t ever start anything dead cold. If you’re doing *The Arabian Nights*, you’re doing it because you like this story and that story. I just dive into what I know I’m going to do. I know I love this scene, so we’ll start there. I start with the thing I have confidence about, and we’ll branch out in all directions from there.”

After rehearsal, Zimmerman goes to bed at 9:00 PM. She wakes at 2:00, writes until 6:00, then sleeps until 9:00 AM. There’s no time for writer’s block—new pages are essential. When she’s working on a play, she told *Chicago Magazine*, “I feel completely caught by the ideas. They won’t let me alone.”

With all of this, she still cannot pinpoint where her visual images come from. From her dreams, perhaps. Dreams which she will then transform in to art.

Her advice to aspiring Mary Zimmermans? “Produce yourself. Don’t wait for someone to offer you anything. Force your friends to do something with you in some basement for two nights at 11 PM. That’s how you learn. You have to practice this in order to get good. Those early, self-produced experiences may be fiascos, attended by 13 people or whatever—that is the only way to get any good.” (WFMT)

Last words? She told Anne Bogart, “A friend of mine once said, ‘You know, you’re up there on stage, the matinee. It’s terrible. You’re hating it. And someone in row XX is having their life changed. It’s absolutely true.’”

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.