

Inspiration for m. butterfly



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Based on a true story that stunned the world, *M. Butterfly* opens in the cramped prison cell where diplomat Rene Gallimard is being held captive by the French government – and by his own illusions. In the darkness of his cell he recalls a time when desire seemed to give him wings. A time when Song Liling, the beautiful Chinese diva, touched him with a love as vivid, as seductive – and as elusive – as a butterfly. How could he have known, then, that his ideal woman was, in fact, a spy for the Chinese government – and a man disguised as a woman? What inspired Hwang to write the play, and most importantly, what do the real life Song and Butterfly have to say about what really happened? *M. Butterfly*, by David Henry Hwang, is set in several different places and time periods. It begins in the present, in Gallimard's prison cell in Paris. Gallimard is the former French diplomat who has been imprisoned for treason, and as he tells his story, the scenes flashback from locations in Beijing, China, from 1960 to 1970 to locations in Paris from 1966 to the present. However, Hwang was not the first person to pen the story. The original story came about in 1898 when John Luther Long was inspired by his sister's chance meeting with the real Butterfly's grown son. Not long after, the short story *Madame Butterfly* appeared in the *Century Magazine*. According to his sister Butterfly's 'husband' had been a British merchant, and her attempted suicide had failed. (Origins, 1) David Belasco, the Broadway legend and writer, later wrote the one-act play *Madame Butterfly*, which premiered March 5, 1900 at the Herald Square Theater in New York to great success. Apart from beginning at the point when Pinkerton has already been gone two years, the play closely follows the story of Long's original. However, Belasco believed there would be more drama if Butterfly succeeded in killing herself. Then Pinkerton would arrive in time to

remorsefully cradle the dying body. Adelaide is renamed Kate. Belasco also took a big theatrical risk by taking fourteen minutes for Butterfly to stand stationary waiting for Pinkerton as a lighting effect showed the passing of the night. It was a success. (Origins, 2) Later in the same year Belasco's play was presented in London at the Duke of York's Theatre, this time on the program with Jerome K. Jerome's Miss Nobbs. Puccini was in London for the premiere of Tosca at Covent Garden and saw the play on opening night. Even without fully understanding the dialogue, Puccini was so moved by the play he immediately knew he wanted to create an opera of the story and rushed backstage to meet Belasco. Puccini's first version of the opera failed at La Scala in 1904, but a revised version was successful the same year, the version that we hear today, one of the most frequently produced operas in the entire repertory. As an opera, Madame Butterfly is a staple of even the most innovative opera houses and has been seen practically everywhere opera can be seen. Each director has placed his or her own mark to put on it. (Origins, 2) In Hwang's version he touches on themes such as: East vs. West, man vs. woman, sexuality, power relations, race, gender, class, stereotypes, fantasy, etc. Hwang set out to write a play that would deconstruct the race and gender stereotypes that the West has adopted in its dealings with Eastern culture. First, he had to show these stereotypes in operation. Negative Western images of the Chinese occur frequently throughout the play. Gallimard complains that the Chinese are arrogant, a view which he learned in Paris, where, according to him, it is a common belief. M. Butterfly is one of the most celebrated of recent American plays, and the first by an Asian American to win universal acclaim. It was first produced in 1988 and won numerous awards, including the Tony Award for Best Play of the Year, <https://assignbuster.com/inspiration-for-m-butterfly/>

the New York Drama Desk Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Broadway play, and the John Gassner Award for the season's outstanding new playwright. M. Butterfly enjoyed a popular run on Broadway and when it moved to London's Shaftsbury Theatre in 1989 it broke all box office records in the first week. In his version the Westerner is once again French and it is he who takes his life as the only honorable escape from public betrayal. In the past 15 years, David Henry Hwang has written more than a dozen plays and screenplays'. Born in Los Angeles to a banker and a professor of piano, both of whom are Chinese immigrants, Hwang has said that when he was young, he regarded his Chinese ancestry as " a minor detail, like having red hair,"(qtd in " early years") but later added that the combination of wanting to delve in Chinese and Chinese-American history for artistic reasons and being exposed to an active third-world consciousness movement" was what started to get him interested in his roots while in college. He graduated from Stanford University in 1979 with a B. A. in English, and briefly taught high school before attending the Yale School of Drama in 1980 and 1981. (Hwang, David Henry: A Literary Biography, " early years")Aside from playwriting, Hwang has also worked as a theatre director, and has written a number of screenplays including M. Butterfly and Golden Gate. He also made a preliminary adaptation of Heinrich Harrer's Seven Years in Tibet. A critic writing for Time Magazine stated " the final scene of M. Butterfly, when the agony of one soul finally takes precedence over broad-ranging commentary, is among the most forceful in the history of the American theater.... Hwang has the potential to become the first important dramatist of American public life since Arthur Miller, and maybe the best of them all." (Hwang, David Henry: A Literary Biography, " early years")Hwang feels that writing is " a

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search for authenticity”, and for two years, Hwang stopped writing. “ I hit a period of writer’s block and I looked at my work and some of it had more dragons and gongs and stuff, and some of those seemed to be more popular. I was wondering if I was repackaging old stereotypes in more intellectually hip forms.” Authenticity is an extremely heated debate among Asian Americans and among people in general. The most common criticism an Asian-American author hears is that his or her work reinforces stereotypes. M. Butterfly was criticized for reinforcing the stereotype of Asian men being effeminate. (Hwang, David Henry: 1994 William L. Abramowitz Guest Lecturer, MIT, 15 April 1994)When asked why Hwang wrote M. Butterfly, he replied, “ In some sense, M. Butterfly allowed me to explore the very issues of authenticity which had caused the writer’s block. I created a French diplomat who was caught up in all Orientalist fantasy and in doing so, I was exploring both the popularity and the seductiveness of these stereotypes. Through the combination of fantasy and reality that’s in the play, I’m asking whether it’s really possible to see the truth, to see the authenticity about a culture, a loved one, or even ourselves.” (Hwang, David Henry: 1994 William L. Abramowitz Guest Lecturer, MIT, 15 April 1994)Hwang chooses to address the subject of authenticity because “ a lot of these debates come down to some sort of struggle over whether we can reach a definition of objective truth, whether or not we can define a universal standard of excellence. I think that those of us who write about minorities, women, gays, whatever, are often criticized for being inauthentic by our own group and in turn, some of us like myself, also go and criticize other people for being inauthentic. So I feel like I’ve been on both sides of that fence and I’m going to frame this a little bit in terms of my own artistic journey. But I’m a playwright and my

journey is essentially a personal one.” (Hwang, David Henry: 1994 William L. Abramowitz Guest Lecturer, MIT, 15 April 1994)M. Butterfly reminds us of the varied ways American drama and theatre are confronting with imagination and spirit and some of the more vexed political and social issues of our day. M. Butterfly has been sometimes regarded as an Anti-American play when in fact it is quite the opposite. “ I consider it a plea to all sides to cut through our respective layers of cultural and sexual misperception, to deal with one another truthfully for our mutual good, from the common and mutual ground we share as human beings.” (Qtd. in “ Afterward”) In other words, Hwang feels that writing the play was his chance to open other people’s eyes to the way in which other people live and once we do that, we will all be a lot happier and respect each other more as individuals. As for the real Butterfly, it is said that the actual affair went on for 19 years when, according to Bernard Boursicot, the inspiration for the character of Gallimard, the affair lasted only a few months in 1965. When Bernard, who was used to getting everything his heart desired, met Shi Peipu, the onetime opera singer, and inspiration for the character of Song, he pursued him with intensity. Now, you may be wondering if Bernard knew that Shi was a man. Well, despite the story, which is told in M. Butterfly, Shi was not dressed as a woman at their first meeting and Bernard never saw his lover perform a woman on stage. The person Bernard saw, and was attracted to, was a young man who was witty and the center of attention at a party. “ He was telling a lot of stories and he was attractive and someone that I thought I would like to know,” says Boursicot. (Qtd in “ Real Butterfly”) The two men give conflicting versions of how Boursicot came to believe his good friend was a woman. Shi, who insists he never told Boursicot he was a girl, says Bernard mistakenly came to that

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conclusion on his own. " I was showing him a scrapbook from when I was in the theatre, and I came to a picture from The Story of the Butterfly . . . ," says Peipu. (qtd in " real butterfly") " I was explaining this story to him in French, but my French wasn't very good and when I got to the part where I said, ' I played the role of the girl,' Monsieur Boursicot said, I understand! I am so happy!' " Couldn't Shi have set him straight? " I tried to," he says, " but he didn't believe me. And I didn't want to take my pants down. I loved him so much. He was so innocent. It's me who was the criminal." (qtd in " real butterfly") Boursicot tells a different tale: ". . . We went for a walk on a bridge near the Forbidden City, a very romantic place. Shi had something to tell me: He was a woman, just like the person in the Chinese legend. Shi said that he was his mother's third daughter, — Shi did have two older sisters, and that when he was born. His mother, afraid her husband would divorce her for not producing a son, decided to bring Shi up as a boy. Shi said I must keep this secret to protect his family. And I did, for 20 years. . . . It seemed possible. His face was completely without hair, he had the hands of a woman, and the Chinese women had very little breasts. . . ." When Shi had finished his story, Boursicot recalls, " I said, ' It's okay, you are a woman. We can share our life together. I will always be your friend.' (qtd in " real butterfly") Yet the relationship grew over time. Boursicot insists he was not blackmailed into passing information to the Chinese but volunteered. Furthermore, he didn't feel like a traitor. " France was not at war with China," he says. " I did not give the Chinese everything they wanted, only papers reflecting how the powers felt about China." (qtd in " real butterfly") The French government would eventually describe Shi as " the main component in the plot." (qtd in " real butterfly") Eventually, the friendship

between Bernard and Shi dissolved and the two were arrested by the French government where Shi confessed everything and Bernard only found out that Shi was a man through a news report he heard on the radio. At the end of the play, Song's transformation is complete. No longer the Butterfly, he is now dressed in a well-cut suit and is in a Paris courthouse. It is now 1986, and the year in which the scandal hits the press. The audience is also treated to his interpretation of events, which are no longer flashbacks in Gallimard's mind, but actual courtroom testimony. Song tells the judge how he came to meet Gallimard, why and how Gallimard came to think he was a woman, and why he shared top-secret government information with the French government, which led to the arrest of the two gentlemen.

Works Cited

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