

# A Ghost in my Suitcase

Adapted by Vanessa Bates  
From the novel by Gabrielle Wang



**CURRENCY PRESS**  
The performing arts publisher

## MAKING SPACE FOR SPIRITS

---

As the child of a librarian, I grew up devouring fantasy books, my spare hours spent lost in strange worlds. So when I stumbled across Gabrielle Wang’s wonderful novel *A Ghost in My Suitcase*, while searching for new stories for Barking Gecko Theatre Company, I was beyond excited. Here was an Australian fantasy epic with all the delicate moral questioning and fierce imagination of Philip Pullman or Ursula Le Guin. And although the story was set entirely in China and full of the fantastical, it was quintessentially Australian in its exploration of diaspora and belonging. Almost everyone living in Australia has roots elsewhere. Many of us feel the pull of this history very strongly and I felt this aspect would resonate strongly with children, as they develop their sense of place and identity in the world. I still feel so fortunate to have been able to work with the formidably talented Vanessa Bates and the entire creative team to find a new form for this story and share it with thousands of children around the country.

We began the adaptation process with hundreds of pages full of wonderful words. And some big creative challenges! The novel is a great yarn spun by a master storyteller, with many layers. The most obvious layer is the action-adventure story, which carries us along with a series of escalating ghost battles in an ancient Chinese water town. Then there is the layer of revelation—family secrets are gradually uncovered as we travel onwards and the past and present draw closer together. And beneath these is a layer of reflection—the deep interiority of the central character Celeste who is learning to process her grief, guided by the calm Daoist philosophy of her grandmother. In adapting the novel to the stage, the challenge was how to make these layers work in a theatrical form. And we found a key answer in the idea of ‘negative space’.

‘The Uses of Not’

Thirty spokes meet in the hub.

Where the wheel isn’t is where it’s useful.

Hollowed out, clay makes a pot.

Where the pot's not is where it's useful.  
Cut doors and windows to make a room.  
Where the room isn't, there's room for you.  
So the profit in what is is in the use of what isn't.

Lao Tzu,  
from *Tao Te Ching*,  
translated by Ursula Le Guin

Negative space is something that Daoist poet-philosopher Lao Tzu understood 2,500 years ago. In fact, he explains it so well that I am tempted to just leave it at that. But I have been asked to write a few more words, so for those who are interested, I'll use the space to explore how we applied this idea to Vanessa's adaptation and our production.

Negative space is not always easy to define in the theatre, but I like to think of it as space left intentionally empty for an audience to fill. This is vital if an audience is to be truly engaged. When and how to use negative space is a big question, particularly when adapting a multi-layered work of fantasy such as this one. There are times to lean into the literal depiction of spectacle and fantastical imagery and times to leave space free for the imagination of the audience. In some ways I think that for Vanessa, translating the book into theatrical form with space for an audience to feel and respond, was as much an act of creation of something new as one of adaptation of an existing work.

Our process has been one of paring back words, actions, scenes and characters to make room. For theatre creatures who love the English language as much as Vanessa and I do, this has been about discovering new languages—in light, sound, tempo and architecture. It has taken three years of disciplined subtraction. In this time, we have had the great luxury of four creative developments including two trips to China and a trial season, followed by performances at three national festivals. At each stage, the 'pot' has hollowed a little more until, by our final season in Perth (this published script), I feel that we made enough room for audience and actors.

As you would imagine for a work of fantasy, there are elements of our production where the lyrical language of the novel gives way to pure visual spectacle. This applied most strongly to the action layer in the story: a kabuki drop where a silky fabric descends from the heavens as night falls over a haunted house, cloaking the stage in darkness; or a

highly detailed filmed ‘tracking shot’ down the canal of a water town, projected on every vertical surface in the space; or the cacophony of real-world images that is Shanghai airport, or the climactic martial-arts-style battle with two ghosts. Little needs to be said when you are showing so much visually.

Then there were scenes where very little was shown either. One of our young test audience’s favourite scenes was our depiction of a bus full of frogs, created primarily with the artful composition of actors’ bodies and sound. Here the audience are enlisted to create the image with their own imaginative forces—the frogs, the bus and the world of rural China beyond the foggy windows. Or for our first ghost encounter, the ghost of the French chef, who never appears on stage but whose earthquake-like energy manifests in actors’ bodies and in sound.

Negative space also exists in Vanessa’s text itself: language constructed in a way that invites reflection via omissions, inferences, ambiguity and mystery. Celeste asks, ‘Por Por, why do people have to die?’, which is answered with silence and a brief wordless touch between the actors. Most of the ‘interior’ passages—Celeste’s asides to the audience—have gradually lost almost all of their text, as we realised the actor and dramatic context communicate so much more powerfully with silence.

‘Begin as you mean to continue’ is a useful maxim in art as well as in life. So a big question in adapting *A Ghost in My Suitcase* was: who has a seat at the table in the very first development? When our creative team first met in early 2016, there were five of us. Vanessa and I led the process of dissection of the novel—labelling its bones, muscles and arteries in a process vital to give our adaptation its physiology. But other aspects of our time together shaped our approach on a deeper level. My co-director Ching Ching Ho brought a wealth of unique perspectives, provocations and cultural insights into the room. Designer Zoe Atkinson inspired us to think in multiple theatrical languages and distil the work to theme and image. And novelist Gabi Wang taught us Tai Chi and read to us from Ursula Le Guin’s stunning translation of Lao Tzu.

These first offers set the tone for all that was to come over the following three years—the wise Daoist aphorisms of Por Por, the fluid ghost-fighting style of Ting Ting, the constantly shifting set of overlapping boxes and the moments of nuanced cultural exchange

in the characters' interactions all have their origins in this beginning. The show continued to evolve in this spirit up until our final season, with investigations of design and use of space given equal weight to explorations of text and the body of the actor.

In the following months, media artist Sohan Ariel Hayes came on board to collect and select imagery for the show, including travelling with Ching Ching on a field trip to locations around China. The sound design was lovingly crafted by Perth composer Rachael Dease, featuring her hauntingly beautiful compositions which brought Celeste's ghost songs to life. Matt Marshall effortlessly sculpted light to give each ghost its own unique energy and ambiance. And among all this, we had multiple rounds of nationwide casting over two years to find five extraordinary, multi-talented performers: Amanda Ma, Frieda Lee, Yilin Kong, Imanuel Dado and Alice Keohavong.

So on to the only question that really matters: what have audiences made of it? Children around the country have responded with joy and a depth of feeling. The best responses have been wordless—the numerous recreations of ghost fights in foyers around the country after each show, as the children attempt to replicate Yilin Kong's martial arts moves. Consistently children have said their favourite moment in the show is not a ghost battle, it is the moment where Celeste finally scatters her mother's ashes and finds release. I have loved the letters we have received. From the child who wrote us a poem about his newfound love for kabuki drops, to the one who said the play 'made me feel completely void from reality', to the child who told us 'It was my first time attending the theatre ... it made me feel like I was in China'. I'll share one adult response, which speaks to the cultural meaning that an audience can find in stories like this one:

Tonight Mum and I were entranced by a story that was about us. I was struck by the feeling of wanting to cry simultaneously while I was beaming from ear to ear. Experiencing your difference as an identity is powerful ... As a child of mixed race in Australia, at times I felt, or was made to feel, like my identity was nothing. To see Celeste's strength as a Eurasian woman was stunning. Representation matters, matters, matters ... Thank you to the mighty little team at Barking Gecko Theatre for sharing this beautiful production.

Finally, the process of inspiration can travel in unexpected directions. After our first development, novelist Gabrielle Wang began work on a sequel, which she's called *Ting Ting the Ghosthunter*. The novel acknowledges that first group of creatives that met in the Melbourne Arts Centre way back at the start of 2016:

A special thank you to Matt, Felix [Ching Ching], Vanessa and Zoe—fellow ghost travellers and play makers.

It is a deeply satisfying thought to feel that we have somehow contributed to Gabi's next novel (a great read by the way!).

Thank you again to Vanessa Bates and the entire creative team for all their passion and craft in adapting this work for the stage. And a huge thank you to Barking Gecko and to Perth, Sydney and Melbourne Festivals for investing in the work's creation. With a published script, I hope there are many more young people who see, read and perform the work and make their own connections! I look forward to future teams of ghost hunters taking the story somewhere none of us expect in its next incarnations.

*Matt Edgerton*  
*July 2019*

Matt Edgerton is a theatre director. He helped develop *A Ghost in My Suitcase* during his time as Artistic Director of Barking Gecko Theatre Company.