

Chipo Chung is a Zimbabwean-Chinese actress and activist based in London. She has worked on a suite of television and theatrical productions over the last fifteen years. On television she has featured in *Dr Who*, *AD The Bible Continues* and *Into the Badlands*. In this interview she discusses her performance as Dido in the 2017 RSC production of *Dido, Queen of Carthage*.

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<http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2019/chung>

Jan Haywood: I am delighted to be in conversation with the actor Chipo Chung, who starred as Dido in Kimberley Sykes' 2017 powerful adaptation of Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. I thought we'd start, Chipo, by talking about your background, and how it is that you came to star as Dido in Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, a play which is not often performed, especially when compared with most of Shakespeare's plays.

Chipo Chung: Well, I'm from Zimbabwe, which is a post-colonial country where people speak English better than the British, and where I loved classical poetry as a teenager. Indeed, I always wanted to work at the RSC. It was a big dream of mine to go to RADA and be at the RSC and so that was my route through University and then Drama School.

I auditioned for the RSC about 10 times but I never got in, which was quite frustrating because I loved classic texts – I wanted to be a classical actor because I love heightened poetry and heightened verse. So I was very grateful to Kimberley [Sykes] for casting me in this production, because I'd almost given up on my classical career. And, an interesting thing, casting in the classical world is very masculine. There's always at least a 60:40 if not a 75:25 ratio of male to female parts in a Shakespeare play.

JH: I can imagine!

CC: Yes, so there's that. And, then there is the fact that the classical world is generally quite conservative. People who are interested in classical literature are generally older, white and of a certain educational background, and I don't fit into that category. So I don't think I've been easily castable in the classical world. But I'm really pleased and proud that my debut at the RSC was playing a part that I consider to be African, since Carthage is in Africa. For Dido was a female leader in Africa, and that's why I got the part – a part that could be interpreted as ethnic. Although not necessarily, of course ... when I watched [another adaptation of the play] in 2009 she was portrayed as tall and blonde, and the reason why she was tall and blonde is because Virgil describes Dido as tall and blonde. I realise that because I watched it and I was somewhat confused. He [Aeneas] was Scottish as well in that production, but they were both blonde, and the difference between them, I thought was quite provincial, between an English blonde and a Scottish blonde. But, when I read the

Aeneid, I understood why that casting choice had been made: it's because Virgil describes her as 'golden-haired'.

JH: I know that you played Ismene in *Phèdre* at the National Theatre in 2009, but it seems to me that this is one of the first times you've starred in a production that concerns classical antiquity. So in *Phèdre* you have Hippolytus, and in this play there are characters that stem from the Trojan War tradition. I wonder if you could say a bit more, then, about your interest in classical literature.

CC: I'm not a Classics scholar, I went to Yale as an undergrad and I underwent a liberal arts education. Generally, I concentrated on theatre studies, but I did do one Classics semester, where I read the *Iliad*, as well as various other classical texts. I'd probably say that's the limit of my academic knowledge of the classical world, but it certainly is familiar to me – the mythology and the stories are all familiar to me. My education at Yale, it was partly academic, partly practical, and my directing teacher was a bit of a magician and so the idea of 'theatre is ritual' was very much instilled in me ... it's something that I deeply believe: that theatre is not simply entertainment.

I mean, that's the Greek version of theatre, of catharsis etcetera – that there is a ritual of cleansing that happens when you go to the theatre. But, in many other ways, I suppose because I'm from Africa and we don't have traditional dramatic forms, albeit there's certainly theatre ritual that happens as part of community life.... The 'epicness' of theatre and the high meaning of theatre, certainly as an active performer, is something that resonates with me, and a play like *Dido* resonates with me for that exact reason. I've done lots of different kinds of plays, but the reason why I love classical plays is because of the epic ritual quality, and the archetypes of the classics. Indeed, as a lover of Joseph Campbell and of [Carl] Jung, these classical archetypes are not literal: you never take the gods literally, but they serve as reflections of our psyche and of our psychology, and of our collective experience of human beings as represented by symbols. That, to me, is what classical mythology is about.

JH: That's fascinating. Recently Kimberley Sykes and I spoke at length about the portrayal of the gods in this production, which I thought was a striking aspect of the show. I think you're right: in this production it was really clear that the gods are kind of manifestations of psychological impulses that say something about the human experience. For instance, Venus is there to represent avarice and desire, not to mention a kind of pain.

CC: Yes. If you look at *Dido* and took the gods away, it's quite clear that she's moved by Aeneas's story. At first you recognise that she's a very generous person, before she even enters, her generosity is described, and her compassion, and then Aeneas tells this awful story and she's tremendously moved by his speech, and from there, she falls in love with him. You can have Cupid in there, and obviously for the sake of theatricality, even with the way we performed it, I think you have to send it up and enjoy the form that's being created. But, on a psychological level there's a total truth to the fact that love is madness, and that it will bring out all sorts of shadows in your personality that are hidden. I mean that's just life, right?

JH: Absolutely! As part of the rehearsal process, I understand that you travelled to Tunisia. I wonder if you could just say a bit about what that entailed, and what you got out of that experience.

CC: I spent six months in Morocco shooting a TV series a few years ago, and I loved it, and I knew Tunisia would be similar but different, and I wanted to, on a

experiential level, see what the country felt like. And you know, it's a real discovery that this place actually existed.

Kimberley and I had a big debate in rehearsals over the concept of Libya. She wanted to cut the references to Libya, and make all the references to Libya either 'Carthage' or 'Afric'. However, I was very keen on Libya, mainly because it places it somewhere that we know exists today. Kimberley thought it confused Libya and Tunisia, because now it's in Tunisia and people will think it's in Libya, but you know, you understand Libya was a concept that included all of that land. But, for me, it was important that it's a place that actually exists, because for many people, Carthage, like Troy, is a mythical place, not an actual civilisation that definitely existed. Nowadays, Carthage is a suburb of Tunis. From the moment I got on the plane I spoke with the people next to me, who said that I was going to the 'Chelsea of Tunis'. They advised me to go to the 'Hotel Didon' – the posh hotel in that area, in Carthage at the top of the hill ('Didon' means 'Dido'). I then explained that I was playing Dido, Queen of Carthage, and asked if they knew about her. Of course they did, and they began to explain how Dido is a live issue right now. Because in Virgil she was a Phoenician, that's the story, is it Timaeus that tells us this?

JH: Yes, that's right. The Sicilian historian of the third century BCE Timaeus of Tauromenium provides our earliest reference to Dido.

CC: Yes. But they're all Greek, you know. Between North Africa and the Middle East it's the same people essentially, or versions of... But yes, she was a Canaanite semitic. But to Tunisians today she represents the indigenous mother, the original before the Arabs, before the Byzantines, before the Romans, there was Carthage and Dido. And that, even though before that there were the Berbers, there's been over 2,800 years, so the Berber culture and the concept of Dido have all been conflated. So they're having a big debate at the moment about their national identity because of the rising 'Islamification' of Muslim countries, as well as the Arab Spring and all the hopes of a new way of being and the potential to go a different way. It started in Tunisia: that kind of more feminine, less autocratic, more collective new way of governing that some people would call more feminine, the rise of the feminine era – Dido represents that to them. And their mythology, the story of our original mother and this rebirth through the Arab Spring of potentially a way that's not as masculine as Islam, or even all the warring masculine tribes that have conquered this land.

I talked to Tunisians and they said, 'I don't know what's happened to this country, this isn't the country that I grew up in'. Because it had been becoming more liberal. Morocco and Tunisia as compared to Libya and Sudan and then the more Middle Eastern Islamic countries, they're pretty liberal, there are women walking around in short shorts – it's not a place characterised by the burqa. But now, my Tunisian friends who I made will say, 'look at these women in burqas, they weren't here when I was growing up'. There's a clear change going on, and it was just fascinating to me that this ancient myth had such relevance. It's a legend that has relevance in daily life.

They are immensely proud that she [Dido] incorporated the North African Tunisian story into western classical history and mythology ... that they've got a place thanks to Virgil ... and at the same time they know that that is not the original story. The original story is far more dynamic and less demeaning, I mean, I sort of take a slight offence to the fact that 'there was this true story of a woman who refused to be subdued, who never submitted to marriage to someone who she didn't want to marry because she was a queen in her own right', and then Virgil makes her fall all over the

floor for a fictional character. The black chick in me rejects that. And it's wonderful because Edith Hall and I spoke on Woman's Hour, and we agreed that there's an even more amazing story to be told, which is the true Dido, Queen of Carthage. And, what I love about it is that I do think, and I love about Marlowe's lines, 'to make me immortal with a kiss', that she did become immortal through her act. Even though the story has been distorted and changed, when she went up in flames 2,800 years ago, we're still talking about it! How amazing is that?

There was also the discovery that the Carthaginian goddess is called Tanit, and she's a female goddess, and there were many goddess cultures obviously, before the rise of the Hebrew god, and around this time [*circa* 800 BCE] is the point when the Hebrew god was in ascendance. So, I found the poetic echo of the truth of the story. Take Jesus, for example, Jesus was a guy, he did exist.

JH: Yes, for sure, although Christians will believe he was a god from inception.

CC: Yes, of course. And you can believe that or not believe it, but on a practical level, he is a guy who did something remarkable that changed the world. Because, we're still feeling the effects of Jesus to this day. It's completely changed the world, what he did, it's remarkable, and he became a god. Whether he was God before or whether he became a god, he is immortal. And it's the same with Dido and what she did. She could have become Tanit, there are questions about – was Dido a goddess first that became a woman? Or a woman that became a goddess? What was the order of things? My instinct is that she was a woman who did this thing that people never forgot, and a few hundred years later the symbol of Tanit arose, and Tanit was the goddess of Carthage. So Kim and Ti [Green] did engage with Tanit, because if you saw the set, on the top there was an inscription in Punic which said, 'Welcome to Carthage', and on the side there was this symbol – it's the symbol of Tanit. 'Moon above, womb below' is the symbol of Tanit, the fertility goddess.

JH: What's striking to me is how myth, geography, topography and history are all complexly woven into your performance as Dido. So, if we could perhaps jump forward a bit: what impact did your travels have during the rehearsal process, not least in terms of your interactions with the cast and crew?

CC: It was a big shock when I arrived at Stratford. I was so grateful when I arrived in Stratford, I thought, 'thank God I went on that trip', because this is so far away from that world. I am grateful to Kim and Ti, of course, because they made sure that the design of the play and the costumes were meaningful; they were immaculate in how they brought that sensory experience; but Stratford in general, is really not that place.

It was great to develop a synergy with Kim, even if my mythologising of the story was not exactly the same as hers. She was interested in the Divine Feminine, and that being a mythical outlook that I've spent some time studying, it was important for me always to share what was at the heart of my belief of what this play is about. And then meeting Sandy [Grierson] and then dealing with aspects of geography, topography, etcetera.... For me, colonialism and misogyny and racism were the things that came up clearly from the text, the othering, the difference, the difference between people – can there be a coming together, or must we pull apart who we are as human beings? Can we manage and become something new together, or are you that and I am this? I

felt that with the play, and I'd love to know if you see this because obviously it's like a Rorschach drawing, whatever, you know, 'I see this, do you see that?'

Take Aeneas, for instance, when he comes up on shore and gets given all the food ... Kim was seeing refugees, and I was seeing the Pilgrims coming to America and being given turkeys by the indigenous peoples. That's what I see because I'm from a colonial state. So what you see is a symbol. And I saw that there was this time 3,000 to 5,000 years ago where humans were more agrarian, where the woman was revered because she was the source of life, and where the goddess was more eminent. And then there was a time when war and conflict, and hunting and the masculine ways of being became more influential, and the Feminine died. And, for me, the balance of Dido and Aeneas was just that, while feeling insulted that this great queen should have to degrade herself for an imaginary person, it's a moment where the feminine is more powerful than the masculine, and the masculine could submit to that and create a certain yin and yang.

JH: Yes, I was thinking exactly that as well; the yin and the yang.

CC: But the masculine must go out and create its own destiny and war, and conquer. And in that moment which was the founding of Italy and western society via the Greeks into Rome and the empire that is the great western civilisation that we live in, the Feminine was vanquished. That is my understanding of the mythology. But of course, Dido and Aeneas is a beautiful domestic love ... marriage ... relationship which speaks so much to universal archetypes. The basic relationship between Dido and Aeneas is one that I think every woman and man can understand as they watch the play – that has nothing to do with the gods and just has to do with 'men are from Mars and women from Venus'.

JH: Yes, their story transcends the particulars of their story. I wonder now if I could focus on your performance as Dido. How much of a challenge was it to portray her as a successful female leader? That might well be the case in the world of the play, but that was certainly not a reality for most women in 16th century England when Marlowe was writing. Of course, there was Elizabeth I, but there was far from an extensive group of celebrated female leaders at the time. What impact did this knowledge have on your performance of the character?

CC: It's pretty difficult, because the play does not give Dido much time to show what kind of leader she is at all. The banquet scene is the only scene where she is the good queen, because after that she's under a spell and I think one must take everything that she says and everything that she does with a pinch of salt. I mean, we struggled, there was a lot of working against the text by all of the actors, and that may be why it was more successful than other productions. Take, for example, Iarbas [played by Daniel York]. Dan could have played him as a vengeful, evil creature. But instead he opted for 'I just love her, and I may not be that brilliant but my love is eternal', and he showed that. And Anna [played by Amber Jones] could have been a whimpering sidekick, 'me me me, oh I love him', but Amber didn't want to play that dull character. And even for me, it was quite tough because Dido is a real classist.

JH: Yes. She regards others in certain ways.

CC: Absolutely, there's an aristocracy, and Aeneas is of the aristocracy and therefore he is acceptable. Iarbas is a peasant and is lower than her. At one point, she says something like, 'those who ... dislike what Dido gives in charge, command my guard to slay for their offence', which fits in with the brutality of the Carthaginians. You

have to take those lines and arm wrestle with them, because there's definitely a version of Dido that is far more unforgiving and wicked, which you could get out of that text, and I didn't want that to be what we thought of a woman, because I think this play, in the wrong hands, could be very misogynistic. And you can still keep a question, but there's a dignity and you do have to ask, 'is this okay? Am I okay with this story?'

JH: Could I ask you that question, then? Because, that was a question I had been thinking about. What was the word you used just before? At the end of the production, is she in fact stripped of her dignity?

CC: Oh, it's tough, so tough. And, when you talk about this you can kind of see that it was a play that was adapted by a university student, because he sort of forces that end speech, as though it comes out of nowhere. It's like it doesn't really connect with what comes before. Of course, I know it's in the *Aeneid* – Dido even quotes Latin lines – but how do you psychologically join the dots to get to that point of revenge? Interestingly, I've listened to some classical scholars talk about how vengeful Marlowe's Dido is, and that's what I'm saying, there could have been a choice that could have been more like that, but I was obviously going for pathos. It should be a tragedy that someone so great should have this happen to them.

But Kim and I were trying to get across with the last speech, which I maybe only got on the last night, 'I get to choose how I go out, and although I have given much, I can also take away everything. So, you will not remember me as this beautiful woman who gave you all this stuff, you will remember me as an incinerated corpse that you killed, and that's what you did'. That's revenge but it's also, 'live with your conscience, and I'm not going out and ... having some secondary life with some guy who I don't want to be with'. It was important for Kim that there was agency, but it's a tough thing to pull off, and I don't know if I pulled it off every night to say that that's the impact that it had. But that's certainly what we were aiming for.

JH: Well at least with the performance I saw, that's exactly how I interpreted her in your performance.

CC: Thank you.

JH: Can we talk a bit more about Aeneas? This question goes back to what we were saying earlier on, and perhaps there is a difference in interpretation between the two of us here inasmuch that Dido appeared to me as a play-thing of the gods, and that she was struck by Cupid via Venus, which was an abuse of this woman. In contrast, it seemed to me that Aeneas really did fall in love with Dido. Now you suggested earlier Dido was also falling in love with him – so there's our difference of opinion. But I wonder what you think about that, the fact that her love for him was kind of divinely constructed ... or not?

CC: It's both. It has to be because Cupid strikes her with the arrow and she goes nuts, and that's what the script says so that's what you have to play. But, in the way that I discovered it (and I hope it came out in the play), when Aeneas says to her, 'wake up', and she comes out of the spell and realises something, namely 'I am Dido, and something has deceived me here, something's wrong, how have I done all these things?'. When she kills herself and says 'Dido dies', she says 'I meant it'. That's what it means to me. So yes, I think on a literal level the gods abused her; but on a psychological level, I think if they hadn't abused her, the romantic in me believes that they [Dido and Aeneas] would have fallen in love but she wouldn't have lost her

dignity about it. But on a symbolic level, and as an actor, you can't play a person who's lost agency – it's impossible. It's impossible to play And, it's fine, I'd have no problem that the illusion of the theatre from your perspective is, 'she's bewitched and she's not acting herself', but from the inside that's what love is.

You can see – and I myself have witnessed – very mature, intellectual women turn into goofy school girls for some guy and be unable to hold a sentence or seduce him in an appropriate or dignified manner. That's life; there's a definite truth to that. So, for me, they're getting together, they're falling in love, and...her offering of her wedding ring of her dead ex-husband? That is true, no god's going to make you do that, but the symbology of the gods is that it heightens it to an extent that she cannot control it. It's impossible to manage and makes her mad. So what I was hoping to get across in the scene with the oars is to show that she is fighting with herself because there is a rational person in there saying, 'What are you doing?'. She's fighting for her sanity. And, when he [Aeneas] goes, she loses her mind – she's completely raving.

JH: I wonder if now I could turn to ask what you make of the story and its incredible longevity? The story of the Trojan War dates back at least as far as the time of Homer [*circa* 800 BCE]. From there we move forward and eventually get to Virgil and his retelling of the Trojan episode, which takes on whole different meanings during the time of Augustus, etc. And then we're skipping forward again, since this is Marlowe's rendition of the Dido story. But there is yet another context as well, since this is a theatrical performance that's being staged in 2017 – a time in which movements such as Me Too gained real prominence. Given this complex trajectory, what do you think the story might mean for audiences today?

CC: Yes. For me it is deeply personal. On the one hand there is this question of the rising feminine, and what I was trying to represent in that first scene, you know – '*Enter with pillow on head*' – which I was very determined about, I was trying to have a shot of Africa and its agrarian past, and I was trying, within the symbology of the first moves, to create the sense of the feminine leader who's a serving leader, and who is about nourishment, feeding, etcetera.

So, for me, coding it in a time where Tunisia is questioning this clash between the masculine and the feminine orders, and I'm sorry to make masculine a negative when it's brought us technology and civilisation, but the kind of... Trump as the President of the world vs MeToo. There's a clash going on between the masculine and the feminine. That is what I love about this play ... what makes it resonate now.

But, in terms of the more ordinary level of human psychology, it's a fascinating play for thinking about who were the female leaders in the past. Today, there's the argument of – can a man be a man if a woman is a higher earner than him? How can he maintain his masculinity if his crown is given to him by a woman, and he takes the feminine position in the relationship. That is an issue for now – the question of what masculinity is. And I loved Sandy's Aeneas. I think Sandy conveyed a really complex individual, fighting with himself, trying to figure out what it means to be a man, having been a bit of a mummy's boy, always being looked after, and I love that Kim cast him, because he's not your quintessential Adonis. I think Sandy managed to pull something so psychologically brilliant out of that script, which I really take my hat off

to him for. It was a joy. Just to be able to have someone you could really play with, that was a real joy of the production.

And of course, there's the relationship between men and women, and I'm sure it's the same the opposite way with certain men and women, and with women and women, and with men and men, but this idea that one person will absolutely sacrifice everything for the other – give up their crown. It's a thing that woman does: give up your crown, give up your career, give up your prestige so that a man can fulfil his destiny and be allowed to feel like a man. So, for me, that's the modern resonance: we live in a time when we are questioning what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man, what it means to be an empowered woman and what it means to be a feminist man or an empowered man. That is the debate, it's certainly my debate.

JH: Well, it's there in the text.

CC: And it's there in the text!

JH: Could I finish by asking what you're going to do next? Are you going to tackle more classically themed stuff, which you obviously have so much passion for?

CC: Yes, it is where my true passion lies. Well, sometimes they say that acting's a vehicle to get around the world, a vehicle for making money and progressing. But there's a certain type of theatre that's more than a job because it has meaning. I won't limit that to the classics – political plays do that, but classics speak to the human spirit. So I'm waiting for the phone calls. But now I'm going on to do a television job which I'm kind of excited about. It's the third season of a show that I was on last year, and I'm thrilled to be going from Dido to that because it's a futuristic dystopian kung fu series. I'm half Chinese, and so I'm really thrilled that my acting will be informed, because it's still archetypal performance even though it's sci-fi fantasy. It's the same form but for a more contemporary audience.

JH: Well thank you for taking the time to talk with me today, Chip. I wish you all the best in your future endeavours and hope to see you in more theatrical productions very soon.