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SF PERUSALS

Sword Against the Sea

An Adaptation of
William Butler Yeats'
Cuchulain Plays and Poems

by Arthur Feinsod

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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SWORD AGAINST THE SEA was first developed under the title *STATIONS OF CUCHULAIN* at Trinity College, Hartford in April, 1999 under the direction of Arthur Feinsod. Original music composed by Gerald Moshell who was also the Music Director. Sets and costumes designed by Crystal Tiala. Lights by Blu. Masks designed by David Watson. The dances were choreographed by BJ Goodwin. The Dramaturg was Laura Blackwell. The cast was as follows:

MALE SINGER . . . . . Timothy O'Brien
FEMALE SINGER . . . . . Dana Reynolds Rock
CUCHULAIN/SPIRIT OF CUCHULAIN . . . . . Matthew Glassman
OLD MAN/BRICRUI . . . . . Justin Ball
GUARDIAN OF THE WELL (HAWK WOMAN)/
WOMAN #1/FAND/MORRIGU . . . . . .Jacquelyn Maher
AOIFE/WOMAN #3 . . . . . Cristina Lundy
NEUTRAL PERFORMERS/DANCERS . . . . . Michael Burke,
Laura Blackwell, Justin Ball,
Javier Chacin, Cristina Lundy
EMER. . . . . .Paige McGinley
FOOL. . . . . .Javier Chacin
BLIND MAN . . . . . .Philip Burgers
YOUNG MAN . . . . . Michael Burke
WOMAN #2/EITHNE INGUBA . . . . . Megan Shea
SERVANT. . . . . Laura Blackwell

SWORD AGAINST THE SEA was first professionally produced in the summer of 2005 at SummerStage (now the Crossroads Repertory Theatre) in Terre Haute, Indiana under the direction of Sam McCready. The set, costumes and masks were designed by Elena Zlotescu. The lighting was designed by R. Michael Ingraham, and Jeff O'Brien designed the sound. The choreographer was Philip Johnston. Christopher Berchild was the dramaturg, Tresa Makosky the stage manager. The production was sponsored by Ned and Phyllis Dye Turner. The cast was as follows:

CUCHULAIN/BRICRIU . . . . . Ciarán McCauley
GUARDIAN OF THE WELL/FAND/
MORRIGU/FIRST WOMAN . . . . . Sarah Morris
EMER . . . . . Kristin Kundert-Gibbs
EITHNE INGUBA/SECOND WOMAN. . . . . .Kelsey Hanlon
AOIFE/THIRD WOMAN . . . . . Julie Dixon
OLD MAN/BLIND MAN . . . . . Mark Douglas Jones
FOOL. . . . . .Brandon Wentz
CONNLA . . . . . Samuel J. Mikeworth
SPIRIT OF CUCHULAIN/CONALL/SERVANT . . . . . Peter Papadopoulos
CHORUS . . . . . Sam McCready

CHARACTERS

(Conceived for 4 male and 4 female actors, with doubling as suggested below. All characters, except **THE POET,** wear full or half masks.)

THE POET – Doubles as **CONNLA**. He is always present on stage and, when not performing in the **CONNLA** mask, watches from the side, at times adding, moving, removing or adjusting scenery, props or costumes, like the Stage Attendant in the Nō Theater. He may put on his CONNLA mask in full view of the audience and enter the action from where he watches on the side or he may exit, as indicated in the stage directions, and then reenter in the **CONNLA** mask or without it as **THE POET**.

CUCHULAIN (pron. Coo-HULL-en) **–** Mighty warrior in the ancient province of Ulster.

GUARDIAN OF THE WELL/HAWK WOMAN – A Woman of the Sidhe (pron. SHEE). A shape-changer with other guises: **FIRST WOMAN**, **FAND** and **MORRIGU** (pron. MAWR-RIH-GOO).

OLD MAN – Doubles as **BLIND MAN** and **BRICRUI**.

AOIFE (pron. EE-fa) **–** Cuchulain's Mistress. Doubles as **THIRD WOMAN**.

EMER (pron. EE-mer) **–** Cuchulain's wife.

BLIND MAN

FOOL – Doubles as **SPIRIT OF CUCHULAIN**

FIRST WOMAN, SECOND WOMAN, and **THIRD WOMAN –** Three mysterious peasant women.

CONNLA (pron. COHN-la) **–** Out-of-wedlock son of Cuchulain and Aoife.

EITHNE INGUBA (pron. EHTH-nah ING-oo-bah) **–** Doubles as **SECOND WOMAN**.

BRICRIU (pron. BRIH-croo) **–** Mysterious creature of the sea inhabiting **CUCHULAIN**'s body.

SPIRIT OF CUCHULAIN

PLACE

Various locations in ancient Ireland.

TIME

The action occurs within a forty-year period of ancient times, from Cuchulain's early manhood to his death as an older warrior.

SETTING

Even though the first two productions of *Sword Against the Sea* occurred on non-proscenium stages, the play is here set on a frontal stage, with a full scrim curtain lowered from the flies for the entire play. Behind the scrim should be a 8'-deep area for scenes that have an especially other-worldly cast. For Act One, there needs to be a sunken or slightly raised circular well (2 to 3 feet in diameter) with enough depth so that the source of its glow, later in the action, is not visible to the audience. For the second part of Act One, The Poet covers the well with a unit that includes a glowing fire, spit and fowl. In Act Two, the well and fire are gone, and a simple 7' by 5' bed/platform is placed just downstage of the scrim and should remain there for the rest of the play. For the second part of Act Two, The Poet attaches, to the upstage middle of the bed/platform, a high vertical member that stands for the pillar-stone on which Cuchulain will fasten himself for his death. Properties are few and simple but should be created as if they are part of a sacred ritual. Keeping props and scenic elements spare and symbolic maintains the spirit of the Noh so influential to Yeats. It is recommended that The Poet be placed in the Down Right area, the musicians in the Down Left area, if live music is preferred to recorded music. Music is recommended: 1) to accompany the four Nō-like dances indicated in the text; 2) to aid with transitions between scenes; and 3) for underscoring, especially for the otherworldly scenes, where the music can enhance the hazy faraway atmosphere created by viewing through the scrim. Based on previous productions, keyboard, cello, flute, and percussion go well with the world of this play.

ADAPTOR'S NOTES

Sword Against the Sea is in two acts and follows the chronology of Cuchulain's life as conceived by William Butler Yeats. Act One consists of Yeats' plays *At the Hawk's Well*; a re-contextualized scene from *The Green Helmet*; and a truncated version of *On Baile's Strand*. The first part of Act Two is comprised of a combination of *Fighting the Waves* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, the second, *The Death of Cuchulain*. Yeats' "Rose Poems" and other verses about Cuchulain, recited by The Poet, are used as transitions and structural bookends. For a more detailed description of

the choices made in adapting *Sword Against the Sea* from William Butler Yeats' Cuchulain works, please see the Postscript. Producers are granted permission to include this explanation (or the full postscript), under Arthur Feinsod's name, in any program or study guide that accompanies a production of this adaptation.

A NOTE TO PRODUCERS

To purchase masks used for the early version of *Sword Against the Sea* (under the title *Stations of Cuchulain*), contact mask designer David Watson at the University of Hartford (dawatson@hartford.edu). To replace The Poet with a male and female singer and to use music composed for *Stations of Cuchulain*, contact Gerald Moshell (Gerald.Moshell@trincoll.edu) for permission and the music as it had been scored for keyboard, cello and flute. Producers may also opt to commission their own music and have selected recited lines sung, especially those here spoken by The Poet (who then may be called The Singer).

AUTHORIZATION

This adaptation of Yeats' Cuchulain plays and poems was approved by Michael and Anne Yeats representing the W.B. Yeats Estate. *Sword Against the Sea* was co-sponsored by the Yeats Society in Sligo, Ireland when it was performed at the Hawk's Well Theatre in 2005 in a performance dedicated to Sam McCready and John Kavanagh.

I have been blessed with having four poets among my closest friends. It is only fitting that I dedicate this adaptation of works by William Butler Yeats to them:

Andrew Davis
Arthur Brown
The late Hugh Ogden
John Kavanagh

"Think where man's glory most begins and ends
And say my glory was I had such friends."

- From "The Municipal Gallery Revisited"
By William Butler Yeats

ACT ONE

*(**AT RISE:** In the center of the stage is a well that will later need to glow. There also is a full scrim with about 6 feet of depth behind it. A mysterious cloaked figure,* **THE GUARDIAN***, sits by the well.* **THE POET** *appears from the wings, takes in the scene and then addresses the audience. He remains on stage throughout, watching, perhaps from a stool, and at times moves, adds, removes or adjusts props, scenery or costume pieces as stage attendants have done for centuries as part of Japanese Nō productions.)*

THE POET. I call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry
And boughs long stripped by the wind,
And I call to the mind's eye
Pallor of an ivory face,
Its lofty dissolute air,
A man climbing up to a place
The salt sea wind has swept bare.

The guardian of the well is sitting
Upon the old grey stone at its side,
Worn out from raking its dry bed,
Worn out from gathering up the leaves.
Her heavy eyes
Know nothing, or but look upon stone.
The wind that blows out of the sea
Turns over the heaped-up leaves at her side;
They rustle and diminish.

*(***OLD MAN** *enters.)*

THE POET. *(cont.)* That old man climbs up hither,
Who has been watching by his well
These fifty years.
He is doubled up with age;
The old thorn-trees are doubled so
Among the rocks where he is climbing.

OLD MAN. *(***OLD MAN** *addresses the* **GUARDIAN**.*)*
Why don't you speak to me? Why don't you say:
'Are you not weary gathering those sticks?
Are not your fingers cold?' You have not one word,
While yesterday you spoke three times. You said:
'The well is full of hazel leaves.' You said:
'The wind is from the west.' And after that:
'If there is rain it's likely there'll be mud.'
Today you do not speak at all.
Your eyes are dazed and heavy. If the Sidhe
Must have a guardian to clean out the well
And drive the cattle off, they might choose somebody
That can be pleasant and companionable
Once in the day. Why do you stare like that?

*(***CUCHULAIN**, *now a young man, enters.)*

You had that glassy look about the eyes
Last time it happened. Do you know anything?
It is enough to drive an old man crazy
To look all day upon these broken rocks,
And ragged thorns, and that one stupid face,
And speak and get no answer.

CUCHULAIN. Then speak to me,
For youth is not more patient than old age;
And though I have trod the rocks for half a day
I cannot find what I am looking for.

OLD MAN. Who speaks?
Who comes so suddenly into this place
Where nothing thrives? If I may judge by the gold
On head and feet and glittering in your coat,
You are not of those who hate the living world.

CUCHULAIN. I am named Cuchulain, I am Sualtim's son.

OLD MAN. I have never heard that name.

CUCHULAIN. It is not unknown.
I have an ancient house beyond the sea.

OLD MAN. What mischief brings you hither? – you are like those
Who are crazy for the shedding of men's blood,
And for the love of women.

CUCHULAIN. A rumor has led me,
A story told over the wine towards dawn.
I rose from the table, found a boat, spread sail,
And with a lucky wind under the sail
Crossed waves that have seemed charmed, and found this shore.

OLD MAN. There is no house to sack among these hills
Nor beautiful woman to be carried off.

CUCHULAIN. You should be native here, for that rough tongue
Matches the barbarous spot. You can, it may be,
Lead me to what I seek, a well wherein
Three hazels drop their nuts and withered leaves,
And where a solitary girl keeps watch
Among grey boulders. He who drinks, they say,
Of that miraculous water lives forever.

OLD MAN. And are there not before your eyes at the instant
Grey boulders and a solitary girl
And three stripped hazels?

CUCHULAIN. But there is no well.

OLD MAN. Can you see nothing yonder?

CUCHULAIN. I but see
A hollow among stones half-full of leaves.

OLD MAN. And do you think so great a gift is found
By no more toil than spreading out a sail,
And climbing a steep hill? O, folly of youth,
Why should that hollow place fill up for you,
That will not fill for me? I have lain in wait
For more than fifty years, to find it empty,
Or but to find the stupid wind of the sea
Drive round the perishable leaves.

CUCHULAIN. So it seems
There is some moment when the water fills it.

OLD MAN. A secret moment that the holy shades
That dance upon the desolate mountain know,
And not a living man, and when it comes
The water has scarce splashed before it is gone.

CUCHULAIN. I will stand here and wait. Why should the luck
Of Sualtim's son desert him now? For never
Have I had long to wait for anything.

OLD MAN. No! Go from this accursed place! This place
Belongs to me, that girl there, and those others,
Deceivers of men.

CUCHULAIN. And who are you who rail
Upon those dancers that all others bless?

OLD MAN. One whom the dancers cheat. I came like you
When young in body and in mind, and blown
By what had seemed to me a lucky sail.
The well was dry, I sat upon its edge,
I waited the miraculous flood, I waited
While the years passed and withered me away.

OLD MAN. *(cont.)* I have snared the birds for food and eaten grass
And drunk the rain, and neither in dark nor shine
Wandered too far away to have heard the splash,
And yet the dancers have deceived me. Thrice
I have awakened from a sudden sleep
To find the stones were wet.

CUCHULAIN. My luck is strong,
It will not leave me waiting, nor will they
That dance among the stones put me asleep;
If I grow drowsy I can pierce my foot.

OLD MAN. No, do not pierce it, for the foot is tender,
It feels pain much. But find your sail again
And leave the well to me, for it belongs
To all that's old and withered.

CUCHULAIN. No, I stay.

*(***GUARDIAN OF THE WELL** *gives the cry of the hawk.)*
There is that bird again.

OLD MAN. There is no bird.

CUCHULAIN. It sounded like the sudden cry of a hawk,
But there's no wing in sight. As I came hither
A great grey hawk swept down out of the sky,
And though I have hawks in my house, the best
In the world, I have not seen its like. It flew
As though it would have torn me with its beak,
Or blinded me, smiting with that great wing.
I had to draw my sword to drive it off,
And after that it flew from rock to rock.
I pelted it with stones, a good half-hour,
And just before I had turned the big rock there
And seen this place, it seemed to vanish away.
Could I but find a means to bring it down,
I'd hood it.

OLD MAN. The Woman of the Sidhe herself,
The mountain witch, the unappeasable shadow.
She is always flitting upon this mountainside,
To allure or to destroy. When she has shown
Herself to the fierce women of the hills
Under that shape they offer sacrifice
And arm for battle. There falls a curse
On all who have gazed in her unmoistened eyes;
So get you gone while you have that proud step
And confident voice, for not a man alive
Has so much luck that he can play with it.
Those that have long to live should fear her most,
The old are cursed already. That curse may be
Never to win a woman's love and keep it;
Or always to mix hatred in the love;
Or it may be that she will kill your children,
That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,
Or you will be so maddened that you kill them
With your own hand.

CUCHULAIN. Have you been set down there
To threaten all who come, and scare them off?
You seem as dried up as the leaves and sticks,
As though you had no part in life.

(The **GUARDIAN OF THE WELL** *gives hawk cry again.)*

That cry!
There is that cry again. That woman made it,
But why does she cry out as the hawk cries?

OLD MAN. It was her mouth, and yet not she, that cried.
It was that shadow cried behind her mouth;
And now I know why she has been so dumb-struck
All the day through, and had such heavy eyes.

*(***GUARDIAN** *shivers and, with the help of* **THE POET**, *emerges from the cloak, revealing a costume and mask that suggest a hawk.)*

OLD MAN. *(cont.)* Look at her shivering now, the terrible life
Is slipping through her veins. She is possessed.
Who knows whom she will murder or betray
Before she awakes in ignorance of it all,
And gathers up the leaves? But they'll be wet;
The water will have come and gone again;
That shivering is the sign. O, get you gone,
At any moment now I shall hear it bubble.
If you are good you will leave it. I am old,
And if I do not drink it now, will never;
I have been watching all my life and maybe
Only a little cupful will bubble up.

CUCHULAIN. I'll take it in my hands. We shall both drink,
And even if there are but a few drops,
Share them.

OLD MAN. But swear that I may drink the first;
The young are greedy, and if you drink the first
You'll drink it all. Ah, you have looked at her;
She has felt your gaze and turned her eyes on us;
I cannot bear her eyes, they are not of this world,
Nor moist, nor faltering, they are no girl's eyes.

CUCHULAIN. Why do you fix those eyes of a hawk upon me?
I am not afraid of you, bird, woman, or witch.
Do what you will, I shall not leave this place
Till I have grown immortal like yourself.

*(***CUCHULAIN** *staggers to his feet and participates in a Nō-like dance with* **GUARDIAN** *around the well.)*

CUCHULAIN. Run where you will,
Grey bird, you shall be perched upon my wrist.
Some were called queens and yet have been perched
there.

(The dance continues. The **GUARDIAN OF THE WELL** *mesmerizes and allures* **CUCHULAIN**, *who drops his spear and begins to follow her.* **THE POET** *picks up the spear and looks into the well, then at* **CUCHULAIN**.*)*

THE POET. I have heard water splash; it comes; it comes;
Look where it glitters. He has heard the splash;
Look, he has turned his head.

*(***CUCHULAIN** *turns his head but before he can see the water, the* **GUARDIAN** *lures him offstage.)*

He has lost what may not be found
Till men heap his burial-mound
And all the history ends.
He might have lived at his ease,
An old dog's head on his knees,
Among his children and friends.

(The **OLD MAN** *wakes and peers into well.)*

OLD MAN. The accursed shadows have deluded me,
The stones are dark and yet the well is empty;
The water flowed and emptied while I slept.
You have deluded me my whole life through,
Accursed dancers, you have stolen my life.
That there should be such evil in a shadow!

CUCHULAIN. *(re-entering)* She has fled from me and hidden in the rocks.

OLD MAN. She has but led you from the fountain. Look!
Though stones and leaves are dark where it has flowed,
There's not a drop to drink.

*(***OLD MAN** *and* **CUCHULAIN** *look into the empty well, the white light of the well on their faces, as they absorb what has been lost.* **THE POET** *watches them, then turns and addresses the audience.)*

THE POET. Come to me, human faces,
Familiar memories;
I have found hateful eyes
Among the desolate places,
Unfaltering, unmoistened eyes.

Folly alone I cherish,
I choose it for my share;
Being but a mouthful of air,
I am content to perish;
I am but a mouthful of sweet air.

(Sound of battle cries from offstage, accompanied by percussive sounds.)

CUCHULAIN. What are those cries?
What is that sound that runs along the hill?
Who are they that beat a sword upon a shield?

OLD MAN. She has roused up the fierce women of the hills,
Aoife, and all her troop, to take your life,
And never till you are lying in the earth
Can you know rest.

CUCHULAIN. The clash of arms again!

OLD MAN. O, do not go! The mountain is accursed;
Stay with me, I have nothing more to lose.
I do not now deceive you.

CUCHULAIN. I will face them.

*(***CUCHULAIN** *exits as the light comes up behind the scrim, revealing* **AOIFE**, *the warrior queen.* **CUCHULAIN** *reenters there, and she draws her sword.)*

Aoife, queen of Scotland.

*(***AOIFE** *taunts him with the sword and* **CUCHULAIN** *responds.* **CUCHULAIN** *and* **AOIFE** *fight in the form of a highly stylized dance that ends with movements of a sexual nature building to a climax. Blackout behind the scrim, with a cross-fade to light on* **EMER**, *in front of the scrim, dyeing fabric at the well as she awaits her beloved.)*

THE POET. A man came slowly from the setting sun,
To Emer, raddling raiment in her dun,
And said, 'I am that swineherd whom you bid
Go watch the road between the wood and tide,
But now I have no need to watch it more.'

*(***CUCHULAIN** *appears.)*

Then Emer cast the web upon the floor,
And raising arms all raddled with the dye,
Parted her lips with a loud sudden cry.

*(***EMER** *cries out, drops the fabric and runs into his arms.)*

That swineherd stared upon her face and said,
'No man alive, no man among the dead,
Has won the gold his cars of battle bring.'

(Transition in music and dance to **EMER** *and* **CUCHULAIN***'s wedding.* **THE POET** *picks up fabric and drapes it over shoulders of* **CUCHULAIN** *and* **EMER** *as if part of the ritual and then exits.)*

CUCHULAIN. Alive I have been far off in all lands under the sun,
And been no faithful man; but when my story is done
My fame shall spring up and laugh, and set you high above all.

EMER. It is you, not your fame that I love.

CUCHULAIN. You are young, you are wise, you can call
Some kinder and comelier man that will sit at home in the house.

EMER. It is you that I love.

(She recites or sings her vow.)

Nothing that he has done;
His mind that is fire,
His body that is sun,
Have set my head higher

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