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The Art of War and Hip Hop

by Olga El

Afro-Chinese comic book artist, Kae, reconciles different aspects of her identity by escaping into a fantasy world where demons—such as family trauma, colorism, and more—are easier to slay. When she embarks on a journey to find extended family abroad, the lines between fiction and reality begin to fade.

The Art of War and Hip Hop is a conversation between different communities-of-color and beyond. The play draws heavily from world folklore and pays homage to the unique intersections that can be found between imported martial arts movies from the '70s and '80s, Eastern pop cultures, and American Hip Hop cultures. The use of projection/video, comics, and subtitles make this work accessible to more than the average theater-going audience.

IMPORTANT NOTE: MUSIC AND DANCE SEQUENCES MAKE THIS PLAY AT LEAST 90 MINUTES. Please read all stage directions carefully! SDs include symbolic, non-verbal, and etcetera action that furthers the plot. Implement the action of the SDs to the best of your ability. Fight scenes should be kept on or close to the floor, as much as possible, for safety. Ideally, subtitles (Chinese and possibly other languages) are projected in creative ways throughout the theater for all the dialogue. Pre-show atmosphere should involve live DJing. Graffiti is a part of the lobby and/or set design.

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Cast of Characters

KAE:	An Afro-Chinese comic book artist
KATANDA:	Kae's successful, Black, older half-sister
TALA:	A tomboyish Hip Hop dancer and Kae's girlfriend (Brown-skinned Filipina or other South East Asian/Pacific Islander Woman. Martial Arts background required. Hip Hop Dance/Capoeira background helpful but not necessary.)
XUAN NU:	AKA "Dark Girl" A very dark-skinned, beautiful, celestial woman (ideally Andamanese or other Negrita, Dalit or other South Asian, Aboriginal Australian, or etc. Martial Arts background required.)
REINA:	A talented Afro-Latina Hip Hop Dancer (Capoeira background required.)
BRAD:	A handsome Chinese-American music artist (Martial Arts background required.)
OMARI:	Kae's half brother, hip hop griot/poet
AMATERASU:	A beautiful, bubbly Asian Woman (Martial Arts background required.)
KHONSU:	A handsome, serious Black Man (Martial Arts background required.)
Ensemble:	Dancers and martial artists who play ALL other minor roles, including MEI NA (Kae's Chinese mother) and MUM-MUM (Kae's & Katanda's paternal grandmother.)

ACT I

(A projection screen lights up in the darkness, on the back wall of the stage, showing black and white comic strip pages featuring an ethereal realm. Objects from various time periods and beyond may be worked into the backgrounds.

Three divine women: SU NU "Plain Lady", TSAI NU "Rainbow Lady", and XUAN NU "Dark Lady" are featured. SU NU is white as the paper and in an equally colorless, celestial gown. Her eyes and hair are as dark as the cosmos. XUAN NU is dark-complexioned, her gown a gradient of greyscale. TSAI NU has a medium skin tone, even vitiligo. Bold patterns adorn her hanfu.

SU NU strums a red and white electric guitar. The red is the only pop of color on the pages. The words of the following voiceovers are illustrated. Hanzi writing can be used in the comic if the voices speak English. If the voices speak Putonghua, English writing may be used. Or, both writing and voices can be in English.)

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V/O
(**In KAE's Voice**)
In the place where all times merge, three goddesses observe a cherished version of Earth. There, the great ancestor of the Chinese people, Huang Di, prepares for battle with his nemesis, the storm lord, Chiyou.

V/O
(**In SU NU's Voice**)
I see the one they call Yellow Emperor has emerged victorious from the battle of Banquan, no doubt due to Xuan Nu's military strategies and favoritism.

V/O
(**In XUAN NU's Voice**)
We share the same spirit and the same love of justice and power. I only favor the one who favors me.

V/O
(**In TSAI NU's Voice**)
Chiyou is a more formidable foe than the fire king. Will your influence be enough to secure another victory?

V/O
(**In XUAN NU's Voice**)
If the enemy within is conquered, who else can pose a threat?

(BLACKOUT/Screen off. Spotlight fades up on a few young Black men in a stairwell. They are singing a soulful ballad, a capella. They have a few minutes for this - the acoustics are amazing! Suddenly we hear KAE and KATANDA arguing loudly. The yelling gets louder until a fantastically-clad warrior crashes onto the stage from RC as full-stage lighting flares up, illuminating a composite set. The a capella boys watch in awe as the warrior fumbles backward up the stairs and his opponent pursues him. The yelling is comprehensible and specific now, as the warriors continue their literal battle all over the stage Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon style...)

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KATANDA
I can't believe you did this. I asked you nicely not to bring that shit in here.

KAE
He had his faults, Kat, but he was our dad.

KATANDA
No, he was YOUR dad. He abandoned me and Omari to go down in history as the world's greatest passport bro.

KAE
He met my mom in California.

KATANDA
Girl bye. This isn't just about y'all. You know damn well he cheated on my mom from here to Tripoli. At least the foreign women had the sense to take the money and run. When he got too old for that fuckery, he found an exotic trophy wife to be a band-aid on his festering internalized racism.

KAE
That's fucked up, Katanda...

KATANDA
No, you know what's fucked up? Overhearing your own black-ass daddy say "Katanda would be pretty if she wasn't so dark-skinned". Seeing your momma work two jobs to support you while her ex-husband bitches about making the smallest of child support payments for his OWN KIDS. Meanwhile, he's a model husband and father for his new family...

KAE
It's not like my life was all sunshine and rainbows. I never fit in anywhere...

KATANDA
Oh please spare me the tragic mulatto shit right now, Kae. Sorry being put in the BEST schools meant being surrounded by white kids but, yes, everyone had some problems growing up. Not everyone had Mr. Hyde for a dad.

(KAE speed walks on stage, enters "KAE'S ROOM" and slams the door behind her. Simultaneously, lights on the warriors go out causing them to disappear in darkness. The a capella boys shake their heads and disperse, leaving the stage. KAE takes a sketchbook off her desk and begins scribbling furiously.)

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KATANDA
This is MY apartment. If you wanna slam doors, pay rent or go get your own shit.

(KAE continues to scribble for a bit, then throws her book and lies face up on her bed.)

KAE
Uuuugh, I can't even think.

(KAE reaches for a cell phone and dials. Lights up elsewhere in the composite set for "TALA'S ROOM". TALA picks up the phone. KAE lets out a long, heavy sigh.)

TALA
Hey babe. You doing ok?

KAE
Katanda and I just had another fight.

TALA
Kat will come around. She always does. This year has been really hard for both of you.

KAE
Maybe I should move back in with my mom.

TALA
Well, I'm sure she wouldn't mind having someone else in the house right now. But you really want to put up with her going through your stuff, asking you when you're going to get a real job or when you're going to get married every other day? Does she even know about us yet?

KAE
No. I'm going to tell her soon. I mean I was going to tell her and daddy then...he died.

TALA
Kae, he died six months ago. Time for a new excuse. You could've told them a long time ago...

KAE
I know. I'm sorry. I just don't want to add any more stress to her life right now with everything that's going on.

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TALA
I'm your partner not a terminal illness. How stressful can it be? I told my parents and they're way more conservative...

KAE
I'm sorry I keep stalling this, Tal. I just feel like every unfulfilled dream mom ever had is projected onto me. I don't want this to be yet another expectation I didn't live up to.

TALA
Wow, loving me sounds so much worse than a terminal illness.

KAE
You know what I mean.

TALA
Yea, I know what you mean. You have about 1000 different versions of the same excuse. You're a grown ass woman, Kae. When are you going to act like it?

KAE
I promise I will tell her. As soon as I get back from my trip. Everything is just hard right now. I love you.

(PAUSE)

TALA
...I love you too. Look, I know you're going through a lot. I don't mean to push you. Tell her whenever you're ready.

KAE
Thanks Tala... Am I going to see you before I leave next week?

TALA
I'll try to stop by. I've been really busy with work and my competition is in a few days.

KAE
What if I come to you? I'm working on a new comic and I want to see what you think.

TALA
The one about the three spirit ladies in ancient China or something?

KAE
Yup. Su Nu, Tsai Nu, and Xuan Nu also known as Plain Girl, Rainbow Girl, and Dark Girl. The three spiritual advisors to the Yellow Emperor, China's mythical ancestor. It's an adventure tale incorporating the myth.

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TALA
Sounds cool. Yea, bring it over.

KAE
Will do! Maybe tomorrow night?

TALA
Sure.

KAE
Great! I'll call you tomorrow. **(PAUSE)** Uh...hey, Tala...?

TALA
Yea?

KAE
Actually, nevermind. I'll see you soon.

TALA
(**Laughs**)
Um, ok. Bye weirdo.

KAE
K, k, bye bye.

(Lights go down on "TALA'S BEDROOM". Lights fade up on a woman, XUAN NU, in "KAE's ROOM".)

XUAN NU
You should've told her.

KAE
Spare me your divine judgement, Xuan Nu.

XUAN NU
I'm not judging you.

KAE
Great, that makes one of us.

(KATANDA walks on stage and knocks on the door. XUAN NU, still standing there, observes.)

KATANDA
Hey, can I come in?

KAE
Sure, it's your apartment.

(KATANDA laughs, opens the door, and walks in.)

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KATANDA
Damn right it is. Who were you just talking to?

KAE
Tala.

KATANDA
Oh, how is she?

KAE
You gonna small talk me to death?

KATANDA
(**Sitting**)
Aight, aight. Look, I'm sorry I went off like that earlier. How dad was, was not your or your mama's fault.

KAE
No, you're right to be upset. I shouldn't have overstepped and brought his stuff here. I'm sorry daddy said that shit to you. The world can be anti-Black as fuck. But how the world is, is not my fault either, Kat.

KATANDA
I know it's not your fault. Just hurts more when that stuff comes from your own people, your own family. He left this world without ever facing his demons. But we're still here...

KAE

We are.**(PAUSE)** Hey Kat...it's a stupid thing but there's this necklace... just a cheap, beaded thing that I made for dad when I was a kid, kinda like a promise necklace. He always wore it. He said he'd always wear it... but I didn't see it on him at the funeral and I didn't find it in his stuff. My mom couldn't find it either. Did you happen to...

KATANDA

Sorry honey. That man was known for broken promises... but if I see it, I'll let you know... Are you coming down to dinner?

KAE

Nah, I'm not really hungry.

XUAN NU

You're starving.

KAE

Shut up.

KATANDA

Huh?

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KAE

Nothing, sorry. I'll be down later.

KATANDA

You sure you're good, Kae?

KAE

Yea, I'm fine.

KATANDA

Ok, I'll see you later then.

(KATANDA gets up to leave.)

KAE

Hey Katanda...?

KATANDA

Yea?

(KAE runs up to KATANDA. They hug. Lights down. Lights up C on a B-Girl/Dance Battle with music. We watch this for a few minutes until KAE walks on the stage with TALA. The action in the background becomes muted but movement can still happen. Beatboxers wait DR. KAE massages TALA's shoulders.)

KAE
Ok, but you deserved to win though.

TALA
Thanks babe but La Reina is crazy talented. And she's gorgeous which doesn't hurt. Honestly, in a Black artform, I can't be mad a Black Woman won. An Afro-Latina capoerista at that.

KAE
An Afro-Latina Capa what now?

TALA
A capoeirista, aka someone who does Capoeira. It's an Afro-Brazilian martial art that looks a lot like breaking but capoeira is older by at least a few centuries.

KAE
So ya'll have dance battles and they have actual battles?

TALA
(**Chuckles**)
Yea, something like that. Lots of B-boys and girls learned their acrobatics from capoeira masters who taught classes in New York in the 70s. Hence all the similarities.

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KAE
So this girl, who you think is "gorgeous", can out dance me and beat my ass? That doesn't seem fair.

(TALA laughs.)