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Entertainment

## Read her lipstick: Yuhua Hamasaki in 'The Black Lizard' in the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival

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If you think that culminating the 2019 Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival with a one-time staged reading of Yukio Mishima's "The Black Lizard" on Sunday morning isn't a fitting finale (festival curator-impresario David Kaplan prefers the word "climax") — or if you feel that a reading using actors with scripts in hand might not be the best way to cap off a four-day extravaganza of plays, parties, workshops and special events — then you should consider the reading at last year's festival of "The Snagglepuss Chronicles."

"Snagglepuss" is up for a Harvey Award, one of the most prestigious awards given out in the comic book industry, named after Harvey Kurtzman of Mad and Playboy Magazine's Little Annie Fannie fame. Which means that nestled among the current nominees for Best Adaption from a Comic, a list that includes productions from Marvel Studios, Amazon Studios, Sony Pictures, Columbia Pictures, Twentieth Century Fox and Netflix, is a little old staged reading at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. "We don't have the big budgets, but that's what we aspire to — that our stage readings should be at that level," Kaplan says. "And this one will be, too."

Mishima adapted "The Black Lizard" from a story by the Japanese mystery and horror author Edogawa Ranpo, first published in 1934, and reset it in the 1960s, stirring in his own brand of camp, decadence, humor and homoeroticism. The festival reading, at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday, Sept. 29, at Provincetown Town Hall, features Yuhua Hamasaki, a drag queen star from the 10th season of "RuPaul's Drag Race," as the title character. Playing detective Kogoro Akechi, Black Lizard's adversary and Japan's version of Sherlock Holmes, is actor James Yaegashi. The reading is directed by Jesse Jou, a professor of theater at Texas Tech University.

In Mishima's play, Black Lizard is the name of a notorious Japanese crime lord, who specializes in jewel theft and murder. She has her eyes set on Japan's most precious gemstone, the Star of Egypt, and the Star's owner hires Akechi to catch her. But the inner truth of what Black Lizard desires is not jewels but beauty that doesn't fade.

Hamasaki was attracted to the role because she sees a lot of herself in the character. "I'm just like Black Lizard when she's not dressed up in her costume," she says. "I'm very calm, very innocent and soft. But when I am dressed up in drag, just like Black Lizard when she's dressed in her costumes, I become driven, vocal and I know what I want and how to get it. We both become unstoppable in our costumes." This duality in their lives runs even deeper when one considers that the parents of Hamasaki — the 28-year-old Miss Asia NYC, Miss Gay South Pacific, and former Miss Fire Island, Miss Stonewall and Miss Long Island Entertainer of the Year — are not aware that she's a drag queen.

Born in China and then moved to Brooklyn, N.Y., and later to Manhattan's Chinatown when she was seven, Hamasaki attended Pace University to study business management to make her parents happy. "Was it a waste of time?" she wonders aloud to herself. "Somewhat," she answers back. And she's fine with her parents not knowing that she does drag. "Their happiness comes first," she says. "In traditional Chinese culture, family comes first, so I'd rather have them be happy and have them not know I'm a drag queen. In the long run, I have many more years to live and do whatever the hell it is I want to do." The pretense is made possible because her parents don't watch American television or read English newspapers, and like many Asian immigrant families, they live in their own Asian bubble of home, work and media. Just as Mishima injected personal issues into his work, there's a similar subtext to "The Black Lizard" for Hamasaki. "This play is a perfect example of what it's like to be a drag queen," she says. (Hamasaki will also perform her cabaret act as part of the festival, at 10:30 p.m. on Friday, Sept. 27, at the Crown & Anchor. Tickets are \$25 at [twptown.org](http://twptown.org).)

For director Jou, who grew up in Houston, Texas, signing on to do "The Black Lizard" was a no-brainer. "It's important to me to have a part in increasing the representation of people who look like me onstage and in storytelling," he says. "It's a great opportunity to amplify Asian and Asian-American voices that in my experience I didn't see a lot of."

Jou is bringing some of his Texas Tech students to Provincetown to help work on the reading, some of whom are Asian-Americans who are looking forward to meeting and working with the Asian-American artists. Jou says “The Black Lizard” is a “gorgeous play that’s queer, fun and dark. Mishima is interested in the power of the outsider, as was Williams. You can see the resonances between the two playwrights, in the sense that here is the ultimate outsider and how she survives. There is a love of beauty, and it shows how beauty and darkness intersect. And that’s really exciting.”

Jou thinks people will leave the reading thinking that it was a well-spent two and a half hours. Kaplan agrees. If audiences are questioning whether to invest their time in a staged reading, his answer is: “Wait till you’ve seen one of ours!”