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## Q&A with Qian Yi, singer in 'Paradise Interrupted'

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In 1999, Qian Yi introduced Western audiences to the Chinese style of opera known as Kunqu when she performed the leading role of Du Liniang in "The Peony Pavilion," written by Tang Xianzu in 1598. Her performance in that 20-hour opera at the Lincoln Center Festival, vaulted her into international prominence.

It is fitting, then, that this year's Spoleto Festival features her in the leading role in "Paradise Interrupted," which is inspired by "The Peony Pavilion" as well as the biblical story of the Garden of Eden. And so, after 16 years, Qian Yi will once again start a journey through a garden.

This interview was conducted in Mandarin and translated to English.

Q: How did "Paradise Interrupted" pull from "The Peony Pavilion" and the Garden of Eden?

A: The story of Eve is very famous in the West. She is expelled from the Garden of Eden, where she lives with Adam without any worries. Du Liniang, in "The Peony Pavilion," also goes to a garden where she meets her lover. But when she wakes up, the garden and her lover are both gone. These two women both attempt to go back to the garden. They both are searching for an unattainable ideal.

We have a talented playwright, Ji Chao, who comes from Beijing. He abstracted some lines from the works of Tang Xianzu and added his original lines to build a new play. I think contemporary people should go on with our traditions. The best way to do this is to stand on the shoulders of giants, borrowing the beautiful verses from Tang Xianzu.

Q: How does it differ from "The Peony Pavilion"?

A: The biggest difference is the music, which is composed by Huang Ruo. I feel myself very lucky that I can sing original music written by a living composer. Because as a Kunqu opera singer, I always sing what our ancestors, the ancient composers, have already composed. But this time, I can sing the music written expressly for my character in "Paradise Interrupted."

Q: What has been the most challenging part of preparing for this piece?

A: Singing is the most challenging part. "Paradise Interrupted" is an opera, not a Kunqu opera. So either the way to present it or the aesthetic direction is different. Huang Ruo has trained me. Spoleto Festival also had me coached by Diane Richardson, the assistant conductor of the festival.

Q: How different are you now than you were in 1999, when you first sang "The Peony Pavilion" at the Lincoln Center Festival?

A: I was 24 years old at that time, and my understanding of Kunqu opera and myself was totally different from today's. Actually, I knew nothing about myself. I was just so carefully presenting what my teacher had taught me on the stage. Now I have lived in New York for 17 years. I have been looking at myself from different angles and trying to understand myself. My living environment has changed, so I wanted to know what this meant to me. And I have been looking for myself. I'm getting older, but I'm also getting richer. This time I did put these years' life experience into this woman in "Paradise Interrupted." And I felt myself relieved when playing her.

Q: How do you compete when the visuals are so eye-catching?

A: It involves two parts. One is blocking, which is related to technique. Another one is that audiences view the stage set and me as a whole, not separately. I'm looking forward to performing on that stage, because the traditional stage of Kunqu opera only consists of a table and two chairs. We really made a breakthrough this time, working together on a half-real and half-unreal stage to present a Western opera incorporating Eastern elements.

Q: Do you think "Paradise Interrupted" is more like a play that integrates Western and Eastern arts?

A: Yes. Most of our team members are Chinese with different backgrounds, in contemporary arts or Western contemporary music. So what we created is a contemporary story. The Kunqu opera elements and the classical verses we used are just our approaches. All we want to do is to tell a universal story and to explore the meaning of life.

Q: What attracts you most to the woman in "Paradise Interrupted"?

A: The color of her costume is white. I really like having my character wear a white costume on stage; it's gorgeous. And after she wakes up, she comes in and out of the garden, which is a huge and legendary journey, a fantasy. I enjoy so much doing such a wide-ranging journey.

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