

Paradise Interrupted brings East and West together in a mythical operatic garden

How Does Your Garden Grow

By Elizabeth Pandolfi

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A black garden grows on stage in this opera about the search for an ideal love

In Chinese artist Jennifer Wen Ma's magnificent 2012 installation "Hanging Garden in Ink," 1,500 live plants were painted jet black with traditional Chinese ink and suspended in midair. The 65-foot-long, 26-foot-high piece, which was commissioned by Beijing's Ullen Center for Contemporary Art, consisted of two halves that were mirror images of each other, creating the illusion of a garden and its reflection in water. There were tall fir trees, delicate flowers, and a quiet bamboo grove, as well as trees native to both Northern and Southern China. It's a monumental and striking piece of art, and one that grew — literally — even more striking as the plants continued to develop, pushing out green shoots of new life through the inky darkness.

Inspired by the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the questions this "Hanging Garden" raises are plentiful: is black the color of death or possibility? How do we translate an ancient tradition into something contemporary? What kind of power does nature hold over us, and we over it?

This is the kind of deeply symbolic, technically complex work that is

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Paradise Interrupted

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typical of Ma, a visual artist who was born in Beijing and moved to the U.S. in 1986. She received her MFA from New York's Pratt Institute, and currently splits her time between the U.S. and China. Today, she's perhaps best known to the world at large for being one of the head designers of the Opening Ceremonies at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Ma is a fearless creator, going after concepts that would seem impossible, or at least prohibitively difficult. That "Hanging Garden" piece required not only some crafty engineering to make the plants cohere, and then hang from the ceiling; it also involved hand-painting each and every individual leaf, bloom, and stem with ink.

Without that painstaking creation, Ma's installation opera *Paradise Interrupted*, which is having its world premiere at this year's Spoleto Festival USA, might never have happened. It was that imagery — that black profusion of plants — which sowed the seed for the opera in Ma's head. "[After the "Hanging Garden" installation] I was standing under this very dramatic upended garden, and just had this idea come to me that it would make a really fantastical, surreal setting for an opera," she says. "I thought this kind of idea, this dream sequence of a garden — it would be black, it would be upside down — would really lend itself to creating this otherworldly environment."

Ma was already exploring the aesthetic of the Garden of Eden, in addition to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, as part of a larger meditation on myth, legend, and tradition, and she became strongly interested in the idea of that black garden as the setting for a mythical quest. When she met the Chinese opera singer Qian Yi a few months later, Ma knew she had to make the opera a reality.

Qian is a titan of the stylized Chinese operatic form, revered by audiences and critics around the globe as an artist of the highest order; she's performed in Western and Chinese operas, including the 19-hour *Peony Pavilion* (from which *Paradise Interrupted* draws some inspiration) and she also acts in theater and writes plays. She became not only a collaborator with Ma — Qian worked on the libretto for *Paradise Interrupted* along with Ma, composer Huang Ruo, and the Chinese playwright Ji Chao — but also served as Ma's muse. "I realized that [Qian's] quest for artistic perfection, and opening herself up to different ways of working creatively, really paralleled this idea of a woman on a quest in search of an unattainable ideal," Ma says. "She's very involved in the creative process."

Qian is also the person who introduced Ma to Huang, a Chinese-born, Oberlin- and Juilliard-educated visionary. Huang works across many genres, from classical to experimental to jazz, creating avant-garde music for everything from large orchestras to small ensembles and sound installations.

When Ma approached him about working together on what would become *Paradise Interrupted*, he had already written one opera: *Dr. Sun Yat-Sen*, a portrayal of the personal life of the father of modern China. Despite the challenges of writing for such an expansive, dramatic form, Huang had no qualms about jumping into another one. "What I love about opera is it's a place where you are a creator — you can create this magical world and a character, bringing that character from paper to reality," he says. "So you are not only a composer, you also need to be a dramaturg. You need to have a good sense of other steps of theater as well, because you do need to consider everything together when you start writing music."

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SPOLETO/2015

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But before Huang or Qian could really begin working on the music, Ma had to start making her artistic vision a reality. *Paradise Interrupted* is unique in many ways, but perhaps its most interesting aspect lies in the fact that the visuals were conceived first instead of the libretto or music, as is usually the case with opera. "Conceived" is the operative word — Huang and Qian were creating the music and libretto simultaneously while Ma was designing, but it was her imagery that really led the creative process. "That's why we call it an installation opera," Ma says.

Ma's first and biggest challenge was, of course, the garden. *Paradise Interrupted* follows a woman through a dream garden, where she searches for a mythical ideal and has various encounters that propel her toward a greater self-awareness. The woman, played by Qian Yi, sings in the traditional, ancient Chinese style, while four male singers, whose voices range from bass baritone (the lowest male classical register) to tenor (the highest), sing in the Western tradition. Ma wanted that garden to emerge out of nowhere. "I wanted to use this really ephemeral quality from Qin opera [the elite, scholarly form of ancient Chinese opera]," she says. "All of Chinese opera traditionally uses these really open stage sets, so that it's up to the performer to suggest drama to the audience, instead of using physical sets. So I wanted to create something out of nothing, to have that ephemeral quality, and in the end go back to nothing."

She went through many different test models for how the black garden might grow and found the one that she would ultimately use after two years of experimenting. Construction of the garden began at the end of 2014 and wrapped up just recently.

But that's not the only seemingly impossible element of *Paradise Interrupted*. There's an interactive component as well, drawn in part from a project Ma did in Beijing shortly after the Olympics called "Nature and Man in Rhapsody of Light." Using a sophisticated computer program, Ma transformed the Olympic aquatics facility, known as the Water Cube, into a nightly, interactive light show that translated data collected from Chinese social media users — emoticon usage, in particular — into changes in light, color, rhythm, and movement that displayed on the building itself. So if the Chinese people seem to be, overall, pretty happy that day, it's reflected on the building.

Ma uses the same concept in *Paradise Interrupted*, but it's been greatly refined. "On her quest, the woman is met by four male singers, who act as the elements of nature — they essentially meet her desires with various things she encounters in the garden," Ma says. "These things are manifestations of light that are activated by her voice. So [those manifestations] change according to the nuance of the way she sings, the emotive quality of her voice." It's all generated live on stage, in real time, whereas the Water Cube project was generated just once daily. Both programs were created by Ma's creative technology director, Guillermo Acevedo.

This embrace of technology's artistic capabilities speaks to the team's vision for *Paradise Interrupted*. "I really wanted a piece that was rooted in tradition — some tradition — but very much a contemporary opera as well," Ma says. Huang agrees, and that's why he decided to write the male vocal lines in the Western style. "My approach to opera is not very square, 'opera-opera,'" he says. "It's a 21st century opera, so I thought it would be great to put in the Western operatic voice as well ... The idea is to integrate the Western and Eastern operatic traditions into one."


Another interesting duality is that while Qian sings real words, as usual in both Western and Eastern opera, the male performers sing only sounds, to emphasize that they are personifications of the four elements. "For the four men I use a lot of made-up words for them, so they could sound more abstract," Huang says. "It makes the characters more mysterious. Yes, there are five people on stage, but they're not necessarily in the same

world."

While that is the case for Qian's character and the men she shares the stage with, it's certainly not for Ma, Huang, and Qian, who together have been wrapped up in *Paradise Interrupted's* intensely collaborative creation for years now. "The nature of it is that we're all creating something out of nothing: Huang's writing the music, I'm the visuals and writing the drama, and Qian, we rely on her to deliver this vision," Ma says. "The piece itself is a metaphor of our creative journey. All three of us are very much invested in how tradition is extended into a contemporary discourse, so this idea of something rooted in tradition, but which has a distinctive, creative, aesthetic voice and vocabulary of its own — that's all very important to us. So we're kind of on this parallel quest for this unattainable ideal or, hopefully, attainable ideal."

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