

# The Post and Courier

## Review: 'Paradise Interrupted' a visual and aural display



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Spoleto Festival USA 2015 "Paradise Interrupted" PROVIDED [x](#)

Westerners can appreciate the stunning magic of "Paradise Interrupted," one of two operas Spoleto Festival has produced this year, in two main ways.

You can delve into the Eastern context of the poetry, which draws heavily from the classic Chinese Kunqu opera from 1598, "The Peony Pavilion," and refers to the Garden of Eden story from Genesis. You can appreciate the Buddhist themes: the ambition and passion of the main character, "The Woman," which she strives to understand as illusion and overcome. And you can admire the ways in which these poetic ideas are expressed visually by director-designer Jennifer Wen Ma and musically by composer Huang Ruo and singer Qian Yi. In other words, you can focus on *what the opera is about*.

This is the intellectual approach to appreciating an original work that beautifully blends Eastern and Western styles and presents five fine singers with remarkable stamina and expression.

Or you can let go of all that and lose yourself in the graceful musical flow and the wondrous aesthetic Ma and her collaborators have created. This approach allows you to focus on *how the opera makes you feel*.

The action takes place on a three-dimensional canvas specially created for this production at Memminger Auditorium. It is very much like multimedia installation art, except in this case some of the "media" is human, and all of it moves.

Video projections create a dreamlike atmosphere; a garden represented by enormous, black, cut-paper objects (inspired by folding Chinese paper lanterns) is pulled onto the stage; a minimalist tree emerges from the floor and slowly spreads its boughs; a stylized flower opens, fan-like, luring The Woman to her presumed ecstasy.

Had there been no music at all, just the staging, this would have been a marvelous, immersive experience. But there was music, fascinating music, lyrical, often rhythmic music. Members of the Spoleto Festival USA Orchestra were joined by Chen Bo playing the Chinese Sheng (a mouth organ), Hong-Da Chin on the Dizi (a flute) and Zhou Yi on the pipa (a lute). Led by John Kennedy, the players produced sounds at first mysterious then pulsating as the cast sang text by librettists Ji Chao, Jennifer Wen Ma, Huang Ruo and Qian Yi who were inspired by Chinese playwright and "Peony Pavilion" author Tang Xian Zu.

Bass-baritone Ao Li, baritone Joo Won Kang, tenor Joseph Dennis and countertenor John Holiday embodied the natural elements, invoking wind and light and garden growth with their voices. They were all superb, singing lyrically in Mandarin, sometimes in a polyphonic way, sometimes chant-like, showing off Huang Ruo's imaginative harmonies and textures.

Holiday stood out, mostly because he was singing in the soprano range most of the time, exhibiting a beautiful, even tone up and down his range.

Qian Yi, a superstar of Kunqu opera, was altogether riveting. Everything she did, whether vocal or sinuously mechanical, was nimble, breezy, elegant. She was at once part of Ma's magical installation art and an independent human force expressing universal concerns.

As The Woman, desire nearly overwhelms her. She is called by the elements, led this way and that, encountering fireflies, a man who reminds her of her longing, dangerous wolves and the gateway to paradise. Seduced by the beauty of the flower, she nearly capitulates to her desire, but manages to break free as the garden disappears in an ash storm. *"This paradise is but a crumbled tomb."*

The Woman assumes her perch in an ink pool, becoming the calligrapher's pen with which a new world can be drawn.

The intentions of Huang Ruo's music were clearest when heard through Qian Yi's shimmering voice. The score is not sometimes in the style of Chinese opera, sometimes rooted in a contemporary Western idiom; it is both, together, simultaneously.

The fluidity of the staging and scenery was mirrored by the musical gestures — phrases that glittered and soared. And even within a single statement, Qian Yi would sing a little in that nasal Chinese style then swoop high and open her throat to sound like Callas or Sutherland.

The orchestra, too, delicately led by Kennedy, combined sounds and styles to produce truly original music.

It was a collaborative effort that paid off, blending not only East and West, but old and new. "Paradise Interrupted," which was co-produced by Spoleto Festival USA and the Lincoln Center Festival, will soon move to New York City and thrill adventurous operagoers with Ma's and Huang's triumphant creation.

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