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‘PARADISE INTERRUPTED’: A CHAMBER INSTALLATION BY JENNIFER WEN MA AT LINCOLN CENTER

BY Lilly Wei POSTED 07/29/16 11:56 AM

Performed July 13, 15, and 16



Performance view of Jennifer Wen Ma's "Paradise Interrupted," 2015, at Spoleto Festival.

JULIA LYNN

Paradise Interrupted, a chamber or “installation” opera, as the program notes call it, is a spellbinding 80-minute feast of genres and cultures. An East/West fantasy that takes place within an imagined garden, the plot revolves around a nameless woman who pines for her idealized lover, their enchanted garden, and lost bliss. But eventually, she renounces the garden as illusory, embracing self-knowledge in its place, however bitterly achieved. She is liberated from its confines

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and triumphantly in control of her being—a very feminist resolution. The opera debuted last year at Spoleto USA in Charleston, South Carolina, and was one of the opening events of the 2016 Lincoln Center Festival. Visually and musically ravishing, it was conceived by the Beijing-born, New York–based interdisciplinary artist Jennifer Wen Ma, who was also its director and designer. Ma is no stranger to dazzle; her spectacles have become ever more assured and narratively complex in the years since she served as a key member of the creative team that produced the opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics, for which she won an Emmy.

Huang Ruo, who was born in China and lives in New York, composed the score and co-wrote the libretto with Ma and others. He wove together Chinese and Western modes in surprising, aurally sensitive ways, mingling the stylizations of plangent Chinese arias with more melodious European opera. He further enriched the soundscape with modernist and experimental music, rock, and jazz. While hybridization has become commonplace, the witchery of the creators of *Paradise Interrupted* have made it seem new. Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden was lashed together with a haunting dream sequence from the *Peony Pavilion*, the 19-hour, 16th-century Kunqu classic, a Chinese theatrical form that combines music, dance, theater, and poetry. To this, Ma contributed a breathtakingly original multimedia stage design. Even the costumes have the allure of couture.

Paradise Interrupted began with a single vibrating white line that crossed the blackness of a screen forming the rear wall, while the luminous figure of Qian Yi, celebrated for her past interpretations of the heroine of the *Peony Pavilion*, stood center stage in a silky white robe, appearing in the principal role of the Woman. What followed was a series of rapidly changing, moody, large-scale abstract projections, mostly in gray-scale monochrome that suggested Chinese ink paintings of landscapes and skyscapes, at times threatening, other times lyrical. At one point, the screen turned a deep violet with bright streaks of light, resembling an evening sky filled with twinkling fireflies or falling stars, a moment of pure visual magic, one among many. Qian's exquisite voice activated the projections, underscoring the notion that she herself is responsible for the world she exists in,

the life she lives. The four male vocalists, the Elements, are also to be applauded, especially the countertenor, John Holiday, a standout.



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As the opera proceeded, the mise-en-scène became increasingly phantasmagoric, mirroring the delirium of dreams. Some wiry nylon ropes suddenly turned into a tree that, just as suddenly, acquired leaves, then fruit. Cleverly cut, intricately fashioned Tyvek foldouts covered in graphite became luxuriant black, *fleurs du malfoliage* that could be easily expanded and compressed, assembled and disassembled in a seeming blink of an eye. Deceptively beatific was the white flower that enfolded the woman in its spiky petals from which she must break free. The one disappointment in this otherwise superb production was the libretto streaming overhead. Written in Chinese and translated into an overly archaic English, often, clumsy in its attempt at equivalency. That said, *Paradise Interrupted* was nonetheless miraculous, spiriting us to a magic kingdom far, far away.

The 2016 Lincoln Center Festival runs through July 31.

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