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A paradise delayed, but no less stunning

A chamber opera that blends Chinese and Western styles and stories, commissioned for Weiwuying's opening season, will be performed this weekend in Kaohsiung and next weekend in Taipei

By Diane Baker / Staff reporter



Qian Yi, center, stars in *Paradise Interrupted*, a one-act opera by composer Huang Ruo and visual artist Jennifer Wen Ma, which opens at the Playhouse at the Weiwuying National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts on Saturday.

Photo courtesy of Marina Levitskaya

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A year behind schedule, the one-act opera *Paradise Interrupted* (驚園) opens this weekend in Kaohsiung, with plenty of big names attached and lots of rave reviews from critics.

The opera was jointly commissioned by the Weiwuying National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts, Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, South Carolina, the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City and Singapore International Festival of Arts. The production was helmed by three China-born, US-based artists: composer Huang Ruo (黃若), visual artist Jennifer

Wen Ma (馬文) and *kun* opera (*kunqu*, 崑曲) star Qian Yi (錢熠).

Ma, who gained worldwide attention for her work on the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, conceptualized the show and served as its director and visual designer. Huang wrote the score, creating the central role of "The Woman" with Qian in mind.

The libretto is credited to writer Ji Chao (姬超), Huang, Ma and Qian.

Paradise Interrupted had its world premiere at the Spoleto Festival USA on May 22, 2015, opened at the Lincoln Center on July 13, 2016, and traveled to Singapore the following month.

Its Taiwanese premiere had to be pushed back because of Weiwuying's construction delays, with the center's opening season starting in mid-October.

Just as the music is a blend of Western orchestration and Chinese instruments as well as Western and *kun* opera styles, the story of *Paradise Interrupted* mixes Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden with the story of Du Liniang (杜麗娘) from the *kun* opera *The Peony Pavilion* (牡丹亭).

The opera begins with Qian, as The Woman, dreaming of an imaginary lover, just like Du. When she awakes, she is disturbed at having lost her dream world, and she begins a journey to find love, meaning and a way back to such perfection.



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The world around *The Woman* and many of the characters she encounters — depicted through Ma's stunning mix of paper cutouts, multimedia installations, interactive videos and Chinese watercolor imagery — is activated by her voice.

In the end, although *The Woman* has found the garden and her utopia, she realizes that what she has actually found is herself. She no longer has any need for illusions or desires.

On her travels, *The Woman* encounters four men who represent the four classical elements and four cardinal directions, among other roles, and who also serve as a Greek chorus.

The American countertenor John Holiday has been widely hailed for his role as the "First Male Voice," although the performances of Chinese bass-baritone Ao Li (李鰲), American tenor Joshua Dennis and South Korean baritone Kang Joo-won have also been praised.

Musicians from the National Symphony Orchestra (國家交響樂團) and National Chinese Orchestra Taiwan (臺灣國樂團) will be conducted by Weiwuying artistic director Chien Wen-pin (簡文彬) at the shows in Kaohsiung and Taipei.

Paradise Interrupted is 80 minutes, with no intermission.

Performance Notes:

WHAT: *Paradise Interrupted*

WHEN: Saturday and Sunday at 7:30pm

WHERE: The Playhouse at the Weiwuying National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts (衛武營國家藝術文化中心) 1, Sanduo 1st Rd, Kaohsiung City (高雄市三多一路1號)

ADMISSION: NT\$200 to NT\$2,000, available at Weiwuying box offices, online at www.artsticket.com.tw and at convenience store ticket kiosks

ADDITIONAL PERFORMANCES: Saturday and Sunday next week at 2:30pm at the National Theater (國家戲劇院), 21-1 Zhongshan S Rd, Taipei City (台北市中山南路21-1號). Tickets are NT\$600 to NT\$2,500, available at National Theater Concert Hall box offices, online at www.artsticket.com.tw and at convenience store ticket kiosks

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