

Across the Universe

On the 250th anniversary of Handel's death, Lady Linda Wong Davies and Zhang Huan bring the first full-scale Baroque opera to China.

words : tamara warren

Love, betrayal, and desire. Comedy and tragedy. Gods and men. The universal stories of humankind are not limited to a singular culture or era. Ovid's "Metamorphoses" incorporated resonant themes of Greek life. Centuries later, Ovid's work inspired Georg Friedrich Handel's eighteenth-century creation, the three-act opera "Semele." In 2010, this same opera will find a new audience in Shanghai. The first full-scale Baroque opera production to reach China, "Semele" is a passion project for Lady Linda Wong Davies and the KT Wong Foundation.

The operatic story line of "Semele" is true to classic Greek mythology. The lovely Semele falls in love with Jupiter, who poses as a mortal in order to be with her. Semele is demanding of him, to the point where he cannot appease her and satisfy her desire to be adored. Semele's fate isn't a kind one—she is scorched with lightning bolts, an act orchestrated by Juno's manipulation as Jupiter's betrayed wife.

"Semele" premiered on February 10, 1744, in Covent Garden. On the 250th anniversary of Handel's death in 1759, the opera finds a contemporary audience. The new co-production of "Semele" between Belgium's Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie | de Munt and the KT Wong Foundation will open the 2009/2010 season in September in Brussels and then make its debut in Shanghai in 2010.

Lady Linda Wong Davies, chairman of the KT Wong Foundation, anticipates an overwhelming response to the grandeur, beauty and sensuality of baroque music, particularly when it reaches Chinese audiences. "That the same obsessions were written down by Ovid in antiquity and then reinterpreted in Handel's 'Semele' ... and now in this new Chinese-European interpretation is proof that all great art is both specific and universal," Wong Davies says.

Wong Davies established the KT Wong Foundation in 2007 in memory of her late father, Dato Wong Kee Tat, a Chinese-Malaysian businessman and philanthropist, who inspired her love of classical music. Its mission is to build bridges between China and the west through artistic and educational collaboration, to spread understanding as China becomes immersed in the international community.

Wong Davies, a passionate devotee of Chinese culture, conceived the "Semele" project on one of her frequent trips to China. "The idea of a 'Semele' that is intercultural, multidisciplinary, and bold came to me while I was at the first ever performance of Handel's 'Messiah' in Shanghai. The audience was deeply moved, and it was then that I realized that great works of art transcend time and culture. It was that moment which inspired me to commission Zhang Huan and to bring the idea to La Monnaie, a gem of a theater with a track record of leadership in experimental forms of opera."

Zhang Huan, an accomplished Chinese artist based in New York, has a firm grasp of Western and Eastern cultural intersections. With "Semele," he makes his operatic directorial debut and operatic design debut, creating the piece's alluring set. Drawing from the opera's storyline—arranged marriage, concubinage, temptation, the scorned first wife, death, reincarnation and the effects of karma—Zhang built an architectural installation of an original Ming Dynasty ancestral temple, which he discovered in Quzhou, Zhejiang Province.

Furthering the rich culture fusion is an acclaimed cast and crew of European and Chinese talents. Christophe Rousset, a leading baroque specialist, worked with period ensemble Les Talens Lyriques and Chinese movement director and choreographer Su Jie to set the musical score. The scope of the production is enhanced by an intercultural cast including soprano Ying Huang, mezzo soprano Ning Liang, tenor Jeremy Ovenden and bass-baritone Nathan Berg. Respected stage and opera lighting director Wolfgang Göbbel was called in, as was fashion designer Han Feng, who created the costumes.

Wong Davies drew inspiration from her work with international opera houses and festivals, including the Glyndebourne Festival Opera, the Royal Opera House, the Salzburg Festival Opera and Grange Park. Her interest in Handel is evident as a member of the board of trustees of the Handel Institute. "Baroque music is one of the least known western musical genres in China today, but I believe the uptake will be swift and enthusiastic," she says.

The KT Wong Foundation is working with the Royal Horticulture Society (RHS) on building future opportunities for collaborations in China during the Expo in Shanghai in 2010.

“Great works of art transcend time and culture.”

—Lady Linda Wong Davies

