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Coup de Théâtre

Around Zhang Huan's first opera

A three-legged Buddha, Mongolian musicians, sumo wrestlers and a hummed version of the communist Internationale – can an over-the-top treatment of a baroque opera by a Chinese visual artist who had never seen an opera be the way to save this musical art form?

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By now the Theatre de la Monnaie's production of Handel's *Semele*, whose initial run recently closed in Brussels, has become a succès de scandale, in the city if not beyond. But the hoopla surrounding the production and its spectacular staging has made it difficult to assess the impact of this *Semele* and to grasp its larger significance.

Anyone who has been to an opera in recent memory knows the problem: a bunch of large people in unbelievable getups, facing a grey-haired audience and singing at them. That is not a journalist's characterisation of opera but that of La Monnaie's executive director Peter De Caluwe.

Opera has never been a mass-media attraction, and one can argue that it has more viewers now than at any time in its not very long western history, but that cannot disguise the fact that its audience is getting older by the minute, and younger generations are not crowding into the stalls for *Tosca* and *Cav'* and *Pag'*. Money is partly at issue: at major opera houses tickets cost a week's wages. But opera was once a popular (read: of the people) art form, not the exclusive prov-

ince of the white-tie set, and popular in the broader sense because it appealed to the eyes and the ears. De Caluwe is betting that this total body experience can translate not only across generations but across continents and cultures as well.

Spare & Imposing

Zhang Huan's staging and direction of the opera represents a creative gamble by De Caluwe, an artistic gamble by Zhang, and a financial and cultural gamble by Linda Davies and the K. T. Wong foundation, which has largely sponsored the venture. The critical response to the collaboration has been mixed, but the aesthetic outcome is not exactly the point.

The production centres around an ancient temple erected on the stage of La Monnaie. I have been following the production for over a year, since I first saw the set in pieces in Zhang's Shanghai studio. It was a private house by the time Zhang bought it, and as he later discovered while taking it apart (from a journal hidden in the wall) it had a tragic history: Its former owner had been executed for murdering his lover. Even disassembled, it is hard to describe the power of the temple,

Portrait of Zhang Huan

Photo: © Zhang Huan Studio



the age and beauty of its fragments, like bones from a dinosaur. Based on videos of its reconstruction and use in an earlier performance piece, *100 Sages in the Bamboo Forest*, which featured a troop of monkeys, it seemed almost too good to be true that this ruin would become the setting for an opera about a tragic figure from Roman mythology. Critics have unanimously praised how it filled the stage of La Monnaie with a spare and imposing presence. Likewise such coups de theatre as the giant puppet of Somnus appearing on the temple roof and the airborne introduction of Semele for her signature 'Endless Pleasure, Endless Love.' Even the paper dragon, sumo wrestlers and the Mongolian singer that Zhang interpolated into the music found some support.

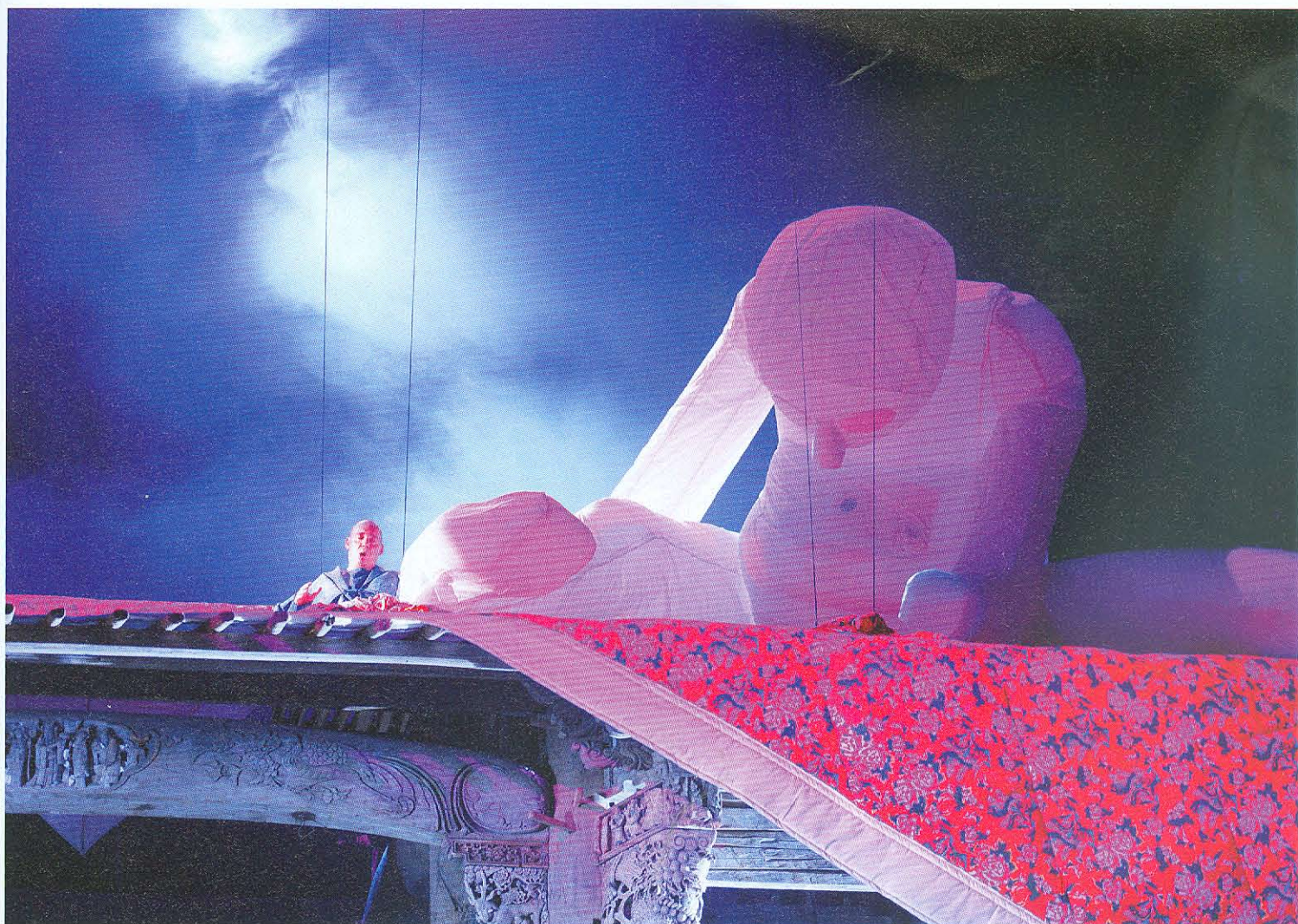
Updating Opera

By now, critics, if not audiences, are getting used to such shocks. More and more visual artists – and designers with the scope and creativity of visual artists – are being recruited to bring opera up to date. Of course, radical theatre directors have a long history of shaking up traditional operas – in the recent past Ingmar Bergman's *Magic Flute*, Peter Sellars' *Idomeneo*, and Peter Brook's *Carmen* come to mind. Robert Wilson introduced not only a new stage language for sung works but also, in collaboration with Philip Glass, a new musical language. Yet opera can't sustain itself unless the traditional repertoire finds a new relevance, and in an increasingly visual

culture, artists get the job, even when, like Zhang Huan, they don't know much about opera.

Picasso certainly didn't know much about ballet when he designed the revolutionary sets for the Ballets Russes' *Parade* in 1917, but he defined its visual character forever. In the 1970s, David Hockney's *Rake's Progress* gave audiences something to look at while they fought their way through Stravinsky's score. Just last summer, Anselm Kiefer created a monumental ruin on the stage of the Bastille Opera for his *In the Beginning*, an unclassifiable work of music and performance. From Germany's A.R. Penck to America's Judy Pfaff, artists are finding an outlet in opera.

And one of the most artist-friendly venues is La Monnaie. That was happening even before De Caluwe arrived in 2007, from Amsterdam, where he had worked with artists such as Georg Baselitz. By now La Monnaie has become arguably more daring even than New York's Brooklyn Academy of Music. The opera house premiered William Kentridge's *The Magic Flute* and co-produced Anish Kapoor's eye-popping staging of *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Olafur Eliasson's prismatic, hall-of-mirrors treatment of Hans Werner Henze's *Phaedra*, among others. Still, the majority of artists' forays on stage have been merely an elaborate window dressing, leaving the singers and the music, not to mention the audience, relatively untouched. It's business as usual when the fat ladies (and men) sing.



Installation & Music

Artists, however, are less and less satisfied with that result. Eliasson moved the entire orchestra of the Staatsoper Berlin to the back of the house, then organised a system of mirrors so the audience could see the singers (or face the music) without having to turn around. Kiefer demanded no-strings access to the Bastille stage and all its resources. Russian-born George Tsypin is among the most ambitious stage designers ever. Not known as a visual artist, he is really more like a mad architect, and he has set out to transform opera through the visual and physical settings he creates. His design for Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, which premiered at New York's Metropolitan Opera – a house not known for taking chances – featured a burning Moscow. It was immediately definitive, stamping the music with a look it will be hard to displace. Tsypin termed his approach to Wagner's Ring cycle 'an art installation with amazing music,' and in true Nietzschean spirit he sought to inject it with a dose of barbarity. His *Die Valkyrie* featured a slanting stage that threatened to pitch even the biggest and burliest singers into the pit, and *Die Gotterdammerung* treated singers and audience to a literal collapse of the heavens as the ceiling over the stage was lowered.

As a Russian, Tsypin imagined his Ring as a meeting point between East and West, a collision of sensibilities and cultures. Such a collision was exactly what Lady

Davies had in mind when she conceived the *Semele* project and sought a partner. As she told me in Brussels, she was thinking of a visual approach to the opera that would speak not just to western audiences but also to eastern ones. With Beijing and Shanghai as ultimate destinations for the production, the point was not to import a western musical form – that had already been done – but to repossess it for Asia, making the East-West cultural bridge a two-way street.

It goes without saying that the street would have some bumps. In the first place, La Monnaie had never had a sponsor making so many of the creative decisions, from choosing the orchestra (Les Talens Lyriques of Paris) and singers (*Semele* and *Juno* are both Chinese) to printing its own version of the programme. At the same time, Zhang himself agreed to the project only if he could have total control of the production, from the mood of the lights to the movement of the singers and even, as it turned out, the music itself. 'I wanted the vision to be mine,' he told me, 'and it would succeed or fail as my responsibility.' All theatres need sponsors but few are willing to surrender quite so much control and perhaps no instances have required the blind faith of *Semele*. Yet in De Caluwe's opinion such risks – financial and creative – are necessary for opera to be reborn through the radical interpretations of contemporary artists. And it must be reborn if it is to survive.







Previous spread
Photo © Forster

Radical Vision

When I arrived in Brussels during final rehearsals, tension was running high. Zhang was pushing the singers to do things on stage they weren't used to doing in baroque opera, and some of the pacing was still rough. More shocking, at the finale, the curtain came down on a hummed version of the Internationale and a video showing a painting of a young woman disintegrating into water and ashes. Les Talens founder and conductor Christophe Rousset stopped the rehearsal, came to the centre of the theatre and engaged Zhang in a heated discussion. Zhang had made the most radical of his decisions – to cut the final act of the opera in which the tragedy of Semele's immolation is redeemed by the birth of Bacchus. Rousset wasn't buying it. As the two artists recounted to me later, Zhang wanted Semele's death unrequited and the distance of the gods confirmed in order to argue for a universal humanism, in which we have only each other as a source of pleasure and hope. The gods, in effect, are dead. Rousset, however, had a higher authority to answer to. He viewed himself as the guarantor of the integrity of Handel's beautiful music. In the end Rousset yielded, not because he agreed with Zhang but because he acknowledged the seriousness of Zhang's vision. Like De Caluwe, Rousset embraces the opportunity to work with contemporary artists in reinterpreting the baroque canon. 'You take the chance of adding two ideas together in order to get something great,' he remarked. 'In Paris there would have been a

riot.' But flexibility has its limits. He got his way, too. The last (short) act was sung and broadcast for the opera goers as they left the house and gathered around Zhang Huan's giant three-legged Buddha in the plaza of La Monnaie.

Going forward, the question is, will it work, will Semele really break down the opera house doors? Or is it too late to save an antiquated art form? For the previews at La Monnaie, much of the audience was under 30, and tickets were being given away in part to entice high-schoolers away from their iPhones and video games. Currently La Monnaie estimates that at least 20 per cent of its regular audience is under 26, not a huge shift in demographics but a start. As for how the Chinese will embrace the opera, that prospect is what motivated Lady Davies, born in Singapore of Chinese parents. 'I grew up with opera,' she says, 'and I think it can have a lasting legacy in China. I want China to become part of a global constituency for this work.'

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