

MODERN PAINTERS

Assimilating *Semele*

Acclaimed Chinese artist **Zhang Huan** gives an ancient Greek tale an Eastern spin in his directorial debut of Handel's *Semele*.

by **Andrew Yang**



Take a story line from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, dramatize it as an opera composed by one of the 18th-century's greatest composers, and give it a contemporary spin by one of China's best-known living artists. Welcome to this fall's production of George Frideric Handel's *Semele* at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie/de Munt in Brussels, and the directorial debut of influential Chinese artist Zhang Huan, who transports this ancient Greek tale to provincial China.

"The idea was to have the Handel opera for the Handel year," explains Peter de Caluwe, the director of La Monnaie, noting that 2009 is the 250th anniversary of Handel's death. "It was not intended that Zhang Huan would do the production but that he would only work with us on visuals," he says.

Zhang was introduced to the house by Lady Linda Davies, chairwoman of the London-based KT Wong Foundation, a coproducer of the opera. "However, further into the project, it was clearer that he should be the director," continues de Caluwe, who in the past has engaged Olafur Eliasson and Anish Kapoor with productions at the Monnaie. "And so we took the risk."

Rehearsals have gone on for nearly a year in Zhang's train station-size warehouse studio outside of Shanghai, with a full set and cast in place. And, as if the artist didn't have enough on his plate, Zhang's solo show at White Cube in London opens on September 4, just days before *Semele's* September 8 premiere.

For those not familiar with *Semele*, the plot derives from a classical tale from Greek mythology but was recast by Handel as the secular story of Semele, a young woman who escapes her marriage in favor of an affair with an older, powerful married man, Jupiter. (In the original Greek myth, Jupiter is Zeus, king of the gods.) Jupiter's wife, Juno, gets wind of this affair and hatches a mischievous plot whereby she tricks Semele into trapping Jupiter, thus initiating Semele's own demise and death.

The story, although centuries old, has been staged by Zhang in a timeless manner and with an Eastern setting. (The fashion designer Han Feng, who collaborated with director Anthony Minghella in his production of *Madama Butterfly*, created the costumes.) "We were very determined that this would be a good show that anyone could understand," says Davies, whose foundation pursues cultural exchange projects between China and the West and is named after her late father, a business tycoon.

The central set is a wooden ancestral temple from the Ming dynasty, which Zhang investigated years ago as a potential art project. The 450-year-old structure once housed a man named Fang and his family in the Quzhou region in southwestern China. Fang discovered that his wife was having an affair and hired someone to kill her lover; he was eventually executed for his crimes. After the family departed, among the objects left behind was his diary.

"A majority of this diary is written about his love and hate for his wife, and his sense of responsibility and helplessness for his family," says Zhang. "After reading through this diary, I suddenly came upon an inspiration for the opera, along with the seeds for the main set of *Semele*."

Whether the themes are East or West, the opera's creators consider them to be universal. "The story is historical and timeless and has

elements of Baroque and Chinese culture," says Davies, who took Zhang to his first opera, *Madama Butterfly*, and later to Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Says Zhang, "The fact that the roots of pain introduced hundreds of years ago in a Western opera reappear in the East, in the fate of a single peasant family in the countryside, can make us continually ponder the redemption of humanity."

"For me, the reason I went for it is because Zhang is very interested in the past," says de Caluwe. "It presents the image of the Western society interpreted through an Eastern society. It creates new chemistries."

After *Semele's* September run in Brussels, the production will be staged at the Beijing Opera House and at a yet-to-be-disclosed venue in Shanghai. ♦

Semele, Sept. 8-29, 2009, lamonnaie.be

BELOW: Handel's *Semele*, 1743, in a production directed by artist Zhang Huan, 2009. Rehearsal views, studio of Zhang Huan, Shanghai: the main set, a Ming dynasty temple (bottom).

OPPOSITE: Zhang Huan (center) in rehearsal in Shanghai.

