

Culture Slam: Supersize Opera Mashup Hits Brooklyn

By CORINNE RAMEY

When the opera “Semele” opens Wednesday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the stage will hold some extra weight: two sumo wrestlers, totaling 700 pounds, and a 17-ton, 450-year-old temple.

“Semele,” a 1743 operatic oratorio by George Frideric Handel, tells the myth of Semele, a mortal who falls in love with a god. In this opera-meets-art-installation production, performed by the Canadian Opera Company, Baroque opera is infused with aspects of Buddhism and Chinese and Japanese culture.

The production is also a first foray into directing for Shanghai-based artist Zhang Huan, a major figure in the Chinese art world known for his provocative performance art, such as sitting on a latrine while insects swarmed over his naked, honey-covered body.

This is the production’s U.S. premiere.

In 2007, Belgium’s Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie and the KT Wong Foundation, a Chinese organization dedicated to cultural collaborations, approached Mr. Zhang with the idea of a nontraditional version of “Semele.”

“I originally refused the offer, because I said, ‘I don’t know anything about opera,’” said Mr.

Zhang, through an interpreter. But the artist was in the process of buying a Ming Dynasty temple, located several hours outside Shanghai. While moving the temple to his factory studio, he discovered an old diary, which told of a man who was sentenced to death for killing a lover of his unfaithful wife.

“When I read the story, I realized that there is a strong connection with ‘Semele,’” said Mr. Zhang. “There are these messy relations between humans and gods, which we can see in real human life.”

An unusual production was born. The opera, for example, opens with a short film that tells the story of the diary, and concludes with the humming of the communist anthem “The Internationale.”

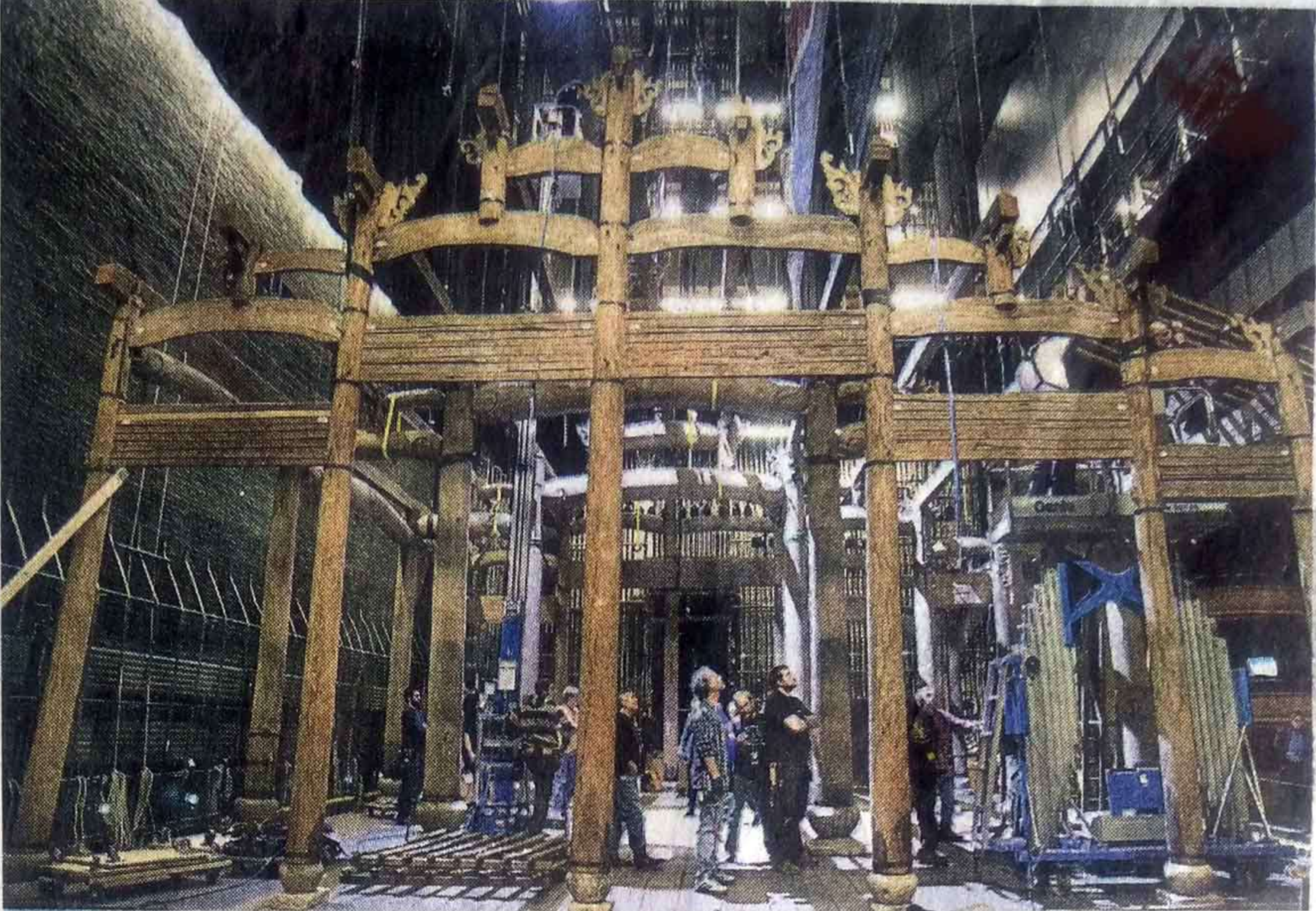
Some aspects are more akin to performance art, such as a fight between two sumo wrestlers, which, while not totally authentic—a real sumo fight takes place in a very small space, said four-time World Sumo Champion Byambajav Ulambayar—uses real wrestlers.

At first being in an opera was strange, “but I got used to it and really enjoy the sounds and the performance,” the 360-pound Mr. Ulambayar, one of wrestlers in the show, said through an in-

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Sumo wrestler Byambajav Ulambayar in ‘Semele,’ directed by Zhang Huan. The opera opens Wednesday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.



Workers assemble a 450-year-old temple that will be part of a production of Handel’s ‘Semele’ at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Below, Kyle Ketelsen portrays Cadmus in the opera, which opens Wednesday.

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terpreter.

The production premiered in Brussels in 2009, and then went to the Beijing Music Festival, although in a modified form.

“The Chinese authorities had issues with the elements that deal with sex, and how sex is portrayed in the staging,” said Mr. Zhang. “Certain aspects we did tone down a little bit.” The production includes lascivious Buddhist monks and, according to the Academy, “one aroused donkey.”

For BAM, the production has involved transporting from Canada and putting together the 17-ton temple—which is, as far as the institution is aware, the heaviest set in its history. The camphor-wood temple, which has no nails or screws, is like a massive Lego set, complete with detailed instructions.

“It’s all interlocking wood and pegs,” said BAM production supervisor Paul Bartlett. “You can’t build it out of order.”

In some reviews, the production has been criticized as being inauthentic. But that misses the point, said Linda Wong Davies, the KT Wong Foundation’s founder and chairwoman.

“We cannot stay in one place in order to be relevant,” she said of “Semele,” which was the first major Chinese production of a Baroque opera.

Even in Handel’s time, “Semele” was considered to be pro-



fane and of dubious subject matter, said conductor Christopher Moulds, who is leading the Canadian Opera Company orchestra and chorus in the production.

“Handel shocked the public on a regular basis,” he said.

Asked what the baroque composer might have thought of sumo wrestlers mingling with his arias, the soprano Jane Archibald, who plays Semele, said it is more often audience mem-

bers—and even singers—who balk at unusual productions.

“I’d think [Handel] would be open-minded to it, because we take great care of the music,” she said. “I think we do him proud.”

“Semele” runs Wednesday through March 10 at the BAM Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn; 718-636-4100, bam.org.