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Paradise Interrupted, an installation opera, is a tour de force of singing and dramatics

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Known for its innovation and adventurousness in programming, the Singapore International Festival of Arts struck gold this year with Paradise Interrupted.

An "installation opera" by the China-born and America-based partnership of composer Huang Ruo and Emmy Award-winning visual designer-director Jennifer Wen Ma, this co-commission by the festival and three international partners had premiered at the Spoleto Festival last year.

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The 80-minute opera is a modernistic take on the famous dream sequence from the 16th-century Ming dynasty kunqu opera Peony Pavilion by Tang Xianzu. Embedded in the new narrative was the plight of the biblical Eve (on her own without Adam), who had been expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Thus the protagonist was just named the Woman (instead of the fabled Du Li-Niang), sung and acted by Qian Yi who came to prominence in the epic 20-hour performances of Peony Pavilion in 1999.

Hers was a tour de force of dramatics and singing in a musical idiom that splendidly melded Chinese and Western opera into one almost indivisible whole. The libretto, a joint effort by Huang, Ma, Qian and writer Ji Chao, was new. This was no cut-and-paste job or pastiche, but rather an original creation, which, while paying homage to the original, was bold enough to strike out on its own.

Waking up from her reverie of idealised romantic bliss, the Woman is confronted by The Elements and Four Directions, sung by counter-tenor John Holiday, tenor Yi Li, baritone Joo Won Kang and bass-baritone Ao Li.

The foursome tormented and played with her emotions, sometimes serving as a Greek chorus, with the exceptionally agile Holiday hitting notes even higher than hers.



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All this took place in an arid setting that soon grew lush with the erection of a sole wire tree that sprouted leaves and thousands of black paper cuttings which magically unfolded like a giant origami concertina into monstrous shrubbery. The use of black, white and grey as predominant colours was starkly effective, representing ink and paper, as well as void and light.

The composer conducted from the pit an ensemble formed by the T'ang Quartet and members of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music. The music was mostly tonal, but highly chromatic, often spare, transparent and minimalist in textures, but closely followed the dramatic action as it built to febrile climaxes.

The Woman's dream garden, as it turned out, was illusory as she returned to the austere setting in which the opera began with.

How would she confront the future? In the original, Du Li-Niang withers and dies from an unfulfilled broken heart (to be later resurrected by the man of the dreams). Here, there is no such man, but Woman comes to a self-actualisation that leaves her with a sturdy sense of inner peace.

Paradise Interrupted, beautifully conceived, was a performance as thought-provoking as it was invigorating.