

## Review: 'Paradise Interrupted' Fuses Eastern Manners with Western Narrative

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Qian Yi stars in Lincoln Center Festival's 'Paradise Interrupted.' (Stephanie Berger)

At traditional Chinese opera, you settle in for an extended duration, submit to being in the time zone of a distant dynasty and accept that something significant is happening when you can't grasp the specifics. By virtue of being a mere 90 minutes long, *Paradise Interrupted*, presented by Lincoln Center Festival on Wednesday in a three-performance run, establishes itself as a hybrid of Eastern manners and Western narrative — and a promising one for future works, even if this one is often tentative.

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The Eastern, kunqu-opera elements include a parable-like tale — based on the writings of Ming Dynasty playwright Tang Xian Zu, best known for *The Peony Pavilion* — charting the inner journey of a woman who wakes up from an idyllic dream world and pursues some sort of heaven on earth until she experiences spiritual transcendence and renounces it all. That's plenty of plot for the contemplative, ritualistic tone of *Paradise Interrupted* and the kind of symbolic visual splendor that's traditionally part of the package. But particularly in the opening scenes, the restrained, almost withholding theatricality initially makes you wonder what's missing, whether in the piece or in your perception of it. Four spirit guides representing basic earth elements, iconic animals and other subsidiary characters arrive at various points in the piece. Their very presence guarantees some sort of musical variety, and one that's markedly more western in style. Predominantly, the score is carried by the central character, who sings Chinese-inflected vocal lines with spare scoring that almost feels like the early-baroque operas of Monteverdi and Cavalli, though it only occasionally achieves the dramatic concentration of those composers.

The piece is billed as an "installation opera," however, the Huang Ruo score is only semi-operatic, intensifying and pacing the storytelling while behaving like aggressive, pervasive incidental music. Though a thrillingly inventive composer in past works, Ruo set his sights low in this one. Rhythms with various degrees of momentum came and went with minimalist-style ostinatos. The most interesting moments had hints of unorthodox harmonies added to the rhythmic bedrock, keeping the score from seeming like a mere series of theatrical devices. The fact that the right devices were mostly in the right places shows how effective future works from this creative team promise to be.

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The "installation" part of the piece's moniker is also a red herring. To me, that term more aptly applies to William Kentridge's Metropolitan Opera production of *Lulu*, which provided ongoing commentary on the opera rather than something that truly participated in the opera's mechanism. That's happily not the case with the Jennifer Wen Ma-supervised production. The combination of video (Austin Switzer) and set design (Matthew J. Hilyard) delivered some beautiful, meticulously composed stage pictures, ones more symbolic than realistic, that fit the libretto's parable beautifully. A tree grew on the stage of the Gerald W. Lynch Theater. A giant fan — also resembling dinosaur bones — was a unifying visual element. Fireflies came and went. Overall, the production mirrored the score, whose spare opening was accompanied by a bare stage. From there, picturesque vegetation arrived onstage as the layers of music escalated with a number of emotional weather fronts displayed on the rear video screen.

The male quartet — John Holiday, Yi Li, Joo Won Kang and Ao Li — captured some of the biggest applause of the evening, perhaps not just because their singing had great confidence (thanks no doubt to conductor Wen-Pin Chien and Ensemble FIRE), but the idiom of the music was easily grasped. As one who no longer finds traditional Chinese music to be remote, I found Qian Yi in the central role to be a charismatic marvel. Though her vocal production definitely hails from Chinese opera, her tone color is that of a western mezzo-soprano, encompassing all of the coloristic possibilities that come with it. The composer gave her some lines that Western singers might find anti-vocal, but she sang with palpable sense of meaning, even in early scenes when her range was circumscribed in keeping with the piece's overall ritualistic tone. In later scenes, she had a much wider vocal and expressive range that revealed the operatic scope of her artistry. She's yet another reason why this team should keep collaborating.

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