

FINANCIAL TIMES

Music

Paradise Interrupted, Lincoln Center Festival, New York — ‘Droning onslaught’

There is much to admire in this quasi-Kunqu opera . . . but not much to love



Yi Li and Qian Yi in 'Paradise Interrupted'. Photo: Stephanie Berger © Stephanie Berger

JULY 15, 2016 by: **Martin Bernheimer**

The intentions behind *Paradise Interrupted* were no doubt lofty, also daring and original. Expectations ran high when the Lincoln Center Festival introduced to New York this quasi- Kunqu opera, a hyper-quaint, dreadfully fussy creation by Huang Ruo fusing ancient ritual with modernist comment and biblical punctuation.

Jennifer Wen Ma's staging, lovingly mounted at the nearby Lynch Theater of John Jay College of Criminal Justice (yes, criminal justice),

<https://www.ft.com/content/5021de44-49b2-11e6-8d68-72e9211e86ab>

worked diligently to validate historical practices. The director also created superbly stylised decors. Qian Yi, fondly remembered for her virtuosic contribution to the unending [Peony Pavilion](http://next.ft.com/content/449fdea4-2622-11e5-bd83-71cb60e8fo8c) (<http://next.ft.com/content/449fdea4-2622-11e5-bd83-71cb60e8fo8c>), dominated the proceedings as the reflective heroine, exhibiting dancier poise, tragic demeanour and a tireless sort-of-soprano that made her eternal, literally high-toned chants sound almost suave to foreign ears.

One admired clever visual effects, inventive choreography and apt video illustrations by Austin Switser. One appreciated a male quartet alternately representing — if indeed one read the fuzzy credits correctly — wind, air, light, fire, love, wolf and four directions. One wanted to applaud the hard-working scene-changers toiling onstage within the symbolic, subtly shifting decors invented by Matthew J. Hilyard. Under the circumstances, the constantly clanging and/or droning onslaught of orchestral comments, diligently delivered in the pit by something labelled Ensemble FIRE and led by Wen-Pin Chien, seemed wholly appropriate.

If only all this exalted effort could have been expended on something more compelling than Ruo's arty-smarty endurance contest. Alas ... Citing Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the inaction starts with its protagonist dreaming of an erotic encounter with an ideal yet absent lover. She sings, by the way, in Mandarin, her words clumsily translated both in English and Chinese titles projected atop the proscenium. Thus begins what is billed as "a psychological journey through a surreal, interactive garden made from dynamic paper sculptures". Unfortunately, delicacy is crucially tested on numerous levels in the process.

Although the nervous verbal, vocal and illustrative navel-gazing in this dubious paradise continues for only 80 minutes, it seems to drone on forever. And then some.

To July 16, lincolncenter.org (<http://lincolncenter.org/>)