

ARTS | ARTS IN REVIEW | OPERA REVIEW

‘Paradise Interrupted’ and ‘Veremonda, l’amazzone di Aragona’ Reviews

Two centuries-old operas get new life at the Spoleto Festival USA.



‘Paradise Interrupted’ runs through May 31 at Spoleto Festival USA. PHOTO: JULIA LYNN PHOTOGRAPHY

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Spoleto Festival USA

Through June 7

Paradise Interrupted

Through May 31

Veremonda, l’amazzone di Aragona

Through June 5

With “Paradise Interrupted,” which had its world premiere at the Spoleto Festival USA on Friday, the composer Huang Ruo and the artist Jennifer Wen Ma have gloriously fused Western and Chinese idioms, modernity and tradition, to create a mesmerizing new work that is part opera, part dynamic art installation. The 80-minute piece is rooted in the 1598 *kunqu* opera “The Peony Pavilion,” is sung in Mandarin, and is a showcase for the electrifying *kunqu* performer Qian Yi, who starred as Du Liniang in the famous 20-hour production of the work that was presented at

the Lincoln Center Festival in 1999 and here in 2004. “Paradise Interrupted” begins with the “Peony Pavilion” heroine’s erotic dream, but when she is cast out of that paradise, it goes in a more modern direction as the character, called The Woman, finds her way past the shackles of desire to an independent existence.

Mr. Huang's music for *The Woman* takes off from the melismatic, pitch-bending, slightly nasal *kunqu* vocal style, and makes it even more haunting and melodic. Four men, the Elements, who guide her on her journey, sing in a tonally based Western idiom, often as an alluring quartet. The juxtaposed musical styles create tension but also intertwine, most remarkably in a love duet for the tenor (Joseph Dennis) and Ms. Qian. Heightening the musical drama even further, the highest male voice is a countertenor, the superb John Holiday, whose line occasionally soars above the heroine's. The orchestra, led by John Kennedy, has 11 Western instruments and a Chinese *pipa* (lute), *sheng* (mouth organ) and *diza* (bamboo flutes); those sonorities also combine to create atmosphere, as when the bleak *pipa*, backed by woodwinds, conveys *The Woman's* desolation.

The music coheres with Ms. Ma's direction and design, which is all in black and white, and vividly uses light (Lihe Xiao), video (Guillermo Acevedo), projections (Austin Switser) and some truly original set pieces (Matthew Hilyard). The erotic dream occurs on an empty stage in a starburst of white light. A garden of collapsible sculptures of cut black paper rises and expands as we watch. Fireflies, playful lights on the backdrop, coalesce into a man; a white flower unfolds from the stage floor. The costumes (Melissa Kirgan, Xing-Zhen Chung-Hilyard) evoke Chinese tradition, but also break from it: When *The Woman* at last finds her own voice, she sheds the embroidered robe with its flowing sleeves and the stiff headdress and long braids for a streamlined white gown. The magnetic Ms. Qian, who has been working in the formal movements of *kunqu*—the tiny, floating steps, the balletic movements of hands and sleeves—transforms them into a bolder, more open pose as she rises out of the pool of ink that represents her future.

Spoleto's production of Francesco Cavalli's "*Veremonda, l'amazzone di Aragona*" was the modern premiere of an opera that has apparently not been performed since it was first heard in Italy in 1652. The conductor, Aaron Carpenè, created the performing edition from multiple sources; the fine period instrument ensemble, New York Baroque Incorporated, was in the pit; the singers were experienced Baroque opera performers, and the show took place in the intimate Dock Street Theatre. Ideal—and all too rare—conditions for Baroque opera performance in the U.S.

Originally performed as part of Carnival festivities in Venice, "*Veremonda*" treads a thin line between seriousness and comedy. The Spanish are besieging a Moorish fort in Gibraltar, but the Spanish king, Alfonso, is more interested in scientific studies than war and his general, Delio, is having a secret affair with the Moorish queen, Zelemina. When this treachery is revealed, *Veremonda*, the Spanish queen, decides to dress as a man and go to war herself, with the ladies of the court in Amazonian armor behind her. More complications ensue, especially between *Veremonda* and Delio, and Giulio Strozzi's libretto is full of double entendres, with gender confusion being only one of the jokes.

It is an ebulliently tuneful piece, with more ensembles than are usual in operas of this

period. There are several love duets, but in keeping with the wackiness of the libretto, none of them are straightforward, especially a lushly scored encounter between Delio and Veremonda that can't decide if it is mutual attraction or rape.

The superb Vivica Genaux brought vehemence and panache to Veremonda, and she made the recitatives sparkle with her dark-hued mezzo. Raffaele Pe's bright, unforced countertenor gave a youthful, virile and amorous spirit to Delio—in potent contrast to Andrey Nemzer's more heroic countertenor instrument, displayed when King Alfonso finally woke up from his studious dreams. Tenor Brian Downen and mezzo Céline Ricci stood out as the comic servant pair Zeriffo and Vespina. Francesca Lombardi Mazzulli was a slightly acid-sounding Zelemina; the show's third countertenor, Michael Maniaci, as her maid, was indisposed and ended up speaking most of his part. The continuo players were valiant, and the lively 11-member orchestra could sound transparent or hefty as required.

Stefano Vizioli's direction, while entertaining, was heavy-handed, more slapstick than *commedia dell'arte*, and the serious moments, such as they were, did not emerge. Ugo Nespolo's primary-colored set of drops and flats resembled a children's picture book, and his costumes had a storybook triteness—Veremonda first appeared in a pink dress that was pure Disney princess. Pierluigi Vanelli supplied the choreography for some vigorous dances.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

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