

## Culture

### OPERA ENTERTAINMENT



Scenes from "Semele" at La Monnaie, which deals with one of the philandering Jupiter's dalliances with a mortal — a popular subject for Baroque opera — and is set in a 450-year-old Ming Dynasty temple. The cast includes, from far left, Ning Liang as Ino, Nathan Berg as Cadmus and Ying Huang as Semele.

## A Chinese spin on Baroque opera

BRUSSELS

The artist Zhang Huan stages Handel's 'Semele' for La Monnaie theater

BY GEORGE LOOMIS

An immense creature has usurped the square outside La Monnaie theater. With three thick legs supporting a partial torso, it might be the underside of a prehistoric reptile. In reality, it is "Three Legged Buddha," a sculpture by Zhang Huan, once known as an audacious performance artist and now hailed as a leading figure in China's visual arts. A viewing of "Buddha" can serve as an apt prelude to what currently transpires inside La Monnaie: a staging by Mr. Zhang of Handel's "Semele" in the artist's first venture with opera.

This "Semele" is the upshot of an unusual co-production between La Monnaie and — in lieu of another opera

house — the fledgling KT Wong Foundation, whose mission is to stimulate Chinese-Western cultural interaction. In the foundation's most ambitious project to date, its chairwoman, Linda Wong Davies, conceived the idea of uniting Western Baroque opera and Chinese stagecraft, then proceeded to act as matchmaker by bringing together a major European opera company and an innovative Chinese artist.

The result is a scenically stunning, theatrically absorbing, musically rewarding (subject to a major qualification) and, in the end, frustrating experience. Lady Davies's choice of work is beyond reproach. Though performed "in the manner of an oratorio" (unstaged) at its 1744 premiere, "Semele" is truly a cornerstone of English opera. Its libretto by William Congreve, derived from Ovid, deals with one of the philandering Jupiter's many dalliances with a mortal — a popular subject for Baroque opera, not least because of its sexual charge. Not content to be simply the chief god's mistress, Semele, egged on by Jupiter's

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jealous wife Juno, presses him for immortality, and that is her undoing.

In a program note, Lady Davies sees a parallel to "the ambitious go-getting China of today," but Mr. Zhang's staging is no updated version set in a Beijing pleasure house. As with "Three Legged Buddha," the basic set is imported: a 450-year-old Ming Dynasty temple of ornately carved wood, which we learn something about in a black-and-white documentary projected during the overture. (Indeed, the temple has its own story of adultery: a man who lived there a couple decades ago learned his wife was having an affair, arranged to have her lover murdered and was convicted and executed. The woman in question is actually depicted in the production, a solitary figure seen sweeping the floor at the beginning and end of the show.)

The splendid temple, which miraculously fits neatly on La Monnaie's stage, proves to be an apt setting for

Semele's aborted wedding to another mortal in Act 1 while also serving to evoke China's own heritage of gods and goddesses. And it sets the stage for traditional Chinese elements, which are laced through the production, some of which need explaining to the untutored Westerner. A donkey, for instance, is apparently associated with peasant weddings, and there is an amusing one here (enacted by two people in costume). A caterpillar-shaped Chinese dragon, all in white (the color of death) is the agent of Semele's demise. And at one point Sumo wrestlers duke it out.

Other details are more universal. In the great Act II lovemaking scene for Jupiter and Semele, the chorus trades its role of voyeur for one of active participation. (Even the donkey becomes aroused.) And for Semele's self-indulgent aria "Myself shall I adore," the set becomes a huge mirror with dazzling lighting (by Wolfgang Göbbel). Han Feng's costumes are also a feast for the eyes.

But Mr. Zhang's inexperience is be-

trayed by his production's lack of dramatic sweep. Special effects often seem present for their own sake rather than for cogent storytelling. Especially when Mr. Zhang tampers with the score, the Chinese dimension weighs awkwardly on Handel's opera. The joyful conclusion of Act I is undone when

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followed by an unaccompanied Mongolian song. More damaging is Mr. Zhang's decision to end the opera prematurely with Semele's death; thereafter, in a kind of funeral procession, men of the chorus hum — of all things — the Communist anthem "International." Instead of leaving the theater elated by Handel's final chorus, one goes away perplexed.

A conductor of Christophe Rousset's

stature ought to safeguard against this sort of thing. Otherwise he and Les Talens Lyriques (his period-instrument band) perform heartily. Ying Huang needs more charisma in the title role, though her voice is lovely and her technique secure. Jeremy Ovenden delivers a highly persuasive, handsomely sung Jupiter, making a fine moment of the incomparable "Where'er you walk," which he sings while tenderly washing Semele's feet. Ning Liang conveys Juno's spiteful jealousy, and Sarah Tynan shines brightly in the small role of Juno's companion Iris, with solid contributions coming from Nathan Berg and David Hansen.

Next year "Semele" is expected to go to Beijing and Shanghai for China's first major staging of a Baroque opera. My guess is that it will find a warm reception, but Mr. Zhang's production is hardly the last word on this wonderful piece.

**Semele.** Directed by Zhang Huan. La Monnaie, Brussels. Through Sept. 29.