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A Playful Approach To Powerful Gods

Knowing nothing about opera should disqualify a director from being invited to stage one. At least you would think so. Yet many companies boast of recruiting neophyte directors as a way to shake up the art form. Alas, a lot of trendy, clueless productions have resulted.

ANTHONY TOMMASINI

OPERA REVIEW

But the Chinese artist Zhang Huan's production of Handel's "Semele," which opened at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Wednesday night, is not one of them. This playful, colorful staging, which comes from the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto, is saturated with Buddhist imagery; elements of Asian theater, including puppets; and, believe it or not, a pair of sumo wrestlers. Mr. Zhang, known internationally for his paintings, carvings and performance-art pieces, blends Handel's telling of the Greek myth of Semele, a daughter of the king of Thebes who falls in love with Jupiter, with a true story of a Chinese man who was executed for killing a lover of his unfaithful wife. The ties between the an-

Handel's "Semele" returns on Friday, Sunday and Tuesday at the Howard Gilman Opera House, Brooklyn Academy of Music, 30 Lafayette Avenue, at Ashland Place, Fort Greene; 718-636-4100, bam.org.

cient myth and the contemporary murder are fairly flimsy. Basically, each involves a love triangle.

Still, Handel's opera, with an English libretto by William Congreve, can be seen as a cautionary tale of using sex to gain power and explores the mingling of desire and ambition. In his theatrical, if sometimes arbitrary way, Mr. Zhang, who also designed the sets, taps into the teeming forces that course through "Semele."

He was originally approached in 2007 jointly by the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels and the KT Wong Foundation, a Chinese organization that fosters cross-cultural collaborations, to direct a nontraditional version of "Semele." He declined at first, because he did not know or even understand opera, as he explained.

Then he came across the story of a Chinese man who had in recent times lived with his wife and family in a 450-year-old Ming dynasty wood temple outside Shanghai. In the course of acquiring that temple and moving it to his studio, Mr. Zhang found the man's diary, which tells of his humiliation over his wife's infidelities.

Mr. Zhang opens his production — which first played in Brussels, then Beijing and, in 2012, Toronto — with a silent, subtitled film of interviews of people re-



JULIETA CERVANTES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Semele Colin Ainsworth and Jane Archibald in this show set in a Ming temple and featuring other Asian elements at Brooklyn Academy of Music.

counting the story of the betrayal and murder, and the husband's execution, which is shown as the overture is performed. The curtain rises to reveal the actual 17-ton wood temple, which had to be disassembled piece by piece and reassembled on the stage of the opera house at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

With its elaborate carvings and delicate roof beams the temple makes a captivating set. It becomes the chapel where Semele is supposed to be married, following her father's wishes, to Athamas, the Prince of Boeotia, even though she loves Jupiter, who appears in mortal form. By the end, though, the temple is the crematory where she dies, having coerced Jupiter into showing himself in his godly state, which unleashes his fiery power and destroys her.

"Semele" may invite directori-

al tinkering because Handel here straddled opera and oratorio. This was less a bold venture in genre-blending than a pragmatic attempt to make "Semele" suitable to both the opera house and concert hall.

By mixing scenes of sexual romping with Asian-style choral ensembles in which Jupiter's priests look like a band of Buddhist monks, the production conveys the duality of the work effectively. The beautiful costumes by Han Feng tweak Baroque fashion with Chinese styles and fabrics.

Christopher Moulds conducts the orchestra with winning vitality and feeling for the style. The Canadian soprano Jane Archibald is a beguiling Semele, and brings a bright, technically agile and appealing voice to a demanding role. Jupiter appears in the guise of a tall, blond and romantic tenor, Colin Ainsworth. The bass-

baritone Kyle Ketelsen is a vocally formidable Cadmus, the king of Thebes. Prince Athamas is sung by the able, earnest countertenor Lawrence Zazzo. And in a dramatically resonant touch, the contralto Hilary Summers sings both the role of Ino, Semele's sister, who truly loves Athamas, and Juno, Jupiter's wife, who plots Semele's destruction. In one crucial scene, Juno takes the form of Ino to deceive Semele, a switch that was easy to accept in this staging. Though Ms. Summers's singing was patchy, she is a vibrant comic actress, especially as the overwrought Juno. The sweet soprano Katherine Whyte is charming as Iris, Juno's willing messenger.

Mr. Zhang probably may go too far with his fanciful tweaks. A donkey (two actors in a vaudevillelike costume), presented as a symbol of fertility, appears on-

stage during one scene of group couplings prancing around with a huge erection. The sumo wrestlers also join the party, reportedly adding a combined 700 pounds to the weight on the stage.

Some Handel lovers may be incensed that this production omits the final celebratory chorus in which Apollo announces that the god Bacchus will rise from Semele's ashes. Instead, monklike choristers hum a Communist anthem, more in keeping, Mr. Zhang suggests, with Buddhist ideals of impermanence.

I actually found the ending affecting. Handel purists should remember that after the disappointing London premiere of "Semele" in 1744, for a few subsequent performances Handel inserted some Italian arias to please traditionalists in the audience. Why not? Whatever it took to fill the seats.