

By Huang Tingting

Although many of the people in the audience knew practically nothing about this classic Chinese story before lining up to see the English-language opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, by the time the curtains were drawn, some were teary-eyed, while others just couldn't stop talking about what they had just experienced.

Dubbed "the hottest ticket in town" by the local San Francisco Chronicle, all six shows, priced \$26-\$397, sold out weeks before debuting on September 10.

The first time that the 18th-century Chinese epic, what the New York Times has called "China's *War and Peace*," has been performed as an English opera, the performance was the creation by a group of prominent Chinese and Chinese-American artists, including MacArthur Fellow Bright Sheng and Tony Award winner David Henry Hwang as co-librettists, Sheng also as composer, Stan Lai as director and Oscar winner Tim Yip as costume and stage designer.

Barriers to understanding

One of China's four great classic novels, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) writer Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* is huge in China. Yet, the tangled relations among the book's hundreds of characters and numerous subtle implications that are difficult to translate into another language, may make it a difficult work to understand for foreign audiences.

That's probably one of the reasons why only eight of the book's characters appear in the opera and the story was condensed into a clear-cut love triangle between young heir Baoyu,

his beloved cousin Daiyu and the noble girl Baochai – a romance between two fallen gods and an earthly woman.

"For American audiences, it's a bit hard for them to understand why Baoyu acts like a playboy and why Daiyu behaves like that," Sheng told the Global Times over the phone.

"Their behavior is sometimes out of place because they're not earthly people, but they understand each other with just a look. That's what we're trying to bring out in this opera."

So does this focus on romance take away from the gravity of this novel that reflects the depths of Chinese culture?

Looking at this classic as an unfinished work, Sheng said the novel offers plenty of room to maneuver when it comes to creating an adaptation. And considering the opera is 2.5 hours long, a strong story is needed.

"When it comes to reflecting Chinese culture, the families and the economy are instead turned into a backdrop that contributes to this tragic love story," said Sheng.

According to him, the story is something he feels Chinese will appreciate and so hopes the show will make its way to China in the near future.

However, for Chinese readers who grew up reading the novel, they may not be ready to see the weak-as-a-cat heroine Daiyu turned into a slightly plump woman growling in bel canto. In Sheng's

opinion this comes down to a lack of understanding of Western opera.

"Not many Chinese know about Western opera," Sheng said.

"Opera tells stories through music. Singers performing an opera need only a few lines, and then the music comes in to show their emotions."

A composer adept at combining the music of the East and West, Sheng also added in traditional Chinese folk music that fits the plot.

"Like in Scene 5, Act 1, when Princess Jia is coming home, I used southern Chinese music *jiangjunling* (literally General's Order) as the procession music," said Sheng.

"During the wedding scene, I used *zizhudiao* (literally Purple Bamboo Song, a type of folk melody popular in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River)."

Community support

"My stage design also has to go with the music," Tim Yip, known for his designs in the 2000 Oscar-winning film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, told the Global Times in a phone interview.

"First we took out a lot of details so it would fit what a modern opera setting requires."

According to Yip, the two-dimensional pillars and Chinese archway set decorations also convey feelings of "fake" or "illusory" to the audience, which is one of the themes that the novel conveys. Additionally, the main setting, which

consists of six moving painted panels "create changing light and shadows that demonstrate a mix of reality and fantasy."

Though the opera's costumes look somewhat similar to his much controversial designs used in the 2010 mainland TV adaptation, Yip told the Global Times that the two designs "bear little connection."

The designs seem to have been well-received so far. US fashion journal *Women's Wear Daily* described them as a design that "floats between poetry and sadness with a real and surreal motif."

Both Sheng and Yip emphasized the team work that went into the project, not just between the creative team, but also including the larger community that supported them.

Produced by the San Francisco Opera, one of the US' top theater companies, the project was initiated by the Minnesota-based Chinese Heritage Foundation as an effort to render "a 21st-century treatment of this novel on the international grand opera stage," according to Pearl Lam Bergad, the Foundation's executive director.

The project, started around 2011, was huge and arduous. Despite the "daunting" workload to "adapt such a complex novel for American audience" who have no prior knowledge of its complexity, "contract negotiations with the creative team alone took close to two years," Bergad told the Global Times in an e-mail interview.

The opera's success has been largely credited to support from local Chinese American communities, which "has definitely been crucial in getting this project going and in creating the huge excitement in San Francisco," Bergad wrote.



► Talking with the team behind the hit English opera 'Dream of the Red Chamber'

MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE



Scenes from English opera *Dream of the Red Chamber* Photos: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera

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