

DECONSTRUCTING PEKING OPERA:
TEARS OF BARREN HILL
ON THE CONTEMPORARY STAGE

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The 2008 Hong Kong Arts Festival presented a remarkable show of a type seldom seen in its program history: an *avant garde* theater piece that is strongly linked to traditional Chinese opera. Called *Tears of Barren Hill* (*Huangshan lei* 荒山淚), it was conceived, written and directed by Danny Yung (Chinese name Rong Nianzeng 榮念曾) of the Hong Kong-based theater group Zuni Icosahedron (Chinese name Jinnian Ershimian Ti 進念廿面體). *Barren Hill* is Yung's third piece created along the same concept, which may be described as the "deconstruction" of traditional Chinese opera, specifically Peking opera.

What do I mean by deconstruction? To explain this, one needs to recognize traditional opera as a long-held *gesamtkunstwerk* in Chinese culture. And in the Chinese people's imagination it is a perfect fusion of poetic, visual, musical, and choreographic art, developed and shaped by the creative energy of countless generations of artists ever since Chinese opera first reached its basic form in the Northern Song dynasty a millennium ago. The performative elements include the highly stylized singing, reciting and speaking of classical and vernacular texts, postures and gestures, facial expressions and body movements, make-up, headgear, footwear and costumes, comical slapstick, martial arts display and pageantry, all accompanied by an ensemble of melodic and percussion instruments. Blended into a coherent whole, these elements mold characters in the telling of stories of joy and sorrow, tragedy and comedy. It is not surprising that Chinese opera is recognized as one of the most sophisticated theatrical genres in the world, and a rich repository of China's myriad artistic expressions. Among the several hundred regional

varieties, Peking opera is the most renowned, beloved by people of diverse social and cultural classes ever since its emergence over two centuries ago.

Chinese opera developed a strong performative tradition of a limited number of “role-types” (*hangdang* 行當 or *jiaose* 腳色); in each role-type, actors are trained in specific styles of speaking, singing, gesturing, and moving, with well-defined tempo, rhythm, intensity, and range of expression, according to the character features and personality traits of the roles being portrayed. The use of role-types intensifies expressive means and highlights the narrative coherency of the story. Though highly formulaic, these expressive means provide the foundation for actors to exercise their creativity within a narrow range of possibilities and in order to establish their mark of identity. In short, each role-type is in itself a mini-*gesamtkunstwerk* immediately recognizable and appreciated by the knowledgeable audience. Actors spend years being trained and become celebrated for a particular role type.

Yung’s three pieces so far, *Flee by Night* (*Yeben* 夜奔), *The Outlaw General* (*Tiao huache* 挑滑車), and now *Tears of Barren Hill*, all produced within the last four years, can be seen as bold attempts to strip away certain long-established aural (*sheng* 聲) and visual (*se* 色) elements and replace them, at least in part, with non-traditional ones, or to mix up the elements in ways heretofore untried. By doing this, he forces an audience familiar with traditional opera to experience a new way of hearing and seeing what they thought they knew. With one or more traditional elements missing from the performance, the spectators are compelled to evaluate the remaining elements in a new context. For example, the actors execute traditional movements while wearing, not gowns with long sleeves, but modern shirts and trousers, thus forcing the spectator to see such movements in a new environment. Instead of wearing facial make-up, the actors don no make-up at all as they project facial gestures, sing, and move, which forces the audience to perceive the facial gestures in a new light. Instead of conveying emotion and intensity through their eye movements and piercing stares—a long-celebrated performative technique—actors appear on stage blind-folded. Instead of singing with the ubiquitous percussion and melodic instrumental accompaniment, actors sing without any accompaniment, thereby exposing the voice “nakedly”. Instead of using the set tunes with a specific tempo established by tradition, the actors sing the same tune, for example, many times more slowly, thus completely altering the long-established and expected musical identity. Instead of maintaining narrative continuity, the drama is fragmented, dissolving into snatches of scenes with no apparent

coherency, not unlike the novels of Robbe-Grillet, the films of Goddard, and the cubist paintings of Picasso.

The several examples of “deconstruction” outlined above are only some of the devices used by Yung to create a new Chinese theater which nevertheless is rooted in traditional opera; the results are startlingly refreshing to some but absolutely sacrilegious to others. Xu Xingjie 徐幸捷, the president of the School of Chinese Opera of the Shanghai Theatre Academy, estimated that not more than 5% of the audience would appreciate the work. Yung dares to tear down long-established conventions, and he is prepared for outraged reactions from aficionados. But he has the strong conviction that such deconstruction frees both the actors’ awareness of expressive possibilities and the audience’s perceptions.

It should be pointed out that such experiments are not new. Wei Liangfu 魏良輔 in the 16th century was well-known for creating a new style of singing old tunes that eventually developed into Kun opera. Two other examples are closer to our time. Cantonese opera in the 1920s and 30s began to have actors don modern dress and sing Chinese texts to Western popular tunes, to the accompaniment of the violin, saxophone, and other alien instruments. In the 1960s, under the direction of Jiang Qing 江青, several so-called Revolutionary Peking Operas were created on contemporary themes with actors wearing contemporary military garb, some recomposing and arranging of traditional tunes, and the use of a much larger orchestra consisting of both Chinese and Western instruments. The difference is that these last two experiments in the early and middle 20th century were undertaken for the sake of greater audience appeal, or economic gain, or better serve political goals. Yung’s intentions, on the other hand, are largely, artistic and intellectual, with the explicit aim to revolutionize theatre for the sake of revolution. The broader message, as is stated in the last scene and in the program notes, is to call upon the larger society to emulate this theatrical experimentation and carry it into the real world. Yung writes in the program notes:

No matter whether we are on-stage or off-stage, work as performers or back-stage hands, are actors or members of the audience, we must all ask ourselves whether we have any ideas or comments about cultural development, cross-cultural exchange, and cross-cultural collaborations. What is our position regarding the changes taking place in our cultural system under the present political and economic conditions?

Yung's *Tears of Barren Hill* was inspired by an episode in the life of the preeminent Peking opera performer, Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋 (1904-1958), who visited Germany at the height of his fame at age 28 in 1932 with the specific aim of exploring and learning about European classical music. Not being content with what he had achieved in Chinese opera, he wanted to enroll in a German music institution for formal study of Western music. Although he never realized his dream because external circumstances forced him to abandon his plan and returned to China after only a few months, his journey to the West and his quest to cross the artistic border forms the basis of Yung's creation.

The title *Tears of Barren Hill* derives from an opera of the same name created by Cheng in 1930, an anti-war critique of the political chaos and military adventurism during China's tumultuous 1920s. Cheng's courageous spirit in breaking down the walls around the operatic profession and stepping down from the stage of the theater to address contemporary political issues also inspired Yung; for Cheng crossed another kind of boundary – the boundary that divides the theater from the real world, the stage from the audience, play-acting from society. Few performers of Cheng's status and fame at the time, or any other time, were willing to risk such a crossing.

Yung writes in the program notes that another reason he chose the title *Tears of Barren Hill* is that, during a visit to a grand cathedral in Germany, Cheng was impressed by the magnificent architecture and the acoustics, no doubt when he heard Bach's organ or choral music reverberating in its space. As the story goes, Cheng, awe-struck by what he saw and heard, spontaneously sang an aria from his *Tears of Barren Hill* in the cathedral, without any accompaniment. This was indeed a courageous act: the Peking opera voice and the accompanying two-stringed fiddle are like hand and glove—few singers would ever publicly sing without the supporting strain of the *jinghu* 京胡. To Yung, this act further confirms Cheng's experimental spirit: singing an aria in this new manner and physical environment was both a symbol and a manifestation of a supreme confidence in his own artistry such that, not willing to stay where he was, Cheng wanted to start anew as a student to learn a completely different musical language.

Yung's piece was structured around four scenes that reflect upon Cheng's life journey and his trip to Germany: the cathedral, the classroom, the theater stage, and death, each representing an external physical and an internal psychological space. The scenes were presented as a continuous flow of action and music without obvious narrative links. The stark stage

set consisted of six large wooden platforms that were re-arranged from scene to scene to suggest the physical settings in an abstract manner. The white backdrop acted as a screen for the projection of text in Chinese and English; visual images were also projected as another layer of expressivity.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the show was the blending of Western musical material into the Peking opera in an original way for both aural and dramatic effect; the result was rich in metaphor and irony. The use of Bach's Goldberg Variations played austerely by Glenn Gould invoked the German formality and discipline that must have impressed Cheng as an antidote to the chaos in his own land. A later scene had the actor sing a passage with the Goldberg theme substituting for the tune of a well-known Peking opera melody, yet retaining the vocal quality and melodic ornaments—a metaphoric crossing of borders through the musical process as well as a fusion of national and cultural identities. The use of segments of Verdi's Requiem and a Billie Holiday song had similar results: astonishing and disquieting, yet infinitely fascinating and thought-provoking.

The crossing of borders was not limited to the deconstruction of performative elements, but was also extended to the actors' artistry. The two main actors were Lan Tian 藍天, who was trained in the Mature Male Role (*laosheng* 老生), and Dong Hongsong 董洪松, trained in the Painted Face Heroic Role (*hualian* 花臉). The subject of the story, Cheng, however, specialized in the Virtuous Female Role (*qingyi* 青衣). Yung challenged both Lan and Dong to emulate Cheng's performance by reciting, singing, gesturing, and moving in the style of the Female Role. Lan and Dong, both final year students at the Shanghai Opera Academy, responded to the challenge courageously and with confidence; Lan in particular was spectacularly successful. Although he had had only a few months of training and learning, he not only projected a respectably convincing Female Role actor on stage, his remarkable performance was radiant and truly a beauty to watch.

Female impersonation has largely disappeared on the Chinese operatic stage since the mid-20th century. One can only imagine the superb artistry of the Four Great Female-Role Actors in the first half of the last century that propelled them to become the most popular actors in any role on the Peking operatic stage. In addition to Cheng Yanqiu, the others were Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894-1961), Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900-1968), and Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 (1900-1976). It was said during those days that, paradoxically, a man playing a woman was more beautiful and womanly

than a woman playing a woman. The current generation of opera-goers, having been deprived of seeing live performances by those great actors, have no means of verifying such a claim, for there were no longer such performances in recent decades, certainly not any that could approach the artistry of the Four Great Ones. Yet Lan Tian gave a glimpse of what might have been and what could be. Being quite tall, his long limbs, lean and supple body, finely shaped head with exquisite features, and delicate hands and fingers, combine to assert a striking presence and graceful movement. His performance, no doubt enhanced by his ballet background, was stunning and dazzling.

Lan sang in the female voice range with strength, delicacy, expressiveness, and conviction. His tone was rich and supple, and, despite singing in a role type that was not his trained specialty, he executed the melodic turns and ornamental flourishes with great persuasiveness. Most striking were two solo passages without instrumental accompaniment. In one he sang the *liushui ban* 西皮流水板 (flowing-water meter) at a speed about three or four times slower than it is normally sung. Such a challenge to a singer who has sung this tune innumerable times in the traditional way is hard to imagine, yet Lan met it head-on and was unfazed, producing a magnificent new melody that was hardly recognizable, yet pregnant with new meaning and ambiguity to those who perceived the root of the tune. Lan's second highpoint was his singing of the Goldberg theme, disguised with the elaborate vocal techniques and ornamentations peculiar to Peking opera. Again, he carried it off splendidly, fulfilling Yung's goal of cross-cultural fusion of the most unique kind.

Lan and Dong sang a duet, which is extremely rare in Peking opera. It was as if Cheng Yanqiu in his Female Role sang a duet with himself, through the personification of a Mature Male Role and the Painted Face Heroic Role. Singing a traditional tune, Lan and Dong's voices interacted and blended so that the old melody assumed new meaning. Dong was on the raised platform – a stage upon a stage, while Lan was on the stage of real life. When the two actors slowly moved closer to one another, an electrifying moment occurred when their fingers touched for a fraction of a second and then quickly flew apart, a metaphor for two parallel universes coming together inconceivably and miraculously for an instant. The two sides of Cheng? East and West? Stage and Reality? Then and Now? The thrilling moment startled and shook the audience, provoking many images and interpretations, and captured one of Yung's fundamental beliefs: the need to cross borders, artistic, political, social, physical, and metaphysical. As quoted above from the script, he urges us all to “ask

ourselves whether we have any ideas or comments about cultural development, cross-cultural exchange, and cross-cultural collaborations.”

The quote also underscores Yung’s second goal: that such experimentation not serve primarily as an art object to be appreciated and admired, let alone as a vehicle for entertainment, but as a means of stimulating dialogue among performers and between performers and audience members; in short, it is a crossing of another kind of border: from on-stage to off-stage. This goal is elaborated in the program notes:

I optimistically nurse the hope that, consumption aside, it [the play] might generate some ideas and discussions among the participating groups and audiences. Maybe, through participation, we can join hands to explore ways to preserve and develop tradition, and then build on its foundations to create experimental forms. At the same time, if those on stage and those in the audience can be stimulated to start a debate on how to achieve a sound cultural system, even under the dominance of politics and economic development, and if the performance can arouse public interest in experimental art, in the development of cultural diversity, and in expanding the scope for dialectics – then Cheng Yanqiu probably would have felt his quest was not in vain, were he to know about this performance, 50 years after his death.

How successfully have Yung’s goals been achieved? The experiment posed a great challenge to the audience. To the *aficionado* of traditional opera, the deconstructed artistic language was disrespectful, confrontational, pointless, perhaps even absurd. Why tamper with “perfection”? The broader messages were likely to be lost amidst shock and disappointment. To those who were ignorant of traditional opera, Yung’s messages would also be in vain, for these spectators would have been unable to perceive and appreciate the experimentation since they lacked the basic knowledge of traditional opera needed to understand what was being deconstructed. It was the rare audience member who knew and loved the traditional opera, yet who also possessed an open enough mind to explore other possibilities, that appreciated this theatrical experiment. How many European classical music lovers would embrace the deconstruction of a Wagnerian opera, with notes scrambled, orchestration altered, and tempo drastically changed? In the end, though Yung’s experiment may have intrigued a small number of audience members, most found it irrelevant at best, and offensive at worst.

The actors, on the other hand, went through a journey of discovery and self-examination during many months of conversations and rehearsals with Yung. In doing so they had the advantage over the audience in experiencing a process rather than being presented with a finished product. Though the challenges were great, the actors who worked with Yung—including not only Lan and Dong in *Tears of Barren Hill*, but Ke Jun 柯軍 from the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe, who performed in *Fleeing by Night*, and Zhou Long 周龍, who teaches at the National Academy of Theater Arts in Beijing and often performs with the China National Peking Opera Company, and who performed in *The Outcast General*—all emerged from the experience with a new perspective, understanding, and vision. They told me that they gained a new appreciation of traditional opera and of the importance of infusing individual creative insights into old works. They came to realize that the life of a performing artist is a journey of continual discovery and development rather than repeated re-enactments of masterpieces. They found that the most challenging but also most rewarding part of such development is to tear down and cross invisible artistic fences that their training, their administrators, and their audience's expectations have built around them. Only by crossing those fences will they free themselves and enter the realm of a greater creative artist. For actors trained in traditional opera, this new attitude is nothing less than revelatory and transformative, and must change their performance in profound ways. Thus, the impact of experimentation on the actors may prove to be significant and long lasting.

One often hears the view that art reflects and comments on life. Yung's experimentation aims to reverse this view by suggesting that art can lead and mold life; that performances on stage have the power to transform life and society beyond the stage, and that the actors need not be mere entertainers, but leaders of the community. Bold experimentation on stage can lead to equally bold or even bolder experimentation in altering society. Yung's deconstruction of traditional opera is a means towards a larger political and social end: to inspire an activist attitude such that the experimentation on-stage leads to experimentation off-stage. The purpose of Yung's deconstruction is to remove the boundary between stage and society and between make-believe and real. In doing so, he makes Chinese opera serve a greater purpose beyond the "perfection" of artistic expression.

Appendix

Tears of Barren Hill was first performed on February 29 and March 1, 2009, at the Studio Theatre of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, as part of the 36th Hong Kong Arts Festival.

The Outcast General was first performed on February 3-4, 2006, in the Studio Theater, The Esplanade, in Singapore, as part of Huayi jie 華藝節 (China Arts Festival).

Flee by Night was first performed on September 25, 2004, in Oslo Konserhus, Norway, as part of the Chinese Cultural Week to celebrate the establishment of diplomatic relationship between Norway and China.

Press Previews and Reviews for *Tears of Barren Hill*:

信報, January 30, 2008

文匯報, February 17, 2008

經濟日報, February 27, 2008

South China Morning Post, 26 February 2008

蘋果日報, February 29, 2008

表演藝術, February 2008

號外, February 2008

明報周刊, March 1, 2008

新快報, March 7, 2008

南方都市報, March 9, 2008

明報, March 12, 2008

南方周末, March 13, 2008

經濟觀察報, March 17, 2008

信報, April 17, 2008

信報, April 23, 2008

21 世紀經濟報導, April 5, 2008

Muse, April 2008



Chen Yanqiu in the 1920s (photographer unknown)



Lan Tian in *Tears of Barren Hill* (photo by Yu Yat Yiu)



Shi Xiaomei (left), Dong Hongsun (right)
in *Tears of Barren Hill* (photo by Ah Ying)

