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Chinese opera's shades of grey

Review **Concert**

SAVAGE LAND

Singapore Chinese Orchestra
Esplanade Concert Hall
Last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

The past two editions of the Esplanade's Huayi festival had showcased Chinese singers who made their names in the West in operatic highlights, but this year saw a full-length opera in a semi-staged concert setting.

Jin Xiang's *Savage Land* is a musical setting of the 1937 play *Yuan Ye* (The Wilderness) by Cao Yu (1910-1996), who has been regarded as "the Shakespeare of China".

It is also the first Western-style opera by a Chinese composer to be sung in Chinese. With a libretto by Wan Fang, Cao's daughter, it received much critical acclaim when it premiered in the West.

Set in the late Qing dynasty, a time of widespread anarchy and lawlessness, it is a story of revenge and redemption, not dissimilar to themes found in Wagner or Verdi operas.

Chou Hu (whose name translates to Avenging Tiger) escapes after spending eight years in prison to find that his betrothed Jin Zi has been married off to Jiao Da Xing, the son of the late murderer of his family. He is torn between rekindled love and thirst for vengeance, which ultimately seals his fate.

The music is dark and foreboding for the most part and in Phoon Yew Tien's excellent adaptation for Chinese instruments, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra conducted by Yeh Tsung provided a most atmospheric and vivid accompaniment for the tragedy to unfold.

Baritone Zhang Feng's Chou Hu was both heroic and brutal, finding a perfect foil in soprano Li Jing Jing's Jin Zi, who, despite her apparent virtuousness, succumbed almost too easily to infidelity. Their impassioned duets in the Second and Fourth Acts, contrasting the overwrought emotions of blissful reunion and final parting, were high points in the intense three-hour melodrama.

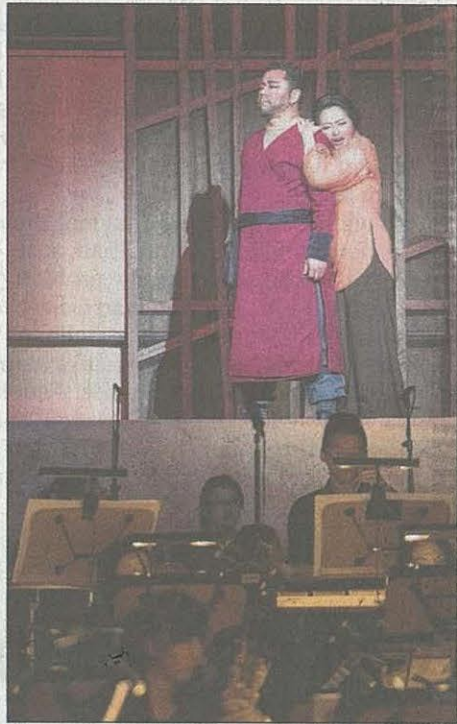
Clearly there were to be no characters in black or white, only multiple shades of grey.

Even the cuckolded Jiao, sung by tenor Zhang Ya Lin, was to find sympathy in his lyrical opening aria and sheer obliviousness to his own plight.

His shrewish blind mother, portrayed by mezzo-soprano Zhu Hui Ling, was evil incarnate until she mistakenly killed her infant heir in a fit of rage, an almost inexplicable plot-twist.

The scene finding both grandson and son dead by the end of the Third Act brought out ripples of ironic laughter from segments of the audience.

Goh Boon Teck's direction made skilful use of the limited space on stage,



Characters in *Savage Land*, a tale of love and revenge, do not come in black or white. PHOTO: ESPLANADE

with the singers and action occupying the chorus gallery behind the orchestra. All the singers' voices were amplified as was the effective NUSChoir, hidden from view, which provided an important dimension by being Chou's biggest tormentors.

The hideous voices he heard in his head were signs of his remorse for Jiao's murder but also the onset of psychosis. Local baritone William Lim and tenor Melvin Tan acquitted themselves well in smaller roles as the inquisitive neighbour Chang Wu and the village simpleton respectively.

There were regular references to religion and prayer throughout the opera, but the reasons for faith as exhibited by the characters often stemmed from ulterior motives. Here was an indictment of faux piousness. Heaven and hell were also mooted, the former as a looming paradise for Chou and Jin Zi caught in an unholy web, and the latter as the fate for all evil-doers. The hellish final scene of Chou's demise was not unlike that of Don Giovanni, except that he accepts his lot while Jin Zi and her unborn son escape to an uncertain future.

Savage Land may be seen as a breakthrough in Chinese musical theatre, not just because of its use of the Western operatic formula in its staging, but also for its gripping narrative and how original Chinese melodies could be convincingly interpolated.

The use of Chinese instruments in this production enhanced the overall experience. Viewed on a wider scale, the *savage land* in its title refers not to a physical place but to the darkest recesses of the human soul and psyche.