

Fantasy of the Red Queen: A woman's tragedy of power and illusion

Text/ Yuen Chi-Chung

Yuen is one of the most authority music critic in Hong Kong and a host of the radio show Free Seating on Commercial Radio 2 (FM903).

Fantasy of the Red Queen was premiered in March 2006 in Frankfurt, and later in Berlin. This massive chamber operatic work, co-produced by Ensemble Modern of Frankfurt and Liu Sola, the reputed contemporary composer, vocalist and writer, is itself a celebration of Sino-German cooperation. The cross-media contemporary musical production will be on stage in Hong Kong on the 7th and 8th November, 2008, as a highlight programme of the New Visions Arts Festival.

Liu does not only compose combining motifs from traditional Chinese drama, revolutionary drama, Chinese hits, as well as popular songs of Old Shanghai and Jazz music of the 1930's but write, direct, and play an acting role in this massive operatic work. But for Ensemble Modern's participation, this performance can be seen as Liu's solo show.

The 53-year-old artist is undoubtedly a legendary figure. Both a musician and writer, Liu Sola is a familiar name on CD covers, concert brochures, as well as literary publications. She does not only compose musical works but novels and prose. In terms of her achievements, Liu truly embraces the best of both worlds.

For me, though, what is most impressive about her is her bedazzling appearance she made in Lien Zhuan with Zuni Icosahedron, as well as her collaboration with Qu Xiaosong and Kung Chi Shing in the Jiang Qing-choreographed piece by the Hong Kong Dance Company *The Third Kingdom of Yulong Mountain: Dying for Love Ceremonies of the Naxi Tribe*.

Currently Beijing-based Liu graduated from The Central Conservatory of Music with a degree in composition. Later, she moved to Memphis in a search for the root of blues and subsequently to New York to work with celebrated jazz musicians. For many years, Liu has lived abroad in metropolitans such as New York and London, collaborating with jazz musicians from different schools, like a true music ambassador from China, whose duties are characterised by her works audacity in crossovers of various genres, wedding the East and the West.

Perhaps this very trait answers for the massive success in the West for her earlier albums, including *Blues in the East* (1994) produced by avant-garde musician Bill Laswell, *China Collage* (1996) and *Haunts* (1998).

The premier of *Fantasy of the Red Queen* was commissioned by The House of World Cultures (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, a.k.a HKW) in 2006 as part of the China Between Past and Present series. Liu herself was on the advisor committee for HKW, and was involved in organising numerous international activities such as the Rebel's Concert Series for the Berlin In-Transit 05 Festival in Berlin, as well as the concert series You Have No Choice by Ensemble Modern and Chinese avant-garde composers in 2006's China Cultural Memory Festival.

Ensemble Modern was formed in 1980, and has been based in Frankfurt since 1985. It is one of the few and the leading chamber ensemble dedicated to the music of modern composers in the world. Its repertoire includes works by Arnold Schonberg, Charles Ives, John Cage, Olivier Messiaen, Edgard Var se, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Steven Reich, John Adams, Anthony Braxton, Kurt Weill, and even rock music by Frank Zappa and Fred Frith. Ensemble Modern is highly reputed within the contemporary music circle. But *Fantasy of the Red Queen* is so much more than just a show of Liu Sola & Ensemble Modern; there is also the group Liu Sola & Friends Ensemble. Formed in New York back in 1997, the composition of the group itself is as eclectic and crossover as Liu's works: pianist, percussionist, guqin and pipa soloist, as well as soprano Wu Jing from Chinese Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble playing the Nurse, and Peking Opera actor Zhen Jianhua playing the Devil. Once again since her last collaboration on June Snow with Liu, Jiang Qing will double as choreographer and director for the production.

Fantasy is a tragedy about a woman's illusion of power. In the opera, the story of Mao Zedong's fourth wife, Jiang Qing, is unfolded through an old woman in a hospital. The Red Queen, played by Liu, narrates Jiang's life all the way from her days as a budding actress in Shanghai, depicting a woman's road to power via associating herself with powerful men, and how all this dreaming of power wakes up to the realisation of the power of dreaming.

"[I'm] trying to trace the root of women's tragedies, not only by looking historically at the art of politics in China, but also through the history of Chinese women as an exemplar," Liu said, speaking on a topic she has always been interested in.

There are meanings behind each movement in traditional Peking Opera. And these metaphors are decoded through a video wall on a stage. "The choreographer designs the movements on stage according what I put on the screen. I want the Queen's movements to be revolutionary, but they have to be rooted in tradition at the same time, because this is precisely what Jiang Qing was after all her life to revolutionise the aesthetics of traditional operas. "

For example, the movements of the Devil, played by Peking Opera actor Zhen Jianhua, are both traditional and modernised. In fact, this character is based on an important figure in the Cultural Revolution, Kang Sheng. It is rumoured that Jiang Qing had been Kang's maid before becoming an actress, and it was through his manipulation that Mao fell in love with Jiang, so that he could benefit politically from their relationship. "The Devil is a mixed character", explained Liu. "It is surreal but it is real." Because Jiang Qing had been receiving his protection throughout her life, and Kang himself was quite a devilish figure in Chinese history. The Queen in the story is a tragic figure. She's the victim of a double temptation: temptation of the real and temptation of the surreal. But what happens on the stage is also true in life, just as temptations in our lives always trigger our innate feverish illusion.

The operatic work was given its English title *Fantasy of the Red Queen* before adopting a Chinese one, Jing Meng (lit. nightmare). Even though Liu personally prefers the English title, she acknowledges the inappropriateness in using it in the Chinese context. "I can't use it in today's China. Jing Meng is more subtle, and it is not suggestive of the story. "

Translated by Bobo Hong

Fantasy of the Red Queen by Liu Sola & Ensemble Modern (Germany)

Time: November 7th to 8th, 2008 (Friday to Saturday) 20:00

Venue: Kwai Tsing Theatre Auditorium

(Post-performance talk on November 7th)