



## Zhang Huan: director's remarks

Because man himself is a monster, god is also a monster

Directing a film or designing an architectural set for a stage production would seem to be a smooth, natural composition for an artist. But to ask an artist to design the set for an opera is a different story altogether. The reason is simple: there are very few people and even fewer artists who understand opera. In all honesty, I do not understand opera. I never imagined I'd have the chance to direct opera because it was so foreign to me. Even though I've done performance art for many years, it is a completely different category of performance from opera. But I like doing things out of the ordinary. That is why I have continued to make art to this day.

My roots in the theatre date back to Beijing in the early 1990s, those days when I struggled for my art and for my very existence. There was one time I worked on the production of 'Three Sisters' for the great Chinese theatre director Lin Zhauhua. Yi Liming was the set and lighting designer and I was his temporary assistant. At that time, I wasn't a performer, I wasn't a designer, I didn't even paint sets. I was responsible for the stage irrigation system, a temporary worker with an interest in theatre who needed to make a living.

I also worked on the set of Chen Shizheng's Kunming Opera 'Peony Pavilion'. Even though at that time I was a 'nobody' and understood nothing, the magic of the stage was clear to me and it stirred me up. Later, I moved to New York I received an invitation from Robert Wilson to contribute to one of his experimental works. I think it was these dim, sleepy experiences in the theatre, and many years of practice as a performance and visual artist, that just might have given me the guts to stand on the stage and show people what I know about opera, what I know about the story of 'Semele'.

This year of working in the theatre has been a creative experience I will never forget. I have deeply felt how gorgeous opera is. It is all so real and slowly unfolds before your eyes. At the same time, it is so unpredictable and so unimaginably peculiar. I am someone who has never designed a set before. I know that all the sets and props are fake. This seems to be the natural and obvious way to do things on stage. But I am certain that the feelings elicited by a performer singing on the Great Wall and one singing in front of an artificial background of the Great Wall would be world's apart. This time around,

I am very excited to have the opportunity to take an ancestral family temple with over 450 years of history and use it on the stage of a 300-year-old European opera house. My goal is to allow the opera singers to re-enact this classical Western opera on an Eastern stage latent with the tragic emotions of 'Semele' – while at the same time allowing Western guests to experience the dramatic beauty and pain common to all human beings. Love and hate, life and death are topics that will forever hang over the human race. The fact that the roots of pain introduced thousands of years ago in a Western opera reappear in the East, in the fate of a single peasant family in the Chinese countryside, can make us ponder the redemptive qualities of humanity. So this old temple is the chapel where Semele is to get married, the heaven where she creates love, the crematory where she is destroyed and the holy land that she is reborn in. It is the homeland where humankind has suffered the four great miseries of birth, aging, sickness and death.

'Yin' and 'guo' (cause and effect), desire and animalism are the central problems in 'Semele'. Because man himself is a monster, god is also a monster. Humanity also contains an animalistic aspect, an inner beast. Desire, lust, the thirst to control and possess are things that we cannot change. The human race has to continuously and eternally develop as it regresses.

Moving in circles, we return to a primitive state.