

Bright realization of a dream



Out of the Box

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WRITTEN BY CAO XUEQIN in the 18th century, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is long considered a masterpiece of Chinese literature. When it was remade into an opera by renowned composer Bright Sheng, many wondered how it would be presented in English.

Tickets to the show in San Francisco, where *DRC* was launched last autumn, have been one of the most-sought-after items in town.

When I heard the news that the show would move to Asia and premiere in the Hong Kong Cultural Center, I told myself that I must find a way to watch the show in person. The show was quickly sold out in Hong Kong,

and I was ecstatic to be invited to the premiere by Sheng, whom I have known for many years, and Mr YS Liu, chairman of the HK Philharmonic Orchestra.

I must admit that I did not know what to expect when I went to the show – in fact, I have never read the novel itself, and I could barely name the characters in the novel. But not knowing the plot only made the whole experience more intriguing.

What I found out was that the storyline is indeed Shakespearean, with love triangles, royal intrigues, family rivalries, and Greek tragedy all thrown in.

The novel is transformed into a modern Western opera format, and sung in English, which is a novel and brave move. At first, it felt very odd to listen to a Chinese classic sung in English, but after a short while it became to make more sense, and I started to immerse myself in the storyline.

Both the English and the (original) Chinese lyrics were displayed on both sides of the stage.

For me, the Chinese subtitles better captured the nuances, even though the English version was expertly done. Judging from the audience reaction, the opera was a big success.

The opera put together a star-studded team to make it a reality; aside from Sheng, the famous playwright David Hwang, the influential and world renowned director Stan Lai, and winner of the Academy Award for Best Art Direction Timmy Yip were all on board, among many others.

Sheng told me that the project took over four years from conception to the first show. He had to translate *Dream* for Hwang, who was born in America and does not read Chinese (Hwang's work includes the famous *M. Butterfly*), so the latter could understand the novel itself before writing the lyrics. After a while, the two started to co-write the libretto.

This was a colossal task, and I doubt there are others who could have done better than them.

The novel has close to 400 characters, but for the opera, Sheng and Hwang reduced them to less than 10, with the three main characters fully represented, of course. It must have been quite a challenge to do this reduction without losing the color and nuances of the original novel, but I think they pulled it off nicely.

At the post-show dinner, I asked Sheng what it was like creating something so monumental, and

also something with so much cultural pressure and expectation. He told me that it was one of the most challenging things he has ever done and he wrote much of the music at his office in the HKUST Jockey Club Institute for Advanced Study building (he is a regular visiting prof at the institute).

I also asked him whether the lyrics or the music came first and he told me it was lyrics first, and music second. For a musical layman like me, I'll never fully understand how a composer can create a full opera with all the complexities involved.

So much pressure, but yet so much creativity!

The show also highlights that Hong Kong is an important global center for the performance arts.

While it was certainly very fitting to have the world premiere of this Chinese classic in San Francisco, the fact that the second premiere was in Asia, and in Hong Kong, speaks volumes about the SAR's prominence in the worldwide art scene.

HK Phil was the main player of the live music and I noticed a number of local performers as well. I wish West Kowloon Cultural District will be finished soon as possible so shows like *Dream* can be performed there.