A CHINESE DREAMSCAPE

Bringing a masterpiece of Chinese literature to the opera stage

By: Ben Coolik

IN 2013, Pearl Bergad, executive director of the Chinese Heritage Foundation, reached out to San Francisco Opera general director emeritus David Gockley to discuss making an opera out of one of the most well-known stories in Chinese literature. Dating back to the mid-18th century, Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* (also known as *The Story of the Stone*) is heralded as a national treasure. It's a vast, 2,000-pages-plus saga that richly details the aristocratic environment of the last imperial dynasty of China while poetically spinning a tale of love, politics, spiritual philosophy, and revolutionary social and cultural concepts and history.

The challenge of condensing the sprawling narrative, including 40 major and 400-plus incidental characters, into a two-and-a-half-hour opera was placed in the hands of co-librettist David Henry Hwang and composer and co-librettist Bright Sheng. From the start, the opera was meant to be sung in English in order to make it accessible to international audiences. Stylistically, Gockley asked Sheng that the opera "be composed in a beautifully lyrical style, nostalgic, and retaining aspects of a traditional Chinese soundscape."

Rather than attempting to squeeze the enormity of the novel into two acts, Sheng and Hwang thematically distilled the material. The resulting libretto tells the core story of a love triangle that begins with a Stone and Flower in heaven. By gathering the dew in a small crack, the Stone has nurtured the lone Crimson-Pearl Flower for thousands of years. The two plead with a monk to allow them to experience corporeal love. Once on Earth, Bai Yu (the Stone) is tormented by his deep love for his soulmate, Dai Yu (the Flower), and his mother's desire to have him wed the beautiful and wealthy Bao Chai. If marrying Dai Yu is his heart's longing, marrying Bao Chai would potentially preserve his family's affluence for generations by uniting his family (the Jia clan), in debt to the emperor, with the very wealthy Xue clan. Bao Yu is tricked into marrying Bao Chai, Dai Yu drowns herself, the emperor destroys both clans by seizing their property and money in order to preserve his own power, and Bao Yu's family become beggars.

The Grand Panorama Garden: A kinetic tapestry hung on loom-like linesets serves as a modular backdrop.

Vertical Chinese screens are rearranged to define various interior locations.

Production design

In staging the opera, the director, Stan Lai, explains, "I aim to blend Chinese aesthetics and Asian philosophies within a contemporary sensibility, to create a play between visual lushness and sparseness befitting the score and the novel's themes of impermanence." The production designer Tim Yip, an Academy Award winner for the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), further explains, "Chinese performance always builds content up from the body. All costumes and props exist to illustrate something that is happening in the body. They are often very sparse, as Chinese traditional performance uses the empty stage. If there's a door, an actor will make a gesture and the audience knows there's a door. Based on an actor's walk, the audience will know whether they are indoors or outdoors. It is an extremely coded language of movement. I found the music to *Dream of the Red Chamber* very suitable for emphasizing this traditional emptiness. Simplicity is powerful, but, at the same time, we have to convey 'who' and 'what.' We have to give context. We can use historical styles to set the story in a specific place and time. Cao

Xueqin wrote in his novel that 'everything is fake,' which gave me the chance to play in the grey areas between realism and surrealism."

Through the use of semi-translucent set pieces, costumes, props, layers of scrim downstage and midstage, a clever multi-piece backdrop, and projections, Yip's set design creates a world where the separation between dream and reality is obscured. Drawing on what Yip describes as his "advantage of knowing traditional Chinese performance techniques, like shadow puppetry, that change scenes with very minimal movements," the audience is transported from sparsely lit scenes on a nearly empty stage to dreamy bamboo forests, the grand hall of an aristocratic estate, and the edges of a lake. In the opening scene, a lone monk, downstage of the proscenium and backed by a scrim and blackout drop, invites the audience to step into his dream. Yip explains, "My first thought was to create a world drawing on both East and West. At the same time, it has to be a dream world, an unrealistic world. Everything has to be poetic. [Translucency] creates an important effect. Everything

onstage merges together to create a unified, dreamy feeling."

A design element critical in achieving Yip's concept is the "Grand Panorama Garden." Comprised of twenty-seven 12mm clear polycarbonate hand-painted panels hung on alternating linesets upstage with 65 visible, loom-like lines, Yip's conceptual garden resembles a kinetic tapestry. Deceivingly three layers deep, yet appearing as a unified painting, Yip says he was inspired by, "the historical background of the author's family, who made Yun Jin (silk brocade) for the emperor." He adds that the images are "made from Cao Xueqin's childhood memories. The paintings on the panels are in a Qing Dynasty style, therefore really flat. As in shadow puppetry, the light comes through the panels from behind, so the scene is real and surreal at the same time, yet understandable dramatically. The screens move on a plane, as opposed to three dimensions. They can be layered and move horizontally or vertically." Eric Walstad, technical and safety director for San Francisco Opera, adds, "We are fortunate to have Stage Technologies' BigTow winches to assist the counterweight linesets. It gives us capacity, speed, and reliability during the garden panel cues." Daniel Knapp, the opera house's managing director of production, says, "The CNC work and hanging irons were executed by [the Cardiff, Wales-based scenery house] Bay Productions." He adds that the creation of the panels took "months of research and failure. We finally got closer to a solution by playing around with a leftover plastic bag from lunch, which we used as a cyc in the model box as a diffusor [along with] bits of lighting gel; prints of Chinese Qing and Ming Dynasty landscapes on overhead foil; scraps of acrylic and Plexiglas panels; various paint coat samples on plastic, vinyl, and acrylic; a retired overhead projector; inky fixtures as cyc lights; and a lot more trial and error."

The richness and effectiveness of Yip's design are not obscured by its simplicity. True to classical Chinese architecture, the intricately detailed and decorated Grand Hall relies on horizontality and bilateral symmetry to emphasize wealth and balance. Four vertical columns, adorned with Chinese lanterns, frame the stage. Scenic elements are easily rearranged for seamless transitions as if, Yip says, "the whole thing is like a painting." Like the variation in patterns afforded by the hanging garden panels, nine vertical single-panel Chinese screens on the stage deck are re-arranged in different configurations, establishing different interior locations throughout the opera. To create the illusion of a lake, Yip utilizes three large horizontal pieces of royal blue, silk-like material, stretched across the stage and manipulated by offstage crew, to mimic ripples on the water's surface. The rich fabric slowly envelops Dai Yu as she drowns in the final scene. The bamboo forest, skillfully crafted in San Francisco Opera's workshop facility in Burlingame, California, is comprised of seven wagons that, like the screens, can be placed in different configurations to establish various outdoor locales. And, of course, there
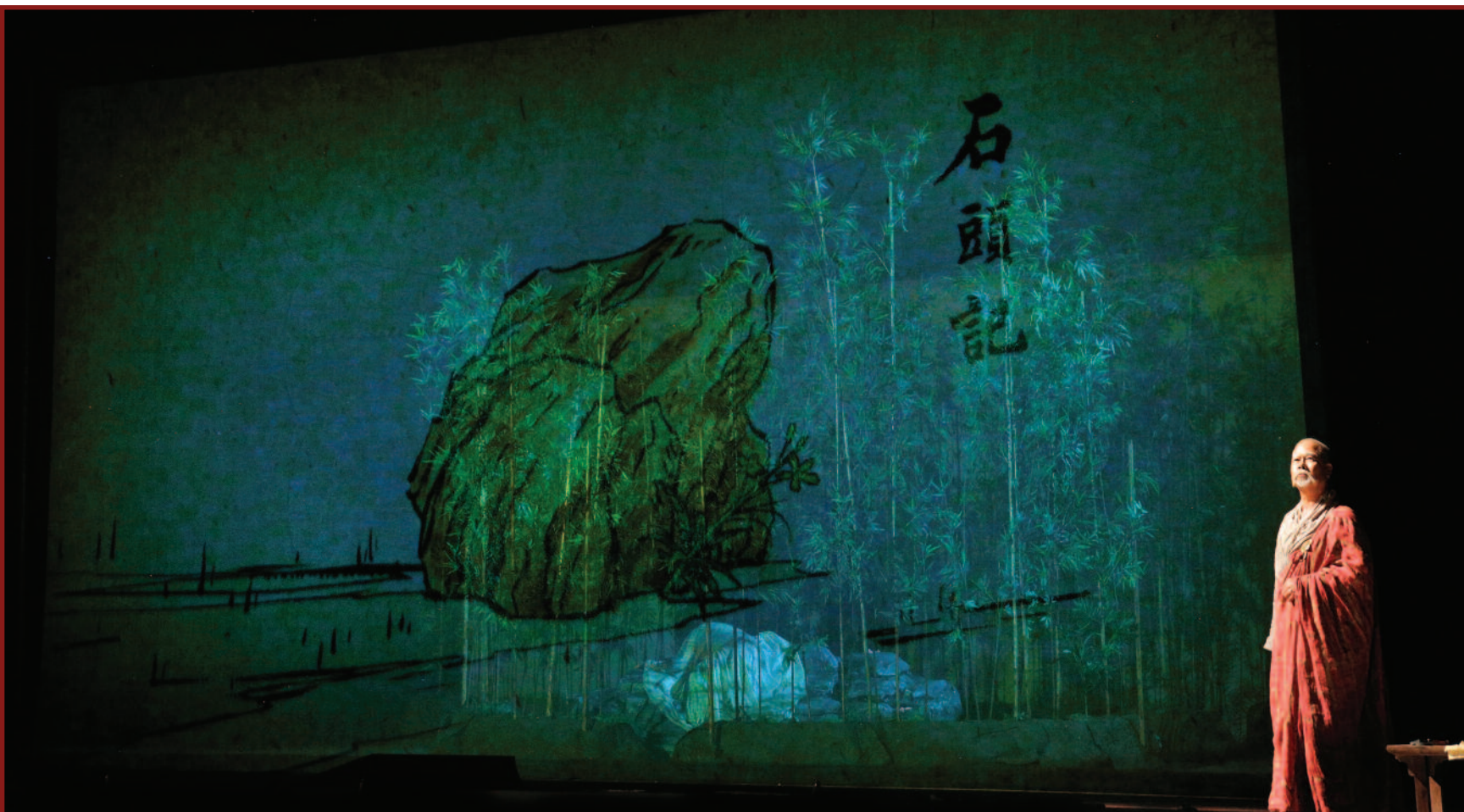
is the large singular stone; a perfectly poetic platform for Dai Yu to sing her laments of losing her one true love.

Lighting

While Yip's set utilizes a largely two-dimensional quality in its quest to embrace the aesthetic of the era's paintings, the construction materials were chosen for their responsiveness to lighting. "Every costume and prop is translucent," Yip explains. "Even the panels of the garden are translucent…the set pieces are translucent so the lighting can change atmosphere to be totally different, yet united, from scene to scene." Gary Marder, the production's lighting designer, adds, "Tim wanted the light to constantly move and all the scenery and costumes to feel translucent…I looked for the best position to get light in behind all of the pieces. For backlighting all of the translucent panels, the [Philips Vari-Lite] spots and washes are my go-to units. When needed, I can cut tight to a panel or use a wash for a big backlight. I also have a lot of cyc control: top, bottom, and a PAR 56 striplight system focused on the horizon line above the scenic ground row. I use this to layer in sky and give more depth behind the garden panels. MR16 striplights above and below the garden panels help highlight them when needed and pull them away from the cyc to build distance."

Marder concedes that achieving translucency wasn't always easy. "We had some issues with shadows from some of the [construction] supports [inside the columns]. I tried to help hide them by focusing breakup gobos on the columns so you couldn't tell the difference between the shadow of the support and the texture of the gobo on the columns. It proved very difficult to find good angles to get low backlight on [the costumes], and, of course, time for that was a major challenge because we only saw the costumes onstage a couple of times before final dress."

Sidelight proved to be essential. "Since the scenery is very flat, and it is shallow on the deck," Marder says, "I tried to increase the distance by making some of my sidelight system dimmer as [the singers] went upstage." Furthermore, he explains, "Lighting a heavy projection show is always a little tricky and finding angles to light singers behind and in front of scrims is even more challenging when so much scenery has to pass through the wings. I decided to add [Philips Vari*Lite] VL3500 Spots and [ETC] Source Four Lustrs to tab ladders on our tab pipes, so they could fly out when necessary for scenery to pass. The VL3500 Spots give me the flexibility to stay off the scrims when needed and open up when doing scenes without scrims."

Marder points out how the Vari-Lite units help him to support one of the most projection-heavy sequences of the opera: the destruction of the Grand Hall by the emperor's army. "The fire projection needs to be supported by the stage lighting because there is no projection that really hits the scenery. My VL3500s are very useful for lighting the scenery with rotating gobos. I also need to pick out the

Tim Yip's scenic model of a room in the Jia clan's palace.
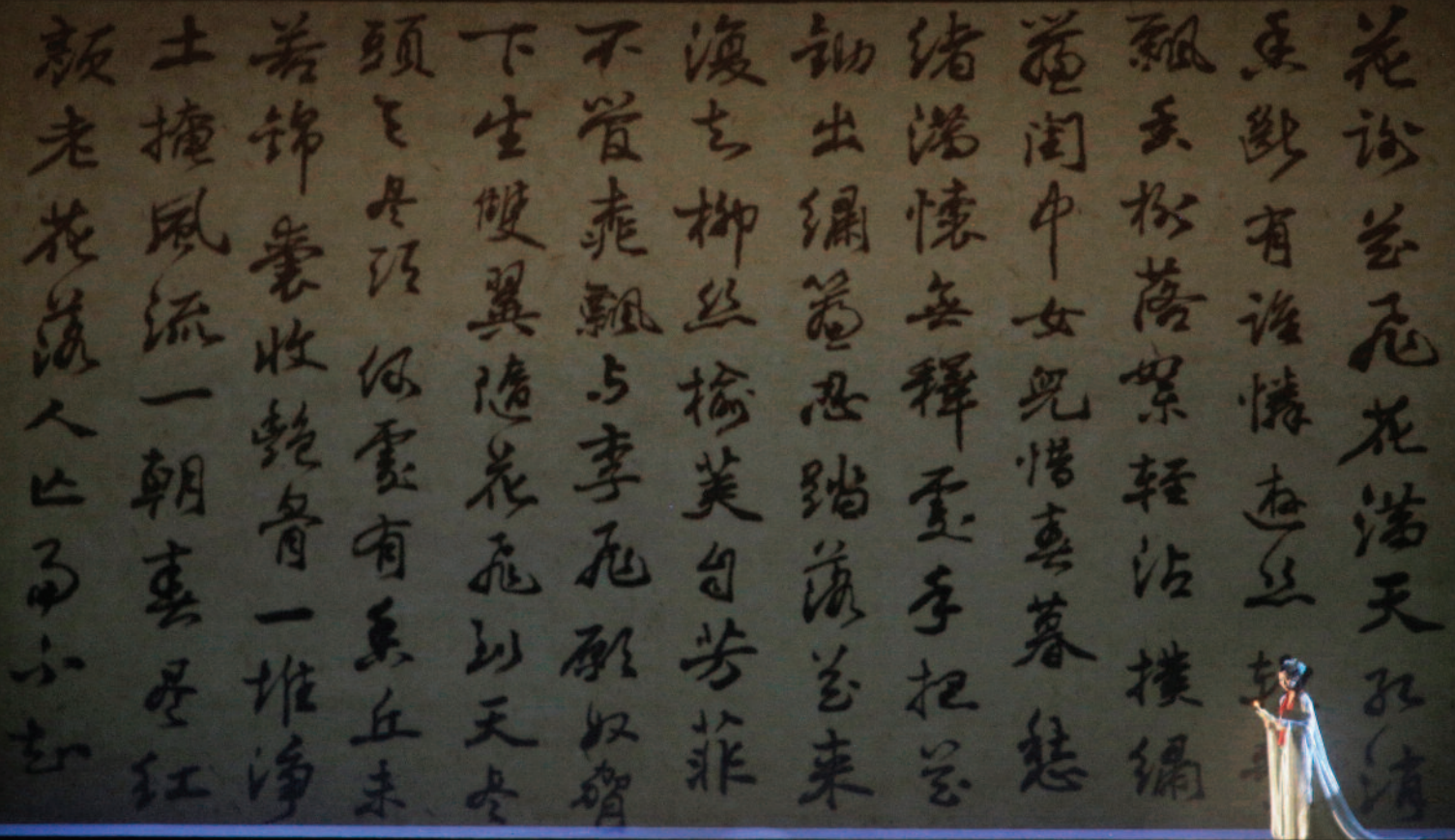
Thanks to projection, a famous poem from the novel fills the stage.

singers that are just upstage of the scrim. My VL4000 Spots on the first bridge are helpful for this; their ability to change color as the fires burned out works really well."

For the production's fog effects, Marder says, "We use a high-pressure steam generator and Dry Fogger Mammoth II [from Chicago-based Interesting Products] to create a mix that gives lift to the liquid nitrogen, which gives the steam more volume; the steam lifts the liquid nitrogen into the air so it doesn't hug the floor, like it would naturally do like dry ice fog. We use liquid nitrogen by itself for the ground-hugging effect in both the boat scene and the ballet/dream scene. We find the Mammoth II Fogger to be more cost-effective compared to dry ice."

The lighting inventory for *Dream of the Red Chamber* includes ETC Source Fours in varying degrees (six with-SeaChanger color changers), ETC Source Four Lustr Series 2 units in varying degrees, PAR 64s, 6' and 8' MR16 striplights, PAR 56 striplights, 1.5K two-cell and four-cell Berkey Far Cycs, 1K four-cell Berkey Cyc footlights, 1K four-cell Orion cyc lights, four 5K Arri Fresnels on Licht-Technik Motoryokes with Wybron scrollers, four 1.2K Arri Suns with Licht-Technik MagVader 250s, six 4K Arri HMI Fresnels (four on Motoryokes) with Licht-Technik MagVader 350s, four Mole 5K Skypans, four ETC Desire D60 Vivids, six Strand Pirouettes, nine VL3500 Spots, 17 VL3500 Washes, five VL4000 Spots, and four Robert Juliat Victor followspots. Lighting is controlled by an ETC Eos console. Marder adds that the production's stage manager, Lisa Anderson, "kept it all together incredibly well for such a short process."

Projections

While the burning of the Jia estate involves one of the more dramatic uses of projection in the opera, animated imagery is relied on in only a few instances: a swirling effect at the opera's opening that draws the audience into the dream, windswept embers during the siege, drifting flower petals during an emotional aria, and singular flames that add dramatic effect to Dai Yu burning her poetry. Static images of a horizon line, consisting of distant rocks and cliffs, provide a backdrop throughout much of the opera. Chinese calligraphy of a famous poem from the novel, projected full-stage, creates a transparent screen that divides the stage in two, and, of course, *Dream of the Red Chamber* must include a depiction of the Stone and the Flower.

Yip's landscape backdrops were inspired by Cao Xueqin, who is also noted for his stylish paintings of rocks and cliffs. "The Qing [dynasty] taste was for paintings of landscapes, especially flowers," he explains. "The tradition continued from the previous Emperor. *Dream of the Red Chamber* uses simple line drawings of cliffs and so on, merging with other elements in the show. The result looks Chinese but, at the same time, nothing prevents other cul-

The wedding scene demonstrates the versatility of the Grand Panorama Garden backdrop; note Marder's use of texture on the columns.

tures from understanding the meanings therein. There are no boundaries."

Regarding the limited application of animated projection in the opera, Yip offers, "Personally, I am not a fan of normal projected images, because they always take away the poetic atmosphere by becoming more rational and descriptive. It can only account for 30% of my design. The other 70% must be filled with other elements. So I choose those projected moments carefully. *Dream of the Red Chamber* uses flat line drawings or paintings, so the effect is traditional." The added animation, Yip says, "is not my favorite choice, but it shows the drama more directly. However, the projection of Chinese poetry during Dai Yu's singing is really powerful because the choreography is so beautiful and the projection is so simple." He concedes, "We live in an era where film is closer to people than theatre. Sometimes cinematic effects help us speak more directly to audiences." Eli Maffei, a San Francisco-based conceptual artist and illustrator, created the digital illustrations in Adobe and expert calligrapher, Patrick P. Lee, scribed the brush calligraphy used in the illustrations as well as the title calligraphy.

Russell Adamson, projection programmer and media server, digital projection, and lighting systems administrator for the San Francisco Opera, created a quad blend on the Gerriets Optilux rear-projection screen using four Christie Roadster S+20K projectors. "Each projector," he says, "covers one-quarter of a 2 x 2 tiled image. In this way, we can cover the 60' x 45' of visual projection surface. The output settings that define the quad blend for the RP are programmed using Mbox Remote software included with [PRG's] Mbox servers, but all the cueing is written on a pair of [MA Lighting] grandMA1 consoles: one master and one live backup." Five Mbox media servers are used in the production, all provided by PRG. The opera house's standard front-of-house hang includes two Digital Projection Titan 1080p SuperQuads, double-hung with their low-profile hanging rigs, which, Adamson says, are "used to cover the downstage scrim and the mid-stage landscape scrim." In addition to the English supertitles, San Francisco Opera offers to its audiences, Adamson notes, "We have added Chinese-language supertitles for this production. We are using two Christie DS+8K projectors: one in each box boom cross-focused to the opposite side title screen."

Adapting *Dream of the Red Chamber* was a monumental task. Although truncating the lengthy masterpiece was inevitable, the creative team produced a metaphysical, poetic, and sensual dreamscape that preserves the heart of the novel. In Yip's words, "We've used Chinese aesthetics—proportion, color, form—to focus on the substance we want to emphasize." 🔊