

Review: A day of fringe ritualistic opera and jazz orchestra quirkiness



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Hollywood has its under the radar, whatever-the-cat-draws-in Fringe Festival. Los Angeles has its fill of venturesome large institutions — notably the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater (REDCAT) and UCLA's Hammer Museum and Center for the Art of Performance — with antennae sensitive to pick up what's happening in the performance nooks and crannies around town.

But to be truly fringe-worthy, a city needs the kind of work that doesn't easily get vacuumed up into such mixes. Two performances on Sunday proved the point.

At Son of Semele — a tiny, tucked-away theater on Beverly Boulevard near Virgil Avenue — O-Lan Jones unveiled the first half of her striking, ritualistic opera-in-progress “Cynosemma: A Dirge from the Dog's Tomb.” A couple of hours later, across town **at the small Gateway Christian Church on the Westside, Alan Chan gave the premiere of his quirkily unexpected concerto, “Moon Walk,” created for pipa player Min Xiao-Fen and the Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra.**

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Megan Breen's libretto, which the poet describes as “ripped from myth,” serves to restore an identity to the Trojan, the wife of King Priam, while also testing us to see where we stand today on issues raised in Euripides' play, “Hecuba.” Troy has fallen; Priam is dead; Odysseus has taken Hecuba and the other women survivors in her court prisoner. Hecuba's daughter Polyxena asks to be, and is, sacrificed rather than sexually serve her masters.

With Kristin Condon's movement and staging by Sabina Zuniga Varela and Nathan Singh, the women wander at first as if in the fog of dream, while they intone quiet drones. By the end of the third, and thus-far final scene, they piercingly wail in pitches so close together that they produce beats painful on the ear and psyche.

How they were driven to the point of violence by the abusive men is the matter of the opera's first half. The second half will be their revenge where they lose their own humanity.

The fascination is how crook this path. Adopting ritualistic movement throughout, the eight performers take turns on instruments, which included various forms of percussion, guitar, harmonium and troubadour harp. Jones, who is the formidable stoic Hecuba — as well as the composer — relies heavily on ancient Greek modes for a score redolent with chant.

Most of all Breen's libretto evokes enigmatic imagery. “Gray is almost silver,” Polyxena, portrayed with calm eloquence by Lauren Han, sings in dismay of miscues from Greek men and Trojan women, both of whom believe the other should know their minds.

The beauty of the opera, which also included a commanding performance from Michael Harris as Odysseus, is finding where the differences lie, what is gray and what is silver, what is and what almost is. Even the title may not be what it seems. Cynossema is the dog-shaped harbor where a battle in the Peloponnesian War was fought, and it is said to have been the tomb of Hecuba, who was turned into a dog by the gods. But “cynossema” has also come to be a term of belittlement, the kind a president might employ if tweeting in Greek.

The point of finding new ways to understand Greek drama, Singh noted in a discussion with the audience after the performance, is to see how humanity has progressed. When we've solved the problems posed in “Hecuba,” we won't need it anymore, he concluded. Jones has more than one good reason not to complete her opera.

A jazz big band, comprised of non-Asian players, formed by a Chinese musician with classical training is, by itself, another unusual cultural hybrid. Adding the traditional Chinese lute, the pipa, is unheard of.

Then again, why not?

Min, who has worked with the L.A. avant-garde electronic composer Carl Stone, also has a jazz side. Her latest CD is “Mao, Monk and Me,” in which she riffs, in a Chinese manner, on Thelonious Monk, sometimes combing classic Chinese folk song with Monk classics.

In “Moon Walk,” Chan goes even further afield.

His is a fairly straight-ahead 17-piece big band. But his compositions have a variety of influences from the occasional Asian music inflection to subtle Ravelian harmonies and textures. He conducts like a classical musician with considerable grace and precision and leaves the playing to his capable band.

The four movements of “Moon Walk” (there will be more, he told the audience) last around a half-hour, and are full of small and large wonders. Min adds percussive strumming to a wailing electric guitar solo. She moons with a bass. She produces floating melodic lines that intersect with a solo trumpet. **In the strangest of all movements, “Diva Cubana,” she vocalizes like a Chinese opera singer with trombone, and dashes off Cuban rhythms that have a particularly nice ring on the pipa.**

The enchanting last movement, “Sky Veggie” (Chan could work on his titles), begins like a swinging lullaby of mysterious ethnic or planetary origins and becomes true to its moon walk aspirations, with the pipa lavishly embellishing a one-finger repeated-note melody on the synthesizer. If Chan had said it was an ancient Greek mode he was fiddling with, I would have bought it.

Oh, yes, there was something else surprising that “Cynosemma” and “Moon Walk” shared. Both events were followed by refreshments, and in both cases, exactly the same tasty lemon cake cookies were served.

Is that an L.A. thing too?



(Photo credit: Dana Ross)