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## California opera delights fans, puzzles critics

Fri Oct 24, 2008 8:52pm EDT

By David Lawsky

SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) - Writer Amy Tan's opera "The Bonesetter's Daughter" finished its premiere engagement here recently, but the unusual production fusing European and Chinese tradition has created a buzz that lingers among fans of the art form.

The New York Times, for one, illustrated a recent article about new operas using a photo from the exotic visual spectacle, about a woman who bridges the generational and cultural gap separating her from her mother.

When "Bonesetter's Daughter" opened in September as a production of the San Francisco Opera, critics gave it mixed reviews, but audiences were enthusiastic and the opera's creators attended every show during the sold-out run.

"Seeing (audiences) respond is a tremendous emotional experience," said Amy Tan, who with composer Stewart Wallace took several trips to China and spent three years transforming her best-selling novel of the same name into an opera.

"We worked on this so hard and so long," said Wallace. "Every performance is different in detail. The places where people laugh are different."

The opera, based in part on the emotional journey Tan took in dealing with her mother's descent into Alzheimer's disease, tells the story of a San Francisco woman who re-experiences her grandmother's life in China in the 1940s. Ultimately, it helps her understand her own mother's life and come to terms with the elderly woman's dementia.

"Bonesetter's Daughter" drew on the theater, music, singing, musical instruments and dance of China and Europe, blending them with a huge video projection screen that augmented the scenery.

Sometimes so much was happening, the audience didn't know whether to look at the Chinese acrobats flying across stage on wires, the singers or the video screen.

### CHALLENGING TRADITION

Various opera critics picked apart elements of the opera, some doubting the music and others the acrobats, the sets or the use of Chinese instruments.

In the New York Times, writing after the opera closed, Anthony Tommasini said it listed into "abstract episodes of musical and dramatic vacuity."

But the Los Angeles Times was kinder, describing the score as "exotic ear candy" with its mix of eastern and western traditions, and the San Francisco Chronicle said it "is a far cry from many an operatic premiere." The result might be called "California Opera".

In fact, Tan's production highlights a trend in recent years of operas calling upon more modern and mixed elements to attract audiences exposed to all sorts of media.

Major European and American companies have brought novelty to 18th and 19th century operas by placing them in modern settings -- using Amy Winehouse costumes, for instance, or Cadillac cars, mobile phones, television press conferences and tableaux from the photos of Abu Ghraib

prison.

To tell her story, Wallace said "Bonesetter's Daughter" required some unusual approaches.

A key role is played by Beijing opera star Qian Yi, who is trained in Chinese Kunju singing, a tradition that lacks the necessity of a voluminous voice that is required for western opera. Qian's voice needed amplification and consequently all of the singers wear body mikes.

But the spectacle on stage helped tell the story as the opera delved into the psyche of the central character, Ruth. What Tan communicates is, in part, what it feels like trying to communicate with her mother.

Some of the dialogue is autobiographical, from a time when the mind of Tan's mother deteriorated because of Alzheimer's disease. Her mother lost the ability to be rational, "but she processed emotions," said Tan.

(Reporting by David Lawsky)

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