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– Jennifer Scappettone

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GHOST VILLAGE: An Opera in Three Acts

Libretto: Judith T. Zeitlin
Composer: Yao Chen
Story adapted from "Gong-sun Jiu-niang," a tale from Liaozhai's Records of the Strange by Pu Songling (1640–1715)

DRAFT 1

Act One, Scene 1, Opening Chorus

GHOSTS:
Like bats we surface at twilight
Glimmering like glowworms
In the hour when you can't tell dog from wolf
And the earth can with our emerald blood.

On a single day, hundreds of us were slaughtered.

Of Ji-xian and Li-yan.
Far from our homes in the eastern counties
On the military parade grounds here in Ji-nan,
Five long years since we were sentenced to death,
Young and old, rich and poor alike.
Five long years since they rounded us up
Five long years since the Yu rebellion was quelled.

—but who remembers us now?
Beyond the city wall,
on the far outskirts of town
And they laid us poor souls in unmarked graves
So many of us, the coffin makers ran out of wood
So many of us, the stocks of poles stretched to the sky.
Green-screened beneath the earth.
The emerald blood of the martyred
And the earth can with our emerald blood.

In the hour when you can't tell dog from wolf
Glimmering like glowworms
Like bats we surface at twilight
GHOSTS:
Act One, Scene 1, Opening Chorus

GHOSTS (whispering):

Unjustly.
We died.
A single day, a single day.

GHOSTS:

We died unjustly!

(whispering)

We died unjustly!

(whispering)

Green hills growl.
and blacken.

Unjustly! Unjustly!

Act One, Scene 1, Opening Chorus

Who remembers us now?
Only five years ago.
Ghosts-green beneath the earth.

Emerald blood of the innocent.
The ground ran with our blood.
How dearly we paid for Yu's Revolt.

Qing axes struck us down.
On a single day, we died en masse.

We come out at twilight.
Blasts of bitter wind.

Green hills glow at night.

Unjustly! Unjustly!
We died unjustly!

GHOSTS: (whispering)

We died.

A single day, a single day.

No one remembers us now.

GHOSTS: (whispering)

Green hills growl.

GHOSTS: (whispering)

We died.

GHOSTS: (whispering)

We died unjustly!
Act One, Scene 1, Opening Chorus

GHOST VILLAGE

REFLECTIONS ON GHOST VILLAGE

a conversation with
Judith Zeitlin
Majel Connery
and
Yao Chen

In 2016, literary historian Judith Zeitlin and composer Yao Chen began working to create an opera in the European tradition based on a Classical Chinese ghost story. As is customary with any opera, the pair first began working on the libretto, which was to be written and adapted by Zeitlin from her English translation of the story before Yao Chen began composing the score. During the process of their collaborative work together they enlisted Majel Connery as dramaturge of the piece as a kind of bridge between the work of the libretto and the music. The following is a cross-continental conversation-in-stages, where the three collaborators talk about their working process and the challenges of translating between traditions, genres, and worlds, particularly those of the living and the dead.

From the beginning one of the key struggles for you, Judith, in writing the libretto was the ethical imperative to ground the opera historically. Could you talk a little about this issue as it relates to Ghost Village?

There was a moment that was very important to me in working with Yao Chen on this opera. The story the libretto is based on is a story by a very famous Chinese writer named Pu Songling and at one point, Yao Chen said to me: “You have to understand, you are not writing an opera by Pu Songling. You are writing an opera by Judith Zeitlin.” And that was really important because I had to set aside a lot of the original story, even elements I had published in my book The Phantom Heroine, where I talked extensively about the historical record that led to Pu Songling’s story. I even had to put aside some parts of my interpretation that I liked best—certain very concrete historical details that just had no place in the opera, that were too complicated or just didn’t add enough to make it worthwhile.

So in the end I kept just the general contours of the historical event. It’s about innocent people being destroyed by historical events they have no control over—is unfortunately still very much with us. So when you mention an ethical imperative, yes, I do feel that ultimately the ghost story is a way for survivors somehow to commemorate these victims while at the same time recognizing that despite their best efforts, those survivors can’t provide the relief or amelioration to the ghosts, to the dead, that they want to give. That general situation is really at the core of the opera. It has to be there and it has to be rooted in history for it to have real power. I don’t know if that makes sense.

Yes, of course, and this brings up another issue related to genre that I remember being a point of some confusion that had to be gradually worked out. In the early drafts, the libretto veered into territory I would have called very opera buffa, which really gave me pause. I think for you and Yao Chen, given your much richer sense of what’s possible in the context of a Chinese ghost story, there was a feeling that, look, this is a much more flexible genre that can easily and naturally go in a funny direction. But at the same time, because the opera was destined for a primarily Western audience, at least at this stage, you wanted to take my generic Western reactions into account. How did you resolve this balancing act?

Firstly, Yao Chen always felt that it was very important to have you on board, partly as a kind of barometer for our audience. And it was always fascinating to see your confusion at various points. Yao Chen and I really went back and forth about pushing things in a more comedic or grotesque direction. I wanted to, and he didn’t. And the story pushes in both directions: there is some banter and some
Reactions on Ghost Village

how to dramatize?

expected ending, a "conventional" tragic

the audience can follow what's going on. How

just enough information at all times so that

loneliness of the dead.

a pace that's not too fast or too slow, and give

tackle, and that you perhaps hadn't quite

This is actually a really interesting topic.

words, you're supplying the kernel of the opera

do all the things a good story does: establish

and that's what feels cool about it.

opera. I don't recognize this move generically,

as a drama, as an enactment of compelling

You said, "I have some say in making him one of three principal characters

in the craft of Chinese

It's also dif

with the characters are close to Chinese
dramatic types, rather than filled

even have a name. We basically put

He's lyrical, he's not going to shy away from

not just in the

He's met his

it because it seems to upset our expectation

very plausible." You're often even giving me

you imagined to be the wedding ceremony—

you needed the story.

We're still working on this ending. In the

We really wish to make the straight man

almost left and

why I chose it. I was always so happy that you

from the 12th to 14th century that includes a

into one particular secret ritual handbook

section on spirit marriage to see if that would

parents to send to their children in the afterlife

You're supplying the kernel of the opera

operatic, but I embrace that."

scale. Don't you need a wedding ceremony here?

This really is what makes the original story so

completely understandable because of that

the original story, the living protagonist and his

in the story, the living male protagonist

into the Underworld—the living male protagonist

The whole idea from the 12th to 14th century that includes a

into one particular secret ritual handbook

 showcasing unit scenic here, because that's

most of this is

You had to push against my

and musically rearranged the original text

making him one of three principal characters.

in an opera, almost had to make us think of

adaptation can be the same. Really

because of that. Yet that's the thing I

there be a big crowd scene?" Or, "I want a

complicated, which is the challenge of writing

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Reflections on Ghost Village

...world, and engaging the Chinese tradition...