



Broadway To Vegas



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By: Laura Deni

TWO LEGENDARY CASANOVAS INTERTWINE

Broadway star Eugene Brancoveanu portrays Don Giovanni and Sabrina Hou is Pan Jian-Lian. Photo by Frank Wing

Two legendary Casanovas, Mozart's Don Giovanni and Xi-men Qing of the Water Margin Heroes novel (Song Dynasty, 960-1280 A.D.) have scandalous reputations.

What would happen if the two met? A duel over a lover? Perhaps a marriage a trios?

An innovative operatic creation tackles the romances and chance encounters of these two great lovers.

Don Giovanni is portrayed by Eugene Brancoveanu, who originated the role of Marcello in Baz Luhrmann's Broadway production of La Boheme, which received an honorary Tony Award. The opera, sung in English punctuated with Chinese, features Merola Opera artists with vocal brilliance and comic ebullience, under the direction of Isabel Milenski.

This unusual opera combines Mozart's great rendition of Don Giovanni and famous characters from classic Chinese opera in a new story with music by Gang Situ and Libretto by Cao Lusheng.



Gang Situ

Situ spoke with Broadway To Vegas about this endeavor and his fascinating background, which has led him to call San Francisco home.

"Don Giovanni, of course, is famous," said Situ who was born in Shanghai. The concept came from the 250-year birthday celebration of Mozart and his Don Giovanni. I think every city with an operatic orchestra was doing Don Giovanni, said Situ referring to Mozart's revered Italian *Dramma giocoso* opera. The story of a ladies' man whose notorious behavior gets him in trouble with the wrong women (and especially the wrong father), this favorite is full of some of the most popular arias in opera.



Broadway star Eugene Brancoveanu portrays Don Giovanni and Sabrina Hou is Pan Jian-Lian. Photo by Frank Wing

"I thought how about here in China Town? We don't have Don Giovanni but we have the other guy - Xi-men Qing. He is similar to Don Giovanni in Chinese literary history. I don't know if it was for real or just created, but there is a famous story about Xi-Men Qing, so every Chinese knows this guy," said Situ about the central character in the first fictional work to depict sexuality in a graphically explicit manner in China, describing in detail the downfall of the Xi-Men clan during the years 1111-1127. The story centers around Xi-Men Qing, a social climber and lustful merchant whose wealth allows him a consort of wives and concubines. A key episode is the seduction of the lascivious, adulterous Pan Jinlian.

After secretly murdering the husband of Pan, Xi-Men Qing marries her as one of his wives. The story follows the domestic sexual struggles of the women within his clan as they clamor for prestige and influence as the Xi-Men clan gradually declines in power.

"I thought, how about if we just put these two guys together," Situ laughed. "It's like two lives and then we go East to West and West to East and there is a big mix-up. It's a comedy."

The cast includes: Eugene Brancoveanu as Don Giovanni; Eugene Chan as Xi-men Qing; Thomas Glenn as Leporello; Sabrina Hou as Pan Jin-lian; Jennifer Palmer Boesing as Elvira; Heidi Moss as Zerlina; Larry Zhang as the Matchmaker; and Jeremy Galyon as the Commendatore.

It's not the first time Situ has tried music with a twist and made it play and pay off.

In 1997, San Francisco Symphony premiered his San Francisco Suite, which includes solo parts for Chinese, Japanese, South America, and African American jazz instruments to dramatize the numerous musical traditions flourishing in the City.

It was a bell ringer - literally - a cable car bell.

Situ was asked to write a piece for the San Francisco Symphony. for a family concert. "At first, I thought, me write a piece for kids -- no way!" he laughed. Then he thought about the diverse city and changed his mind.

"We have cable cars here. So, the idea was if you took a ride on a cable car and went into different neighborhoods - Chinatown, Japanese town, Hispanic community. Each movement is only two or three minutes, but it's like an international tour for the kids. We borrowed a real cable car bell from the Cable Car Museum and after every movement we rang the bell -- ding, ding, ding - which indicated we were going into a different cultural neighborhood. Different instruments also signified different neighborhoods."

Situ's music is as eclectic as he is.

His father was Music Director and Conductor of the Shanghai Philharmonic, and his mother was a mezzo-soprano with the Shanghai Opera. After early studies in piano and violin, Situ was sent

during the Cultural Revolution to a rural area for "re-education," interrupting his music education for many years.

"It was because of my parents and their western music," he explained. They were doing Western music and they were told to stop. They were punished. They had to stop playing Western music. In the first couple of years they had to stop altogether. Then they could only play certain things."

I had just graduated from high school. I was sent to the countryside and that was called re-education. Chairman Mao thought that all things you learned from a school were just books - not a real life. So he sent people to "learn the real life."

"If the family had just one child, they would not go. But, at that time, the one child per family policy was not yet happening. Most families had two, three or four kids. If you had one, the child didn't have to go, but if you had two, one stayed home and the other had to go. I have a younger brother, so I had to go. If I didn't go, my brother would have been taken away."

"So, I went to a Provenance about a day away from Shanghai. I was a farmer for four years. That was interesting," he said a little ruefully. "It is a hard life. I had to do whatever the farmers did. Get up early and work from when the sun rose until the sun set. I did that for four years."

After enough time passes looking back can glean learned insights.

"Now, when I look back, I have seen some benefits from the life experience. Of course, I lost my golden age - the time for education, the career development for whatever you want to do. On the other hand, I learned something that I can live under any kind of a life condition. I can deal with little money - no problem."

Repressed feelings can express themselves in music.

"If I want to express those kind of feelings in a concerto, it would be slower - drawing on those kind of feelings - sad or bad."

"When they tried to end the Cultural Revolution, it was a gradual changing," he recalled. "People started to return to schools in the city. But, like today, you had to apply to get into the university. I passed the examination and went to Teachers University which trained all of the high school teachers."

He was twenty when he returned to Shanghai and enrolled in the music department at Shanghai Teachers' University, whose faculty he joined eventually, and he continued his composition studies at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

Teaching didn't fulfill Situ's creative nature.

"The way they let you teach was only repeating everything. Every year you start from the beginning and do everything exactly the same way. I like being more creative. In China you are secure with a job. You graduate and they send you somewhere for a job," he said about the no

unemployment policy, which still exists today. "But, you cannot change your job. So, I had to get out."

His parents also encouraged him to leave.

"In 1984 the open door policy had already begun. I have a lot of relatives living abroad - Canada, United States and Europe," Situ continued. "My parents had a musical tour abroad. While they were on the concert tour they got to see a lot of the relatives. Because my parents toured and they encouraged me to get out and see the outside world. They said San Francisco is a beautiful place and there are a lot of Chinese, so you will feel comfortable."

Encouraged by his parents, both of whom are deceased, Gang Situ came to the United States in 1985 and three years later received a master's degree in composition from the Music and Arts Institute of San Francisco.

"I didn't know English when I came here, so I took some classes in English. I went once a week. I still use a lot of Chinese material in my music. Those are the things I'm most familiar with. And, also I think there are certain things about roots. It's in my blood. You cannot change it."

"There is a lot of jazz in San Francisco. I went to a lot of jazz club. For awhile I tried to imitate jazz. But, there was something not in my blood. I think you can do what isn't in your blood, but you can't do it well.

"For instance, I speak English now, but there is still the accent - it is Chinese English. It's broken English. People can tell that isn't my real language. The same with music. You have to learn to do what you know best. So, for my style, I had to stick to my roots. I put a lot of Western things together with Chinese. I don't see a clear line there. I don't see a big gap between two cultures. I hate to say East meets West, but it's true. Like the Opera story we are doing."



Lily Cai

A co-founder of Chinese Cultural Productions and one of the most active Chinese-born composers in the United States, Situ has composed works for orchestra, chorus, dance, and chamber ensembles. Many of his scores have been created for San Francisco's Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company and the San Francisco Symphony.

"Lily Cai is my wife," said Situ. "We met here and formed a dance company. I run the music and handle the administration."

Elegant, sensual and captivating, the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company melds ancient Chinese forms with modern dance in an artistic and inventive marriage of styles. The Company bridges the continuum from past to contemporary - from spectacular court dances of Chinese dynasties to contemporary works fusing classical Chinese and ballet, complemented by dazzling costumes, original music, and multi-media designs.

The Company performs and tours extensively throughout the United States. In 1994 the Company opened the Grateful Dead's concert celebrating the year of the Dog at the Oakland Coliseum, and in 1995 performed for United Nations' 50th Anniversary Celebration in San Francisco. In 1996, the Company received two coveted awards for Outstanding Achievement in Choreography and Company Performance Awards from Isadora Duncan Dance Awards Committee for their collaborative performance with Oakland's Dimensions Dance Theater entitled Common Ground. That same year, the Company also premiered Chinese Myths Cantata, a successful collaboration with The Women's Philharmonic and Chanticleer.

With his wife as his professional partner Situ and Lily Cai meld his music and her choreography.

"There are several ways that a program is formed," Situ explained. "If my schedule is such that I have another writing commitment at that time, then we use existing music and the program is set to the existing music. The second way is possible because of technology. We can use 3 or 4 types of music and I just re-arrange them. You've got to get permission from the record company or the authors and then you can mix them using software, like a computer process. The third way is how most of our programs are constructed - I composed. Who comes up with the idea first is like the chicken and the egg concept. It depends upon the situation. Sometimes she comes to the idea first - what kind of things she wants to do. Then we discuss the structure. To me music for the dance is different than creating music for an orchestra. That music is in elements, components."



Gang Situ surrounded by violins with Streamers poster. Calligraphy by Marty Soh

In effect Gang and Lily construct a road map.



"To write for the dance, structure is first," he elaborated. For five minutes - this, then faster. Then the next mood is slower. How many minutes is each and we make a map. I create it on a computer, then we rehearse and see what works. It goes back and forth many times."

Currently China is the new kid of the block. The in thing is to feature something Chinese. Situ doesn't feel this is a passing fad.

"I think it good," he said of China being showcased everywhere from art to music, dance and plays. "What has happened since I've lived in this country, more than 20 years now, we realize most Americans don't know Chinese culture very well. I've been on tour in more than 30 states. I've been in every corner. People living in San Francisco or New York know Chinese culture, but not in the heart of this country."

"If we go to a small town and if it's four hours to another place, you never seen an Asian face. But, everyplace we go, there are Chinese restaurants! No matter how small the town, there is a Chinese restaurant. They always have Chinese food even though it may be very bad Chinese food," laughed the composer who cooks as a hobby.

"I like to cook. I think it's another part of the creating process. I like to try different things. I don't use a cook book. It's like composing music. I like to create my own. I put this here and something there and experiment. I enjoy it."

"So, Americans know Chinese food. And, they know a little bit about Chinese acrobats, but Americans don't know Chinese dances. I think it is good to let American know more about the cultural of any country."

Major news organization also hype China as the nation to fear - the country that will surpass us economically, militarily and take the oil. Might political headlines hamper creative endeavors?

"I hate to say it, but media says more of the negative than the positive," he answered. "The Chinese government has media censorship and the media here doesn't like that. Whatever our media can report, they look for the negative. China is changing. China is complicated. They have a long history and there are so many people. They like the way they live. In some things there is quite a different mindset. You can't change everything overnight. If you change things too quickly, then there are major problems."

Childless, Gang and Lily consider their dancers "like our children. They have our house key," Gang admitted. "They can eat here."

With hopes of production outside of San Francisco, Situ stressed "this is new. Nobody has done something like this. We use known material and then stick Chinese things in there. It's an intriguing concept that we hope everyone will enjoy."

The Grand Seducers plays May 18-20 at the Chinese Cultural Center in San Francisco.

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