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A Visit to
CHINATOWN

★★★ RISING STARS ★★★

CHINATOWN

by **BRIDGET ESLER**

I n September 2022, City Opera Vancouver broke new ground with the world première of *Chinatown*. The commission remains one of the only operas in existence to be sung in Hoisan, a Chinese dialect, and the first opera to be written about one of Canada's many Chinatown districts. Now, one year later, *Chinatown* is set to reach a wider audience with the release of its original cast recording, on Halifax-based record label Leaf Music.

Chinatown is the fourth commission by City Opera Vancouver in its 17-year history. The company is committed to the creation of purposeful works that showcase Canadian themes and artists. Their commission process is unique: the libretto is always developed first, with a selection process for a composer coming later. In 2017, then artistic director Charles Barber became interested in the historic importance of Vancouver's Chinatown, its relationship to the overall development of the city, and the neighbourhood's recent social and economic struggles. With the inkling that Chinatown would make a good setting for an opera, the company set to work.

A year-long search for a librettist led them to author Madeleine Thien. Her award-winning 2016 novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* had recently turned her into a star on the Canadian literature scene. Thien's poetic prose felt well-suited to what City Opera envisioned for the piece. Next, historian and writer Paul Yee came on board to assist with translating portions of the libretto into the Hoisan dialect. Other sections remained in English and Cantonese.

The final piece of the puzzle was commissioning a composer to set Thien and Yee's text to music. Alice Ping Yee Ho undertook the thorough composer audition process with anticipation. She was drawn to *Chinatown* because of the way its themes of immigration reflected her own roots. She was born in Hong Kong, moved to the United States as a teenager to study music, and eventually settled in Ontario. Having previously composed two operas based on Chinese folklore—*The Monkiest King* (2018) and *The Lesson of Da Ji* (2013)—Ho knew that this was a project for which she was perfectly suited.

When the call came in May 2020 that the commission was hers, she began composing straight away, under a tight deadline. She was to have the two-hour opera completed within a year. As it happened, two months into the COVID-19 pandemic, there were few other professional engagements to distract her from her task. She found shelter from the uncertainty of that early-pandemic period in the "wonderful world" of *Chinatown*. "I was able to sail through (the pandemic) and be concentrated on the work," she says.

Chinatown is an intergenerational story centred around the lives of two men, Xon Pon and Saihin, who emigrate to Vancouver's Chinatown from southern China. The plot follows their families through 60 years of Chinese-Canadian history. It touches on the Head Tax and the Exclusion Act, discriminatory measures taken by the Canadian government during the 19th and 20th centuries to discourage and ban Chinese immigration. *Chinatown* is much more than a history lesson, though. "The most important thing is the love aspect of the story," Ho explains. While the opera does include a romance between characters Anna and Eugene, Xon Pon and Saihin's relationship is at the story's heart. "It is so daring that the opera explores the love between the two men. It's very subtle. It's a great friendship, but it's genuine love, however you define it," Ho says.

The element that makes *Chinatown* so singular is its incorporation of the Hoisan dialect. This unique feature also proved to be one of the opera's greatest challenges. Hoisan, although now in decline, was once the primary dialect spoken in Chinatowns across North America, as a significant number of Chinese immigrants during the late 19th and early 20th centuries came from a single county in Guandong province, from which the dialect originates.

Chinatown's action begins in 1896. This meant that the most truthful and historically accurate depiction of these characters would necessarily include them speaking Hoisan. When Ho was first tasked

with setting Thien and Yee's text, she thought to herself: "Is this even possible?" Though somewhat familiar with Hoisan—having heard it spoken by a nanny growing up—the composer does not speak the dialect herself. Moreover, she felt it had a coarse and jagged sound, making it poorly-suited to melodic treatment. That preconceived notion melted away over two years of writing and revising. As she worked closely with Yee to understand the contours of the language and maximize the singability of the text, she came to appreciate Hoisan's idiosyncrasies. "It is so musical. It is very pentatonic. It has so much character!" she exclaims.

SPENCER BRITTEN

When tenor Spencer Britten heard that an opera sung in Hoisan was being produced in his hometown Vancouver, he knew that he had to keep *Chinatown* on his radar. Britten was raised in a household with Hoisan-speaking grandparents and fluently spoke the dialect himself before he started preschool, at which point his Hoisan was supplanted by the English he
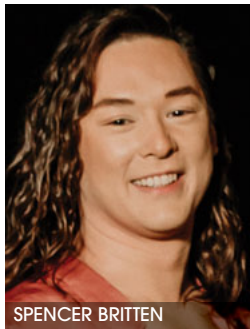
PHOTO : DIAMOND'S EDGE PHOTOGRAPHY

spoke in class, and the Mandarin he learned in after-school lessons. Needless to say, he was intrigued by the thought of an opera that featured the nostalgic language of his early childhood memories.

It was like fate had intervened when he was asked to participate in *Chinatown*'s première production, and his busy international performance schedule left just enough weeks free for him to accept the contract. He was available for the rehearsals and performances, but only had five months to learn the role of Saihin—typically, he would need at least a year to tackle a new part.

Musically, it would be manageable. The tenor quickly felt at home in Ho's compositional world. "It all made sense," he says of the way she incorporated traditional Chinese melodies and instruments into the fabric of the score. The obstacles came with learning and memorizing the language.

Britten had the advantage of being the only cast member with a family background in Hoisan. The sounds of the dialect, which vary significantly from other Chinese dialects, were familiar to him, even if the vocabulary was not. Translator Paul Yee proved to be an invaluable resource for the entire cast during the rehearsal process, taking singers aside in quiet moments to work on pronunciation and inflection. Since Hoisan is a tonal dialect, it was of particular importance that singers pitch the language properly, so as to sound like native speakers. Britten found that the brief moments when his character *spoke* in Hoisan were much more challenging than the sung text.

"In a way it felt limiting because the language is so melodic. The way we express ourselves in English is so determined by the tone or the pitch of how we say something, so learning how to be expressive within the tonal language was a huge learning curve," he explains.

In the early stages of *Chinatown*'s genesis, the creative team was concerned that asking their singers to learn such a tricky dialect would be too much. Their fears were ultimately unfounded: "All the singers came through. They nailed the dialect perfectly! Whether they had spoken any Chinese, or none at all, they listened, they rehearsed, and they got it. I was just bowled over," Yee proudly declares in a video announcing the release of the album. In Ho's words: "I was so moved and impressed because all of the singers were so dedicated and so respectful."

The motivation required to put in that effort came naturally to the *Chinatown* cast. "The passion was there because all of us were so connected to the subject matter," Britten says. Like so many of those involved in creating the opera, his own family's immigration story was reflected in the fictional lives of Saihin and Xon Pon. Not only that, but Britten personally understands the sacrifices one has to make in pursuit of the life of one's dreams, having restarted his life in many different cities in service of his singing career. "(Immigrating) is so difficult and now, having lived abroad, I relate to that struggle even more." He says he has "a greater appreciation for what my family did to get to Canada," adding: "We want to fight for the life we think we can have, and provide for the ones that we love at whatever cost."

As *Chinatown*'s creative team worked under the pressure of tight deadlines, fuelled by their personal investment in the story they were telling, strong bonds and new friendships were inevitably formed. Britten describes the many dinners shared between them, sometimes cooked up by tenor and spectacular amateur chef Derek Kwan, other times provided courtesy of chorus member William Liu's family-run restaurant Kam Wai Dim Sum. Ho recalls with wonder the way that many of the singers cried during each performance, a mark of the

magic that was being created onstage. "Obviously it felt special to the cast, but it became very special for the audiences that were there as well," says Britten.

By explaining that part of *Chinatown* would be sung in Hoisan, the tenor was able to convince many relatives, who were otherwise skeptical of opera, to attend the performances. The piece resonated with them more deeply than he could have imagined.

The president of City Opera's board of directors, Janet Lea, described a similar reaction from a Chinese-Canadian friend who attended *Chinatown* with her sisters. The group of women wept as they watched the performance, touched by a narrative that was so connected to their own lives.

Beyond those who related specifically to the Chinese-Canadian element of the story, audiences of all backgrounds were struck by the opera's powerful themes of love, family, separation, and death. "My friends who know nothing about opera absolutely loved it. It's one of the favourite things they've seen me in," says Britten.

Part of *Chinatown*'s universal appeal emerged from the way it was shaped by the community that surrounded it through every step of the creative process. Throughout its three-year development, City Opera hosted workshops of the libretto and score in fully-packed rooms all over Vancouver's Chinatown. These open sessions were an opportunity to receive valuable feedback from locals—some of whom were classical music experts and others who had never heard an opera. For Ho, who had not had the opportunity to workshop her operas in the past, this experience was "nerve-racking, but crucial." Throughout the process she said to herself, "I need to put my ego down and listen and make it better." The results were worthwhile: an opera that is molded by the community that it represents.

The original cast recording, made in 2022 and released last month, is the next step in telling *Chinatown*'s important story. One cannot help but make the connection between the discrimination and struggles faced by the opera's characters and the rise of anti-Asian hate, both in Canada and around the world, over the last several years. *Chinatown* remembers a history that should not be forgotten, while simultaneously celebrating the beauty and resilience of the Chinese-Canadian community. "It's fiction, but isn't fiction," says Janet Lea. For five nights last year, Vancouver audiences were invited into the world of Saihin and Xon Pon. Now, this album invites listeners across the country, and the world, to take a visit to Chinatown. **LSM**