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An Opera About Colonialism Shows How History Warps

BY JOSHUA BARONE FEBRUARY 28, 2020

The composer Du Yun, left, with the opera's directors, Yuval Sharon (in blue) and Mr. Luger (in orange).
Credit: Michael Christopher Brown for *The New York Times*.

This city likes to pretend it has no history, Yuval Sharon said on a recent afternoon while standing across the street from a place called, yes, Los Angeles State Historic Park.

But history is here. For a long time the land on which this park now sits, not far from the forest of skyscrapers downtown, was a rail yard known as the Cornfield. Nearby, a mob of white people lynched nearly three dozen Chinese men and boys in 1871. Before colonialism and westward expansion, it was a flood plain and the site of an important Tongva village.

"There's a kind of amnesia here that's celebrated," said Mr. Sharon, a MacArthur "genius" grant-winning opera director. "I think that more than ever now, we need a sense of reckoning with our history. And how can art play a role in that?"

He doesn't necessarily have the answer. But the new opera *Sweet Land*, which premieres on Saturday at the park, is an attempt by Mr. Sharon — along with a team of collaborators and his innovative company, the Industry — to at least start a conversation.

A head-spinning abstraction of colonialism and whitewashed mythology, *Sweet Land* has been described by its creators as "an opera that erases itself." It achieves an effect not unlike that of traveling back in time to witness the first Thanksgiving, then returning to the present to hear its story warped through the traditional, wholesome retelling.

Every Industry production — including *Invisible Cities*, which unfolded at Los Angeles's Union Station, and *Hopscotch*, set in 24 cars driving around the city — has collaborative practice at its core. Mr. Sharon's *Sweet Land* partners include, as co-director, Cannupa Hanska Luger, an interdisciplinary artist who was raised on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota; Raven Chacon, a Navajo composer and installation artist; Du Yun, the Pulitzer Prize-winning, Chinese-born composer; Aja Couchois Duncan, a librettist and writer of Ojibwe descent; and Douglas Kearney, an African-American poet and librettist.

"We're Noah's Ark," Ms. Duncan said. "Two librettists, two composers, two directors."

Each pair includes a newcomer to opera, which Ms. Du described as an opportunity "to listen to a culture that is not our own." Mr. Kearney, who has worked in the form before, said that writing with Ms. Duncan, who hasn't, has forced him to think more critically about the function of a libretto.

The artists have proposed a new myth about two groups, the Hosts and Arrivals — reminiscent of the American experience, but also universal. (The piece's relationship to the United States, however, is undeniable: Think "sweet land of liberty.")

"We are all from somewhere," Mr. Sharon said. "Everyone has been either the colonized or the perpetrator."

Abstraction, he added, helps refocus history. "That's where it feels more closely related to the strategies in science fiction," he said, "which are always so political and give you the right tools to understand the present."

The *Sweet Land* librettos are placeless and poetic; the music is reminiscent of known styles, but heard as if through a prism; the colorful costumes are works of arresting fantasy. The sets are ephemeral architecture erected n the park — confronting, Mr. Sharon said, "the illusion that we've always been here, not nature."

As in previous Industry projects, which have explored the possibility of individual audience members having vastly different experiences, the plot of *Sweet Land* isn't straightforward. About 200 people gather at the start inside a pop-up space modeled on the Amargosa Opera House, an unlikely theater plopped into Death Valley, Calif. After an introduction — composed by Mr. Chacon and Ms. Du and depicting the Arrivals, well, arriving — the audience is divided onto two tracks, each leading to a separate theater and story.

One is called *Feast*, written by Ms. Du and Ms. Duncan about welcoming the Arrivals; the other, *Train*, is by Mr. Chacon and Mr. Kearney and about something like Manifest Destiny. Each, Mr. Luger said, is "closer to what the reality might have been, at least in terms of the emotional intensity. It's much more visceral. It really does not hide away from the violence, the lust and sexuality. And the displacement."

In these scenes, Mr. Chacon and Ms. Du avoided quoting specific Indigenous musical styles. Still, there are echoes of them, such as in the vocal technique for Makwa, one of the Hosts; there are parodic evocations of Western opera, as in an Arrival's recitative, delivered in countertenor voice with Baroque accompaniment.

After *Feast* and *Train* are over, the audience is reunited outside at what's called *The Crossroads*, a space of images projected onto mist. A chorus tells the crowd to "go back to where you came from" — a double-edged phrase that echoes President Trump yet is also a practical instruction to return to the theaters where *Feast* and *Train* took place.

Those spaces have been transformed; *Feast* now looks more like a Golden Corral, and *Train* features a group of House Hunters. In the second-part pieces that follow, Mr. Chacon and Ms. Du have switched tracks, letting each composer respond to the other's initial work. The stories the audiences heard in the first part are repeated, but now in an oddly mythologized way — with the exception of a character returning from each original story, flustered and trying to be heard, yet not acknowledged.

"It's what we've all been told in school," Mr. Luger said. "But we've left the characters that have been redacted. So you can tell the story isn't all there."

If all of this sounds confusing, that's the point. "I hope it's frustrating, in the best way possible," Mr. Sharon said. "That's what should be the catalyst for the self-examination that we want the audience to come into."

The audience's response is crucial for the opera's ending. As the listeners are reunited back in the first theater, it's up to them to make sense — with one another — about what they have just seen.

Mr. Sharon doesn't recommend trying to see both the *Feast* and *Train* tracks. "I like the idea that another person's experience is actually really cut off from yours until you make the effort to inquire about it," he said. "The audience has to complete the work."

Mr. Luger interjected: "And that is how you turn it into a myth."