



Eva Yerbabuena

COMPAÑÍA EVA YERBABUENA
Suma Flamenca Festival 2008
Plaza de la Constitución, Aranjuez

Dance for Eva Yerbabuena is fierce and lonely and oblivious to its surroundings. Unlike most Flamenco performers – for whom presentational aesthetic and audience acknowledgement are key – Yerbabuena stands before her vociferous fans packed within an open-air plaza in the Spanish town of Aranjuez and appears positively alone.

The unquestionably gifted Yerbabuena has the qualities of a darkly decorated deity whose overwhelming charisma and riveting zapateo are shared with spectators purely by default.

Ascendant on a collapsible stage that is excessively elevated and cluttered with heavy steel frames and speakers, Yerbabuena plunges into three impassioned solos during which her commanding figure projects always inward. Her centre of gravity is stubbornly rooted, making her shapes unusual and interesting. When her hips dart in one direction, her shoulders hasten in the other. Meanwhile, her head and feet remain in perfect vertical alignment.

Next she pounds her thighs and raises her seemingly unpainted face to a starless

sky in an attempt to invoke her Sevillian ancestors. The effect is both engrossing and alarming, as if onlookers are privy to a private gypsy ceremony that could end in disaster were Yerbabuena to be interrupted.

The mood, for the most part, is electric and counterbalanced by four males who showcase a lighter style of Flamenco-ballet when Yerbabuena finds herself temporarily shattered. In insipid crimson and mauve the men look boyish beside Yerbabuena who, even when bouncing across the stage in mock-playfulness, is teetotal and sombre.

Four Flamenco singers who inhabit the stage periphery find themselves all but dismissed by the star. Their disembodied cries incite the merest shift in her shoulders and neck and at one point assist her to simulate a sense of falling in slow-motion.

Yerbabuena's dance is contemplative and concerned and, like the solitary light-bulb that dangles above her head during the first solo, alone in her illumination. It is thrilling to witness her technique that exists in isolation in a region where Flamenco venues spot cities like theatres in the West End of London.

Malcolm Rock

China

in London



SUZHOU KUNQU OPERA COMPANY THE PEONY PAVILION

No doubt an exoticism, still, for the majority of its London audience, 16th-century Kun opera *The Peony Pavilion* manages nevertheless to feel not in the least bit foreign. By melding Confucian philosophy with saucy sexuality, Tang Xianzu's 400-year-old tale of love at first undiscovered, then unattainable, and at last unassailable proves both funny and familiar.

Akin to Wagner's *Ring* in scale, the three-part Chinese classic has been abridged from 20 to nine hours by director Wen Guosheng, whose setting is bereft of any significant props besides simple floral-upholstered furniture and suspended calligraphy friezes.

It falls upon the performers themselves to colour the stage with buoyant vocal lines, handsome costumes featuring elongated sleeves, and tightly choreographed gestures that make *Pavilion* a sung dance of matchless precision.

Whereas Madame Butterfly's Cio-Cio-San is granted some half a dozen Puccini arias with which to declare her emotional turmoil, Kun lovers Du Liniang (Shen Fengying) and Liu Mengmei (Yu Jiulin) have more than a dozen solos each that are book-ended by tidy unsung dialogue.

Kun turns the wistful sigh into an oral art and celebrates simple revelations with an overzealous clash of cymbals. The Western ear requires time and cerebral persuasion before it can endure these sometimes penetrating sounds that are typical of the form and

inculcated in its native admirers. Thankfully, secondary characters Spring Fragrance (Lü Jia) and Sister Stone (Tao Hongzhen) provide a more palatable means of access: the former uses impeccable comic timing and luxurious outfits to earn audience affection while the latter mirthfully laments her uncooperative lapideous hymen that has left her with little alternative but to embrace a pious vocation.

Fire-breathing Judge Hu (Tang Rong) and his flecked and fortified underworld minions also put on a hell of a show, confirming that Kun performers are masters of both voice and body. They build tableaux with handheld fans, paper lamps, spears and themselves, which materialise then collapse amid fleeting rushes of acrobatic jest.

Jia, too, demonstrates superb physical proficiency, complementing her songs with elegant turns of the wrist, darting eyes, sophisticated balances and swordplay. In one scene she emerges as a pink amalgam of oriental warrior and tasseled cowgirl with metre-long feathers that double as sprouting headgear and ornamental dance props.

The shrill falsetto cries and raucous instrumentation that characterise Kun opera create an alien first impression, however a committed sitting reveals *The Peony Pavilion* as fundamentally concerned with controlled tone, delicate movement, and love that is, as Mengmei muses, "beautiful like early spring that no one sees". M.R.