

The Bonesetter's Daughter, the opera by Amy Tan

Review and photos submitted by:
Elizabeth Xiu Wong

Amy Tan wrote the libretto to **The Bonesetter's Daughter**, based on her 2001 novel. Did you catch the play presented by **CATS** a couple of years ago? The opera is a collaboration of the Chinese-American author, an American music composer--Stewart Wallace, a Chinese-born stage director—Chen Shi-Zheng, imported Chinese kunju opera singers/musicians, and the SF Opera.



L-R: Sovahn LeBlanc, Eileen Leung, Jeannie Wong Wood & Elizabeth X. Wong

Off To The Opera!

Dressed up in a bright red silk jacket decorated with turquoise flowers, I was ready to play the part. Not on the stage of the San Francisco Opera, but in the audience. We were about to witness the first major American opera produced to tell a Chinese-American story.

First, the **CATS** bus left Nevada City and made a pick up for members of the Sacramento Chinese Culture Foundation and fans of Amy Tan, and then through rush hour traffic to catch a pre-show talk. We needed some of the complex scenes explained in advance, and the program read like a guidebook as well. I later discovered that *Dragon Bones*, a critical prop in the story, are prehistoric dinosaur bones valued as a Chinese traditional medicine for healing broken human bones. This news article was just published on July 4, 2007: www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19606626/

Ghosts Speak With Emotions, Not Words

This new work was full of unexpected surprises! Set in 2 acts, we traveled back and forth between 2 countries and between the 2 worlds of the living and the ghosts. All was tied quite neatly with the theme of "emotions," especially those from a broken heart. The ghost of Precious Auntie "floats" in the air waiting to have her story told. She sings out her emotions, but the people below her cannot hear her voice. Her daughter Old LuLing and granddaughter Ruth do not hear the ghost until they are transported back to China in Act II. And that's when you bring out the hankies and try to keep the sniffing to a minimum. These characters and memoirs are taken from Amy Tan's real life with her own mother Daisy Tan slipping into Alzheimer's.

How The Dead Ancestors Rule Over The Living

The secret stuff for "longest-lasting life" is what the characters killed each other over. What is this "stuff"? *Dragon Bones*. Their magical power had been Chinese traditional

medicine since the prehistoric era. The villain craves for it, and Precious Auntie holds tight to it while alive and tighter when dead. And when she finally gives it to Chang the Coffinmaker, she makes sure that every strike of her ghostly painful vengeance is felt by this evil villain.

Threats of suicide haunt LuLing, who in turn passes on her torture to her daughter Ruth. Just as in Amy Tan's life, most of the female ancestors took their own lives. In the end, we discover that this is an act of empowerment that both protects LuLing, daughter of Precious Auntie, and makes possible Precious Auntie's final vengeance.

What Lies Ahead For "The Bonesetter's Daughter"

For now, there are no set plans by the collaborative group to bring back this world premiere on tour. Before they do, I hope the opera goes through a few improvements to make it easier for the audience. Although all sung in English, the operatic intonations were difficult to understand even with the surtitles projected above the stage curtains. The story could be much more poignant if 2 characters from the novel were added. Unlike the prominent father in the novel, the Bonesetter character in the opera is merely mentioned by name. For those who read the novel, and watched the **CATS** staged play, we know that the father of LuLing is not the evil coffinmaker, but another man loved by Precious Auntie. Both he and the Bonesetter are both murdered by Chang the Coffinmaker!

The promotion before its month-long run was incredible and tickets for all shows were sold out. On closing night, people even paid to stand 5-persons deep for a "SRO—standing room only" spot on the floor. While waiting for a possible tour, you can prepare yourselves:

- KQED preview online: <http://sfopera.com/p/?mID=211>
- The novel: *The Bonesetter's Daughter*
- Fate! Luck! Chance! (the Libretto and making of, by Ken Smith)
- KQED radio interview: AmyTanBonesetters892-0881108
- Program book from the opera

See you in 2009 at the next **CATS** show...**FLOWER DRUM SONG**.



L-R: Music Composer Stewart Wallace, Elizabeth X. Wong, Author Amy Tan