

# 'RedDust' shows flashes of brilliance

By Jane Vranish  
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Woe to anyone who has struggled with the top of a blank page, a difficult and solitary process that Winston Churchill once called "an adventure" before labeling it "a tyrant."

Composer and librettist Mathew Rosenblum might have had that in mind for the Opera Theater of Pittsburgh's world premiere of his first opera, "RedDust," which traced the internal conflict of writer Shi-yin (Kelvin Chan) by transforming his imaginative journey into a vivid cast of characters, at The Andy Warhol Museum Friday night.

Writing is not a linear process by any means, and it is the same for, I

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am presuming, composers, choreographers and visual artists. Sometimes it can be very messy. But it turned out to provide a provocative setting for the multimedia windstorm of "RedDust."

For most of the opera, Shi-yin was caught in the act of writing a classic Chinese story about a stone that comes to life as a young boy, Pao-Yu, played by Jo Ellen Miller.

## opera review

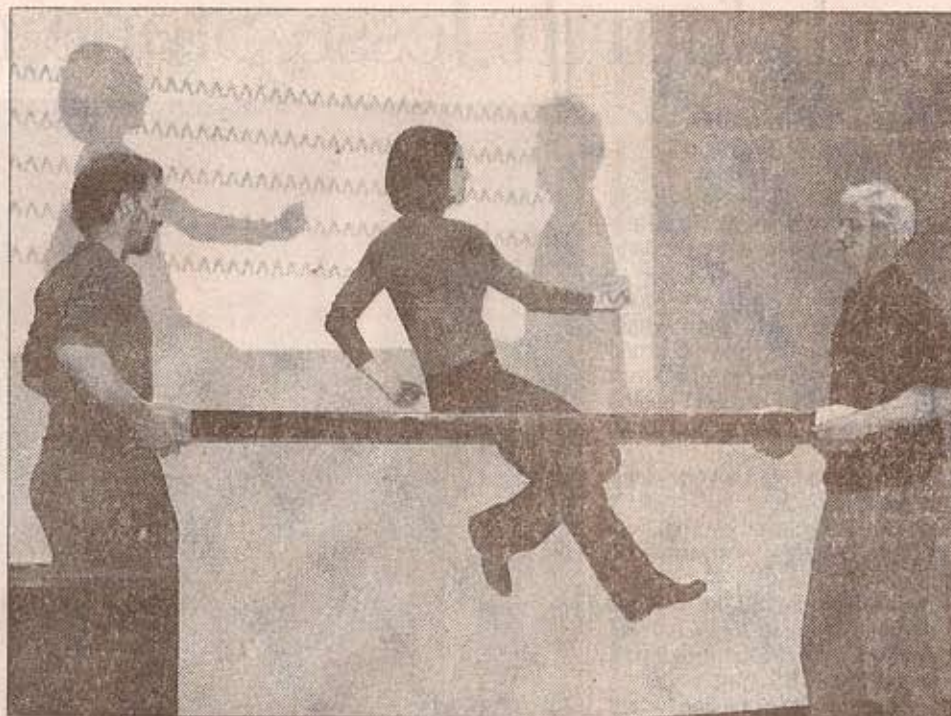
Other characters come to life via members of Attack Theatre, Michele de la Reza, Peter Kope, Jeff Davis and Kristin McClintock-LeBeau, sometimes playing multiple roles.

But Rosenblum also inserted Gertrude Stein (Anna Singer) and the reason was uncertain. A native of Pittsburgh giving it a local connection? A writer whom Shi-yin might have admired? As an early supporter of the Cubist art movement, someone who might provide a connective link for the disparate elements in a similar fashion?

Never mind, I loved the way Singer — sometimes double-cast as a Fairy of Disenchantment that, actually, Warhol would have loved — mightily helped Shi-yin through his writer's block.

This remarkable cast of seven seemed like more on the small, elevated stage, covered in a red dust sort of carpet, backed by a highly functional variation on a Chinese step cabinet, with two secret entrances, some bamboo accents and marked by a desk that remained unnervingly off kilter.

The staging remained taut under the sure hand of director Jonathan Eaton, certainly a master of dramaturgy, and the quixotic mix of media, one of the strongest blends yet seen in this area. The video documentation activity by Lou Yellin and Jim Ledoux — and it had to be labeled that for its throbbing presence on both the stage screen and concrete ceiling beams — played off an assortment of words. Often it served as the ultimate in



Opera Theater

Attack Theatre's Jeff Davis, left, Kristin McClintock-LeBeau and Peter Kope try out choreography for "RedDust."

OpTrans, usually found as translation in traditional opera, but a nifty underscoring of the English libretto here.

Eaton works exceptionally well with Attack Theatre and the collaboration produced a fantastical landscape of arches on Pao-Yu's journey and a disturbing, yet ethereally beautiful suicide scene for de la Reza.

Like the production itself, Rosenblum's score was impressionist, with the vocal lines floating above, minimalist and sometimes surprisingly tonal. It rarely imposed itself on the singers, who often spoke the text, but seemed to be content to serve as a psychedelic wash over the dramatic continuum.

There were many moments of brilliance, enough to sustain the value of this production. Much of the first act moved forward with Pao-Yu's story. But the second act, dealing with Shi-yin's emotional discord over his lover's suicide, didn't build enough steam for the climax.

But given the enormously complicated and private nature of the subject material, "RedDust" conveyed not only the confusion indicated in the title, but a sweeping emotional experience.

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