

As Big As The Sky

July 2015



Photo: Ada Nieuwendijk

"As Big As The Sky is essentially a 21st century comedy of errors, an ideal genre to portray such a grotesque reality." Marinus de Ruiter attends a premiere of an opera eight years in the making

Set in a contemporary China caught in hyperspeed transition, *As Big As The Sky* is an opera full of striking invention, be it artist Ai Weiwei's set designs, Dutch composer Arnoud Noordegtraaf's music, or British writer Adrian Hornsby's libretto. Eight years in the making, the birth pangs of its production were complicated by Ai Weiwei's widely reported conflicts with the Chinese government. Its world premiere finally took place recently at Amsterdam's Holland Festival.

"Out-believing" is a phrase coined by Hornsby, an expert on current building practice in China. "I out-believe your reality", contends the god-like character M, director of M-A-O (M Architecture Office) in his Skype meeting with billionaire Wu Cai, a cameo role played by Ai Weiwei himself. Appearing on screens amid the singers on stage their talking heads represent the latest, not to say shadiest class of megalomaniacs cynically profiting from any disaster and in the process convincing everyone that white is black, light is dark, and vice versa.

This demonic inversion of reality is visualised in Ai Weiwei's huge central set piece that looms over the stage, as it slowly turns around its horizontal axis. Its geometrical framework is beautiful in its internal logic, even as it's just as easily associated with the most mundane everyday objects: a teabag, a lampshade, or rather two bell-shaped lampshade frames assembled into one. Projected on the surface and refracted through its various faces are real-life video images shot by drones, showing Chinese villages falling into ruin as ever proliferating high-rise projects push them off the map.



Ai Weiwei and *As Big As The Sky* deputy set designer Bart Visser collaborate via Skype

The first view we get of the object is from below, showing us a flat square with a round hole. By the end of the opera, we have reached the top where we now see a circle with a square hole. This is the ancient Chinese symbol for the 'round sky and square earth', symbolising the ancient Chinese perception of a flat earth as represented in antique coins and objects. This is history spinning in reverse – tragically, for the opera's lead character Sem Aers, a Dutch up and coming architect lured into the impossible building project of erecting a gigantic dome over an entire village by M and Wu Cai.

As Sem, baritone Martijn Cornet starts out with high ambition and on top of it all. Cornet sings in a deliberately stiff, recitative fashion until Sem falls in love with the opportunistic Chinese opera beauty-cum-Twitter celebrity Mulan, sung by soprano He Yi. All of a sudden Sem indulges himself in oriental fashion and music until scandal and misfortune strike his dome project and Mulan leaves him. Sinking into a dark Wagnerian mode, he pours out his predictable Western guilt in hilariously exaggerated outbursts. This is typical of composer Noordegtraaf's style: playfully shuffling idioms and quotations, often extrapolating phrases through sampling. In the end, Sem's dome is completed, but his star has long faded, his dream project now reduced to a tourist trap, a backdrop for Mulan's big show.

As Big As The Sky has a weighty subject which is made even heavier by the history of popular operas set in the Orient like Puccini's *Turandot* and *Madame Butterfly*. Not forgetting the megalomaniac power of architects, as portrayed in the Ayn Rand novel *The Fountainhead* and the Ibsen play *The Master Builder*. Also, Noordegtraaf's composition can appear complex and fragmented, certainly in contrast to Hornsby's carefully constructed libretto. But as a counterweight, their opera is full of humour and sparkling performances. Both are evident in He Yi's singing of Noordegtraaf's imaginative variations on the traditional Kunqu opera style, and tenor Zhang Bo, as an the old village dweller, who binds the story with his loud yet instantly memorable melodic announcements. *As Big As The Sky* is essentially a 21st century comedy of errors, an ideal genre to portray such a grotesque reality.

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Artists

- Ai Weiwei
- JS Bach
- Vicki Bennett
- British Summertime
- Ends
- Earle Brown
- Anton Bruckner
- John Cage
- Nick Cave
- Angharad Davies
- Benedict Drew
- Ostad Elahi

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- Phil England
- Tony Herrington



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