

Painted Skin

An opera in concert by Hao Weiya

Libretto by Wang Yuanfei

Synopsis by Michael Hofmann

Act I

Professor Wang is on his way home in the rain on a springtime evening after having several drinks at the local bar when he encounters a young woman alone along his path. Immediately enchanted by her, he offers his umbrella as protection from the rain. Though she initially refuses, the mysterious woman eventually accepts the umbrella and runs off without uttering a word.

Later, Wang's wife, Chen, welcomes him home, but notices a strange fragrance hanging around him. He explains his previous encounter. They prepare for bed together, unaware that the woman from earlier is watching from a distance.

Interlude I

The woman is revealed to be a demon from another dimension who wears a suit of painted skin as a disguise to appear human. The demon plots to take Wang's kind heart in order to permanently take human form.

Act II

The next day, Wang is working on poetry in his garden when he notices the distinctive scent of the young woman. She approaches Wang to return the borrowed umbrella, but scurries off after Chen arrives in the garden. Preoccupied, Wang leaves to work in his study; Chen remains outside, suspecting something is wrong with her husband.

Act III

In his study, Wang struggles with his attraction to the enigmatic woman. She appears, and Wang, intoxicated by her fragrance, devotes his heart to the woman. They are again interrupted by Chen, who presses Wang on his behavior. He shrugs her off, leaving Chen alone again to grapple with suspicion of Wang's infidelity.

Interlude II

The demon steels itself to finally seize Wang's heart.

Act IV

The demon, still disguised, returns to Wang's study, and Chen confronts them. The demon explains its goal to Chen, who pleads the demon to leave the couple alone. Feeling threatened, Chen calls for Wang, who upon seeing both women hesitates to take either side. The demon reminds Wang of his earlier promise, which Wang dismisses as nothing more than a line of recited poetry.

Infuriated at Wang's fickleness, the demon reveals its true form. A now-terrified Wang pleads the demon to take his wife's heart instead. Chen spurns her husband, and in turn allows the demon to take Wang's heart. Disgusted at the couple, the demon takes both of their hearts, killing them, but finds the hearts tainted and unsuitable. The demon leaves after tossing the hearts back at the couple, who revive, confused and horrified.