



MAKING GENDER IN OPERA

EAST MEETS WEST

International Conference on
Opera, Performance and Culture

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FACULTY OF MUSIC

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FULL PROGRAMME

Making Gender in Opera, East and West

Faculty of Music, Schwarzman Centre, University of Oxford

12-13 December 2025

December 12th

10.00-11.00: Session 1

- Haili Ma (University of Leeds), 'The 'Perfect' Gender Making through Tao: the case of Chinese All-female Yue Opera'
- Bette Zhaoyi Yan (University of Oxford), 'The Magic of In-Between: Cross-Gender Performance and Gendered Selfhood in Chinese Opera on the Contemporary Stage'

11.00-11.30: Tea break

11.30-13.00: Session 2

- Getong Feng (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München), 'Reinterpretations of Turandot in Contemporary German-Speaking Director's Opera: A Case Study of Productions by Philipp Stölzl, Claus Guth and Marie-Eve Signeyrole'
- Jiadong Zhang (University College, London), 'Neither Adaptation Nor Re-staging: A Re-examination of S. I. Hsiung's Translation and Direction of Lady Precious Stream'
- Mridula Sharma (University of Manchester), 'Reimagining Gender Through Class Precarity: La Bohème on the 2025 British Stage'

13.00-14.00: Lunch

14.00-15.00: Session 3

- Suzanne Aspden (University of Oxford), 'Operatic Verisimilitude and Gender Non-Conformity in 18th-century Opera'
- Rasa Murauskaitė (University of Cambridge), 'Representing the changing discourse on gender in Lithuanian contemporary opera: The case of the comic-strip opera Alpha'

15.00-15.30: Tea break

15.30-17.00: Session 4

- Roundtable discussion: Orientalism in (Western) scholarship and gender stereotypes in (Eastern) opera, led by Bette Zhaoyi Yan and William Want (University of Oxford)

December 13th

10.00-11.00: Session 5

- Ashley Thorpe (Royal Holloway University of London) ' "Deeds Not Words": Gender Performance and the Possibility of Its Subversion in Japanese and English-language Nō'
- Jad Orphée Chami, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)) 'Sing Like a Man! From the Haute-Contre to Oum Kalthoum: Gender, Listening, and the Politics of the Liminal Voice Across Musical Traditions'

11.00-11.30: Tea break

11.30-12.30: Session 6

- Chinese Opera Female *Sheng* Performance and Demonstration: Jin Zhao (visiting performance artist)
- Roundtable on performance: Josette Bushell-Mingo (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama), Bette Zhaoyi Yan, William Want

Website: <https://www.music.ox.ac.uk/event/making-gender-in-opera>

ABSTRACTS

Session 1

- Haili Ma (University of Leeds), 'The 'Perfect' Gender Making through Tao: the case of Chinese All-female Yue Opera'

Abstract:

This paper examines the idealised gender making in Chinese opera through the case of Chinese all-female yue opera (yueju). All-female yueju originates in folk community singing and developed as a modern theatre art form at the turn of the 20th century Shanghai. It has continued to be favoured by audience nationwide to this day, despite turbulent political impact. This paper proposes that the celebrated cross-dressing male role (xiaosheng), from the 1948 audience voted Yueju King Yin Guifang to the 2023 media celebrated CHEN Lijun, derives from the deeply ingrained aesthetics taste of Yin-Yang balance and the Unity of Heaven and Human (天人合一), the essence of Taoism. It suggests that reasons of the all-female yueju stands out in aesthetic taste from the rest of Chinese opera forms (over 300) is closely linked to its modern theatre making and Zhejiang affluent audience taste evolution, where yueju no longer serves as community festival event but sophisticated aesthetic expression, exemplified in gender making. The paper builds its theoretical framework around Taoism in its original text, as well as key Western scholars' translations, such as Ursula K. Le Guin's Tao Te Ching and Richard Wilhelm's I Ching.

Speaker's biography:

Dr. Haili Ma is an Associate Professor in UK-China creative industries at University of Leeds, UK. Haili was a xiaosheng performer at Shanghai Luwan All-female Yue Opera Troupe before moving to the UK in 1997 where she pursued academic studies and subsequent career. She has published widely including two monographs: Urban Politics and Cultural Capital, the case of Chinese opera (Routledge 2015 hardcopy and 2020 paperback) and Understanding Cultural and Creative Industries through Chinese Theatre (Palgrave Macmillan 2024). Haili's five consecutive UKRI/AHRC awards (2018-2024) explore digital creative collaboration and audience taste building across the UK and China: <https://bridgingthegaps.leeds.ac.uk/>

Session 1

- Bette Zhaoyi Yan (University of Oxford), 'The Magic of In-Between: Cross-Gender Performance and Gendered Selfhood in Chinese Opera on the Contemporary Stage'

Abstract:

In a small rehearsal studio in Shanghai, a young dan (female role in Chinese opera) performer, Tongtong, adjusts the headwear and the long water sleeves and smiles to me: "When I'm on stage, I can finally be myself." Born male but identifying as female, Tongtong regards the opera stage as both sanctuary and mirror, a space where cross-gender performance enables them to inhabit a self otherwise denied in daily life. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork (2023–2024) in Beijing, Xi'an, and Shanghai, this paper explores how cross-gender performers in contemporary Chinese opera negotiate identity across artistic, emotional, and social boundaries.

Rather than framing these practices as mere continuations of a historic theatrical convention, I examine them as living negotiations of gendered being. For some performers and enthusiasts, gay, bisexual, transgender, or simply gender-nonconforming, like Tongtong the stage becomes an "in-between" realm where masculinity and femininity coexist in tension and play. Within this liminal aesthetic, performance operates as both a protective mask and an expressive release: it allows what cannot be lived openly to be performed, and what is performed to reshape lived selfhood.

This paper situates cross-gender performance within ethnomusicological debates on embodiment, performativity, and the politics of voice and gaze. The Chinese opera stage, with its codified yet fluid conventions, reveals the social power of aesthetic suspension: a shared understanding between performer and audience that what is witnessed is both real and not real. In this space of consented illusion, gender becomes not a fixed identity but a cultivated art, temporary, negotiable, and profoundly human.

Speaker's biography:

Bette Zhaoyi Yan is a DPhil candidate in ethnomusicology at the University of Oxford, specialising in cross-gender performance in Chinese opera. Her work bridges musicology, anthropology, gender studies, and performance research. An accomplished soprano, she has performed across the UK, Europe, and Mainland China, including at the Sheldonian Theatre and Berlin Opera Academy, and was the 2022–23 Oxford Young Artist Platform winner. Alongside her research and teaching at Oxford, Bette is the Coordinator at the Performance Research Hub TORCH Oxford and is the founder of the Art Beyond Borders Initiative (ABBI) to foster cross-cultural artistic exchange.

Session 2

- Getong Feng (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München), 'Reinterpretations of Turandot in Contemporary German-Speaking Director's Opera: A Case Study of Productions by Philipp Stölzl, Claus Guth and Marie-Eve Signeyrole'

Abstract:

Turandot is among the most frequently performed operas. According to statistics from Operabase, between 2000 and 2023, Turandot was performed over 5,000 times worldwide—including concert versions, semi-staged renditions, and full productions—spanning more than 1,000 different stagings. During the same period, it ranked nineteenth among the most frequently performed operas globally. Its enduring popularity lies not only in the music's exceptional artistic achievement, but also in the character of Princess Turandot, who embodies both timeless human complexity and the enigmatic allure of the "Oriental" woman. This paper takes the libretto adapted by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni as its point of departure and, drawing on the aesthetic principles of Regietheater in the German-speaking world, focuses on two representative contemporary productions: Philipp Stölzl (2022, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin) and Claus Guth (2023, Vienna State Opera). It examines how the image of Turandot has been reinterpreted on German-language opera stages in the 21st century. The study finds that the "Chinese elements" in contemporary productions are increasingly understood as metaphors for a "foreign" or "alien" space, with direct representations of traditional Chinese imagery on stage largely diminished. Directors have shifted their creative focus toward exploring the psychological dimensions of the characters, using the expressive means of Regietheater to reveal the inner journeys of Turandot. This trend reflects a broader transition in German-language opera from external cultural representation toward an introspective psychological interpretation.

Speaker's biography:

Getong Feng

- PhD candidate, Department of German Language and Literature, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich;
- Former Assistant Researcher, the Opera Research Institute, Peking University;
- Registered Media Representative for the Bavarian State Opera and the Salzburg Festival;
- Opera Critic for IOCO Arts Review, Der Opernfreund, and Klassik-Begeistert.

Session 2

- Jiadong Zhang (University College, London), 'Neither Adaptation Nor Re-staging: A Re-examination of S. I. Hsiung's Translation and Direction of *Lady Precious Stream*'

Abstract:

Previous scholarship, such as that of Ma Huijuan, has often viewed S. I. Hsiung's English translation of *Lady Precious Stream* and its adoption of international stage practices as adaptations or distortions that compromised the integrity of Peking Opera abroad. This paper argues, from a semiotic perspective, that Hsiung's translation is not so much a rewriting as an engagement with the open linguistic semiotic system of Peking Opera—a system whose flexibility allows the reshaping of content without breaking from operatic convention. Rather than transforming the opera into spoken drama, the first 1934 London production—staged without star performers—enhanced verbal elements while minimizing music and movement. This shift does not simply convert non-verbal signs into language; instead, Hsiung reshapes the narrative through linguistic means that echo the aesthetic and storytelling principles of traditional Chinese opera.

This study also demonstrates that Hsiung's intervention constitutes a gendered reinterpretation of the narrative. By changing the traditional ending—where Xue Pinggui marries Princess Dai Zhan—to one in which she becomes his sworn sister, Hsiung removes the polygynous structure embedded in the original plot and grants the female characters greater dignity and agency. While this change is often attributed solely to the tastes or moral expectations of 1930s London audiences, this paper argues the revised ending emerges as the result of three intersecting forces: the reformist energies within the operatic tradition, the expectations of London audiences, and Hsiung's own evolving modernist commitments.

Speaker's biography:

Dr. Zhang Jiadong is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at University College London, where he also serves as a Nominated Advisor for doctoral candidates at CenTraS. He received his Ph.D. in English Language and Literature from Nankai University, jointly supervised by the University of Vienna, and is currently a faculty member at Dalian University of Foreign Languages. His research focuses on theatre semiotics, comparative drama, and the translation and international dissemination of traditional Chinese opera. He leads one ministerial-level and one provincial-level key project on Chinese opera translation and global communication. His work has been published in leading journals such as *Chinese Translators Journal*, *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, *Theatre Literature*, *Literature and Culture*, and *Frontiers in Communication*.

In addition to his academic research, Dr. Zhang received systematic training in Peking Opera under Ms. Fan Jinqiu, a National First-Class Performer of the Cheng School. Combining scholarly expertise with artistic practice, he actively promotes the international teaching and global dissemination of traditional Chinese opera.

Session 2

- Mridula Sharma (University of Manchester), 'Reimagining Gender Through Class Precarity: La Bohème on the 2025 British Stage'

Abstract:

First premiered in 1896, Puccini's *La Bohème* portrays nineteenth-century Parisian poverty, with men barely surviving on low-paying work and women negotiating love and autonomy within the constraints of economic dependence. Rodolfo's jealousy initially appears to drive Mimì away, but he later admits to his friends that his real fear is economic, not jealousy. Unable to afford care for her worsening illness, he believes that his poverty makes him unworthy of her. His overt weaponisation of jealousy to mask economic anxiety offers a potent metaphor for how poverty distorts perception and reinforces gendered power dynamics onstage. My paper analyses Phyllida Lloyd's acclaimed 2025 production of *La Bohème*, which arrived in Britain after a summer of far right rallies. In this climate of heightened social and political tension, Lloyd's staging underscores the stakes of performing gender and class on the operatic stage. I argue that its depiction of relationships shaped by material constraints offers a pointed reminder to British audiences of the consequences of abandoning class consciousness and naturalising social hierarchies. By interweaving libretto analysis with performance reception, I demonstrate how narrative, musical form, and staging collaboratively construct *La Bohème* as a site where gender and class are mutually constitutive. My focus on both historical and contemporary performance shows how the opera's treatment of economic precarity continues to shape the ways in which gender is produced and perceived in performance today. The paper contributes to broader discussions of gender in opera by showing how musical narrative and staging can both reflect and critique social hierarchies, affective economies, and the survival imperatives that structure gendered life.

Speaker's biography:

Mridula Sharma is a PhD student at the University of Manchester. Previously, she has contributed papers to peer-reviewed journals and edited collections published by OUP and Routledge. Her current research draws on postcolonial and feminist theory for a comparative analysis of post-1950 literary-cultural texts.

Session 3

- Suzanne Aspden (University of Oxford), 'Operatic Verisimilitude and Gender Non-Conformity in 18th-century Opera'

Abstract:

At its inception in the early seventeenth century, Italian opera had a fundamental problem: how could audiences believe that characters conversed in song? Their solution was to propose a particular form of verisimilitude – truth to nature – whereby opera reflected not everyday life, but the lives of supernatural beings and idealised Arcadian shepherds. Gods, demons, nymphs and shepherds, the theory went, could be imagined to converse in song, being from some other realm or distant time. That form of verisimilitude offered a solution to one problem, but created another: how could audiences relate to these gods and nymphs?

By the eighteenth century, Italian opera changed again, to represent heroic historical characters. But something of the supernatural strangeness of its early days persisted in the singers themselves, whose voices could perform otherworldly feats of virtuosity, and whose bodies – particularly those of the castrati – broke down norms of sex and gender. Opera and opera singers were still generally perceived as somehow 'monstrous', no matter how heroic their plots.

In this paper, I examine how singers from the early eighteenth century – both men and women – tested conventional understandings of gender roles through their bodies, voices, and careers, with a particular focus on London as a site where Italian singers were experienced as excitingly alien.

Speaker's biography:

Suzanne Aspden is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Music, University of Oxford, and Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford. Her research focusses on opera and issues of performance and identity in books *The Rival Sirens* (Cambridge, 2013), and *Operatic Geographies* (Chicago, 2019), as well as other essays. Her forthcoming book concerns music and national identity in eighteenth-century Britain.

Session 3

- Rasa Murauskaitė (University of Cambridge), 'Representing the changing discourse on gender in Lithuanian contemporary opera: The case of the comic-strip opera Alpha'

Abstract:

What is the role of contemporary opera in the discourse on gender roles? To what extent is this issue relevant to 21st-century society? Discussions on gender in operatic discourse began gaining traction in the last quarter of the twentieth century with the emergence of feminist opera studies and remains highly relevant today. This paper contributes to these discussions by focusing on the Lithuanian comic-strip opera Alpha. Despite advancements in gender equality since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, contemporary studies demonstrate prevailing conservative attitudes supportive of traditional values and patriarchal ideals relating to gender roles in Lithuanian society. Opera has become a platform for discussing both, remaining problematic attitudes and changing gender discourse. In this paper, I question the role of contemporary opera in such discussions, analyzing how Alpha's creative team – director, stage and costume designer Gintarė Minelgaitė alias Dr. GoraParasit, composer Albertas Navickas, and librettist Gabrielė Labanauskaitė – constructs the image of a woman who dares to challenge the established social order.

Speaker's biography:

Rasa Murauskaitė-Juškienė (*1992) is a musicologist and cultural journalist. She obtained a Master's degree in Music Theory and Criticism from the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. In October 2022, she began her PhD studies at the University of Cambridge. Her PhD project examines decolonisation in contemporary opera in the Baltic States and Ukraine since 1991. She has participated in the international conferences in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Latvia, Poland, Germany and Lithuania. Her work has been published in various academic journals and she is also a co-author of a critical edition of *Liber Organistarum Collegii Cronensis Societatis Jesu* and the memoir *Užrašai iš Rokantiškių*. She has been lecturing at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre since 2018 and at the Vilnius University from 2018 to 2024.

Session 4

- Roundtable discussion: Orientalism in (Western) scholarship and gender stereotypes in (Eastern) opera, led by Bette Zhaoyi Yan and William Want (University of Oxford)

This roundtable brings together divergent perspectives on one of the most persistent questions in the study of Chinese opera: why has cross-gender performance—particularly the ‘dan’ tradition—become such a dominant interpretive lens in Western scholarship? While cross-gender roles undeniably form an important part of Xiqu’s aesthetic and historical fabric, some scholars argue that this focus risks reducing a vast and heterogeneous tradition to an exoticised emblem of “Eastern femininity.” Others propose that attention to gender remains crucial for understanding performer training, embodiment, creativity, and identity negotiation on and beyond the stage. Rather than advancing a single position, this discussion invites participants to consider how concepts like Orientalism, gender stereotyping, codification, musical style, and theatrical practice intersect in both research and reception. How do scholarly desires shape what becomes legible or valuable in Chinese opera? How do performers negotiate these projections? And how might we move toward interpretive frameworks that remain attentive to aesthetics, history, social context, and lived experience without collapsing complexity into familiar tropes?

This conversation aims to open space for productive disagreement, critical reflection, and new pathways for understanding gender, representation, and interpretive responsibility in cross-cultural opera studies.

Suggested Readings

- Zhao, Sophie Tingting. 2016. “Reorienting the Gaze in Mei Lanfang’s Lyrical Theatre: Performing Female Interiority.” *Asian Theatre Journal* 33, no. 2: 395–419.
- Tian, Min. 2000. “Male Dan: the Paradox of Sex, Acting, and Perception of Female Impersonation in Traditional Chinese Theatre.” *Asian Theatre Journal* 17, no. 3: 78–97.

Plus one of the following for historical background:

- Guo, Chao and Josh Sternberg. 2025. “Revisiting Mei Lanfang’s 1930 USA Tour: Triumphs of Curation.” *Theatre History Studies* 43: 24–47.
- Li, Ruru. 2010. “Jingju: Formation, Growth and the First Reform.” In *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World*, 13–54. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Suggested Film Viewing:

- Farewell My Concubine 霸王别姬 (1993)

Dir. Chen Kaige

This internationally acclaimed film traces the intertwined lives of two Jingju performers across political upheavals of the twentieth century. Its powerful imagery of the dan role—particularly its associations with fragility, beauty, and tragic destiny—has profoundly shaped global perceptions of Chinese opera. The film provides a vivid entry point for thinking about how gendered and Orientalised narratives circulate in the international imagination.

- Woman Demon Human 人·鬼·情 (1987)

Dir. Huang Shuqin

Often described as China's first feminist film, *Woman Demon Human* depicts the life of Qiu Yun, a female performer renowned for playing male roles in traditional opera. Through its blending of biography, performance, and psychological portraiture, the film explores questions of identity, embodiment, and the complex entanglement between on-stage persona and off-stage selfhood. Its nuanced portrayal of gender and artistry offers a valuable counterpoint to more familiar cinematic representations of Chinese opera.

Speakers' biography:

William Want is a Master's student in Music at the University of Oxford specialising in the musical, aesthetic, and affective analysis of Xiqu (Chinese Opera). Their research bridges performance studies, affect theory, musicology, and aesthetics, with a particular focus on minor affective categories and the dramaturgies of jingju (Beijing Opera). They were a visiting scholar at Shanghai Theatre Academy and have trained in the Huadan (young, unmarried, lower-class female) role under Li Qiuping.

William has presented on cuteness in contemporary Beijing Opera, the musical-philosophical structure of endings in Xiqu, and affect in the Model Operas of the Cultural Revolution. As an experienced theatre-maker, they integrate practice and scholarship to develop new critical perspectives on Xiqu.

Bette Zhaoyi Yan (see page 4 for details).

Session 5

- Ashley Thorpe (Royal Holloway University of London) ' "Deeds Not Words": Gender Performance and the Possibility of Its Subversion in Japanese and English-language Nō'

Abstract:

This paper will begin with an investigation into the construction of gender in Japanese nō as detailed by Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443) in his treatises *Style and the Flower* (Fushikaden, written in 1418), *True Path to the Flower* (Shikadō, 1420), and *Reflections on Art* (Sarugaki dangi, written c.1422–1430). It will emphasize how the concepts of 'monomane' ('role-playing' or 'imitation') and 'yūgen' ('grace', 'elegance' or 'mysterious beauty') are required to construct character. In particular, to reach the epitome of nō as an artform, Zeami suggests that actors should use these techniques to realise 'kakari' ('mood', 'atmosphere'). As an illustrative example, the paper will explore the roles of Yoshitsune's mistress Shizuka and the demon general Taira no Tomomori from the play *Benkei aboard Ship* (Funa benkei), where the same actor usually plays both male and female roles.

The paper will then explore how newly-written nō in English (eigo shinsaku nō) might work within the conventions of nō to challenge patriarchal constructions of the passivity of women. It will focus on *Emily*, written by the author, and composed and choreographed by semi- and fully professional nō practitioners associated with the Kita School. Exploring the implications of Emily Wilding Davison's death at the Epsom Derby in 1913 from the perspective of the jockey that killed her, *Emily* was first performed in 2018 to commemorate one hundred years of women obtaining the vote in Britain. I argue that through 'kakari' ('mood', 'atmosphere'), the performance challenged female passivity in the UK, Japan, and elsewhere.

Speaker's biography:

Ashley Thorpe is a Reader in Theatre in the Department of Drama, Theatre & Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London. He has published eleven books on Chinese, Japanese and pan-Asian drama, as well as ceramic art, more recent volumes including *Asian City Crossings: Pathways of Performance Through Hong Kong and Singapore* (Routledge, 2021) with Rossella Ferrari and *Intercultural Japanese Noh Theatre: Texts and Analyses of English-language Noh* (Methuen, 2025) with Richard Emmert. He has recently completed his third monograph, *Contemporary British Theatre and the Imaging of China: Poststructuralism, Dialectics and the Shadow of Brecht* (currently under review with Palgrave) as well as a 500,000-word bilingual dictionary on jingju ('Beijing Opera') with colleagues at Beijing Language and Culture University. He is a member of Theatre Nohgaku and performed a solo role in the English-language *Oppenheimer* in August 2025 at the Kita School Noh Stage in Tokyo to mark 80 years since the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Session 5

- Jad Orphée Chami, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)) '*Sing Like a Man! From the Haute-Contre to Oum Kalthoum: Gender, Listening, and the Politics of the Liminal Voice Across Musical Traditions*'

Abstract:

There was a kind of polyphony in my grandmother's house in Beirut. In the living room, I watched the french musicals *Le Roi Soleil* and *Mozart l'opéra rock*, fascinated by men in eyeliner singing in fragile mixed voices, embodying canons of Western history. From the kitchen came another music: my grandmother rolled vine leaves to Oum Kalthoum's voice, the kettle whistling, the smell of cardamom coffee filling the air. In the mornings we listened to Fayrouz, and at night to Oum Kalthoum. Between these two worlds I learned that voices could hold entire histories.

This paper-composition offers an auto-musicoethnographic reflection on the liminal voice, a voice that crosses gender, geography and history. At Louis XIV's Versailles, the haute contre embodied the "natural" high male ideal. Unlike the Italian castrati, it used a mixed technique blending chest resonance with a lighter head voice to reach the upper register. Jean-Baptiste Lully wrote heroic yet tender roles for this voice, and William Christie later revived the repertoire through *Les Arts Florissants*, training tenors such as Jean-Paul Fouchécourt and Reinoud van Mechelen to rediscover its clarity and vulnerability. The story of the haute-contre helps reveal another geography of the liminal voice. Oum Kalthoum's contralto, devotional yet carnal, created tarab, that state of shared musical suspension where time stretches and emotion becomes collective. Her grave, enveloping and intoxicating voice provoked desire, as the castrati once did in Europe. Fayrouz, by contrast, offered a maternal and aerial soprano, a morning voice that reassures and gathers, carrying the memory of homeland. Together they form a dialogue of night and day, longing and return, two ways of weaving stories through song

Speaker's biography:

Jad Orphée Chami (he/هو) is an artist-researcher, composer, and performer living between Montreal and Paris, born and raised in Beirut. His research-creation PhD at UQAM, explores testimony as lament and the rhapsode's gesture of stitching voices and histories through storytelling. A recipient of the Antje Bettin Intercultural Award, he was nominated for Best Original Score at the Canadian Iris Awards for *Antigone*, Canada's submission to the 92nd Academy Awards. Supported by the Québec Arts Council, his forthcoming EP blends Baroque and Levantine influences, reflecting his broader inquiry into the liminal voice across theatre, oral history, and music composition.

Session 6

- Chinese Opera Female Sheng Performance and Demonstration: Jin Zhao (visiting performance artist) and Wenxue Gao (Jinghu player)
- Roundtable on performance: Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama), Bette Zhaoyi Yan and William Want (University of Oxford)

This interactive performance–demonstration offers a rare insight into the embodied construction of gender on the Jingju stage. Visiting artist Jin Zhao, a specialist in female sheng roles (female performing male roles), will present selected excerpts and demonstrate foundational Jingju techniques, revealing how gesture, voice, rhythm, and codified movement collectively shape the stylised masculinity central to the sheng tradition. A central feature of the session is a live, step-by-step professional makeup and hair preparation, which lifts the curtain on how gender is materially crafted and transformed through the aesthetic systems of Chinese opera. Participants will also have the opportunity to engage with Ms Zhao directly through guided interaction and practice of basic techniques.

Throughout the session, Bette Zhaoyi Yan will provide interpretation and contextual framing, situating these embodied practices within broader discussions of gender performance and cross-cultural spectatorship. The event will be enriched by a major response from Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE, acclaimed actor, director, and Principal of the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, whose commentary will draw out resonances and tensions between Jingju theatricality and Western acting traditions, embodiment, and identity. William Want will contribute additional reflections from historical and dramaturgical perspectives.

Together, the artists and scholars will explore how gender is not merely represented but actively negotiated, produced, and reimagined through the living, transformative practices of Chinese opera.

Biographies:

Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE is Principal and CEO of The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and Artistic Director for The National Black Theatre of Sweden.

She is an award-winning actor and director whose career has included performances with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre and the Manchester Royal Exchange.

Awards include H.M. The King's Medal 8th Order of the Seraphim by H.M. King Carl XVI Gustaf. CinemAfrica Arts and Culture Award 2023 , Freedom of the City of London, 2024. Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to the Arts, The Judy Craymer Award for Innovation and Southbank Cultural Diversity Award.

Jin Zhao is a Peking Opera performer in Elder Male Role and Pipa player in the Peking Opera Troupe of the Beijing Railway Bureau since 1975. For over 40 years, she has performed across China and internationally. Since 2016, she has been actively promoting Peking Opera in the UK through performances, online events, and workshops, receiving recognition for her contributions.



Wenxue Gao is a Jinghu player. He has began studying jinghu performance from a young age under Ma Yufu, a renowned musician from the Tianjin Peking Opera Theatre. For many years, he has been actively accompanying Peking Opera enthusiasts in community opera clubs and senior universities. Since 2016, he and his wife, Mrs. Zhao Jin, have been invited to perform at various celebratory events across the UK.



