

THE 圖蘭朵  
TURANDOT  
PROJECT

A FILM BY ALLAN MILLER



A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

# THE 圖蘭朵 TURANDOT PROJECT

In 1997, celebrated filmmaker Allan Miller (the Academy Award-nominated *Small Wonders*) began chronicling an unprecedented cross-cultural collaboration. World-renowned conductor Zubin Mehta and award-winning Chinese film director Zhang Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern*, *Ju Dou*, *Not One Less*) joined forces to produce Puccini's opera *Turandot* in Italy. Before the year was out, Mr. Miller found himself filming an even more historic event: Zhang and Mehta were able to obtain government permission to bring their *Turandot* to the ancient Forbidden City in Beijing.

**The Turandot Project** offers privileged access to the back-stage drama that surrounded the mounting of *Turandot* and the passionate personalities that made the production such a triumph.



## About the Turandot Project

**The Turandot Project** chronicles the creation of the extraordinary production of Puccini's opera, "Turandot," beginning in Florence, Italy, in 1997, and culminating the next year in spectacular outdoor performances in the Forbidden City of Beijing. The award-winning Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou (*Red Sorghum*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Ju Dou*, *Not One Less*) directed both productions, with conductor and musical director Zubin Mehta.

Set in ancient China, the 1926 opera is the story of a vengeful princess, Turandot, who refuses to marry any man who can't answer her three riddles. The suitors who fail are executed. A stranger, Calaf, arrives in town, is smitten by the princess and rises to the challenge. When he passes her test, Turandot is reluctant to fulfill her part of the bargain. He offers her a way out. If she can guess his name by dawn, she can have him executed. Only Calaf's father and a servant girl, Liu, who is in love with him, know his name. Turandot captures and tortures the servant, who kills herself so as not to betray Calaf's secret. When day breaks, Turandot admits defeat and confesses that she has always loved Calaf. Her people, no longer afraid of her, rejoice in the union and the power of love.

The dynamic collaboration between Zubin Mehta and Zhang Yimou fuels the film. From the beginning, Maestro Mehta wanted a more "authentic," more Chinese version of the opera. "Usually *Turandot* is full of Chinese cliches. It looks like a big Chinese restaurant." Mehta comments. Zhang Yimou had never directed a Western opera before, but felt that his work could put Chinese talent and culture on the global map: "That's why I took on this project—to win credit for the Chinese," he tells his stage hands.

**The Turandot Project** begins with Zhang and Mehta's colorful Florence production. Zhang confronts the complexities of opera staging for the first time. "For example," as Mr. Miller points out, "he couldn't put the men in the front of the stage and the women in the back because the sound, of course, would be terribly out of balance." He also discovered that

singers must move on the stage in time with the music, not faster or slower to suit a scene staged for the camera. Zhang was also forced to abandon his attempts to teach the singers formal Chinese movements and gestures. They were too difficult. But in all other areas Zhang pressed for authenticity when he knew he could get the results.

The drama of the film intensifies in China, when Zhang and Mehta bring the most ambitious production of *Turandot* ever attempted to the Forbidden City of Beijing. The production becomes a miniature world of its own, filled with passion and politics, amid a huge array of languages—Chinese, Italian, English, French, and German. Easterners and Westerners are forced to make compromises and revise their attitudes about art and culture. Even the weather is a formidable challenge to the opera, as they have to adjust their schedules to avoid the heat and the threat of rain.

For the Beijing *Turandot*, only the most exquisite and dramatic stage would do, and Zhang and Mehta secretly picked the Forbidden City for their production, then used every cultural and political contact to secure permission to use it. Mehta describes cajoling the Chinese Minister of Culture, sweetly offering him a box of precious Indian mangoes. But even with the government's consent, staging a production in the Forbidden City proved incredibly difficult. Built in 1420, the palace was first inhabited by the third Emperor of the Ming Dynasty. It is a national treasure, made of wood - not one nail could be hammered into the scene, and the threat of fire made it impossible to use any local electricity. As the Deputy Executive Director of the project says: "In case something happens, I will be put in jail."

Through the drama and struggle of both productions, **The Turandot Project** shows us Zhang's intense dedication to the project. In the Forbidden City, Zhang rejected the beautiful and expensive costumes that were created for the Italian production, saying that on the Ming stage, only authentic period costumes would be acceptable. "If we use the previous costumes, ignoring dynasties, and perform in the Forbidden City... the Chinese will consider it a joke." Zhang hired about 2000 people from rural China to sew and embroider 900 new costumes for the Beijing *Turandot*. To fill out the enormous scope of the Forbidden City stage, Zhang engaged 300 soldiers from the Chinese army and cast them as ancient Chinese warriors. As he added more and more Chinese elements to the production, the problems associated with complex opera productions multiplied. Guido Levi, the famous Italian lighting designer, tried to insist on his interpretation of the needs for each scene. Zhang

Yimou wanted a brilliant atmosphere throughout. Wolfgang Fritz, the sound designer from Vienna, was faced with tremendous acoustic challenges in the huge outdoor arena, and the budget steadily climbed to \$15 million.

Backstage we meet an enormous array of performers—from the Western principal opera singers: Sharon Sweet, Giovanna Casolla, and Audrey Stottler (who rotate in the role of Turandot); Lando Bartolini, Sergej Larin, and Kristjan Johannsson (Calaf); and Barbara Fritolli, Barbara Hendricks, and Angela Maria Blasi (Liu)—to the chorus from the Florence Opera - to the Chinese minor characters - to extras and soldiers who had never before performed onstage or even heard Western opera. The soldiers initially hated Puccini, as Chen Weiya, the Assistant Director, comments: “They asked what kind of music this was. Like a cow’s moaning. But now I found out that many of our soldiers have already been able to hum along with some parts of the music.” Some of the opera’s divas did not take well to their new costumes. One scene shows us Mehta and the costumers quietly soothing Sharon Sweet, who rejects an ungainly headdress: “No, I’m not wearing it,” she says. “You wear it. It’s ugly as sin and there’s no balance to it... We’re doing something much more elegant.” A tremendous charm of *The Turandot Project* is its celebration of all of the personalities and dramas that combine to bring this most ambitious production to life.

The Forbidden City production takes on epic proportions as we see how Zhang Yimou struggles with both natural and human elements to realize his vision. He shows us his frustration of having to cancel dress rehearsals because of torrential rain, his open fights with lighting director Guido Levi, and the difficulty of galvanizing hundreds of singers, dancers, soldiers, musicians and artisans to bring about this magnificent production. **The Turandot Project** presents a glorious picture of the back-stage personalities in the drama, to the exhaustion and triumph that culminate in the dazzlingly successful final performances.

Ultimately, Zhang and Mehta’s *Turandot* is a huge success: a union of Western opera with Eastern culture and tradition. Mehta comments: “It’s a fulfillment of a... musical dream—a theatrical dream—to do *Turandot* in Beijing. I’m glad I was the first one to do it.” And as Mehta says at the finale as we watch Turandot declaring her love for Calaf before the Emperor: “Everything came into place in the end... there was not one glitch. Nobody thought we could do it.”

## Production Notes

America's finest music documentarian, Allan Miller, has produced films involving some of the most important musical events of the last two decades. He has directed 35 documentaries about music, two of which have won Academy Awards—*Bolero*, and *From Mao To Mozart - Isaac Stern in China*—plus an Emmy-winning documentary about classical violinist Itzhak Perlman. He also directed *Small Wonders* (1996), a film about violin teacher Roberta Guaspari-Tzavaras, which received an Academy Award nomination. It was subsequently made into the feature length movie *Music of the Heart*, directed by Wes Craven and starring Meryl Streep. In spite of his enormous experience, Mr. Miller says that filming Zhang Yimou and Zubin Mehta's *Turandot* was the culmination of all his work on music.

Mr. Miller first heard that Zhang and Mehta were joining forces to bring a new production of *Turandot* to the stage in Florence while interviewing the director for a different documentary entirely. He was working on a movie about Chinese composer Zhao Jiping, who composed the music for many of Zhang's films, including *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). Producer Margaret Smilow and Allan Miller quickly jumped at the chance to make a film about Zhang and conductor Zubin Mehta and their production with the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in Florence. When everyone decided to bring the production to Beijing's Forbidden City, Mr. Miller seized the opportunity to continue filming: "Mehta and Zhang Yimou just opened themselves up to us, or let us pry them open."

Zhang Yimou had never directed an opera before *Turandot*, but easily grasped what his responsibilities were to the production. Mr. Miller recalls the director admitting, "I don't know anything about opera... Mehta can do all the music... whatever is heard is up to him, but what they see is mine."

Shooting both the Italian and Chinese productions of *Turandot* presents an opportunity to watch Zhang construct two extremely different interpretations of the opera. "In Florence he wanted to stage the opera according to traditions of the Peking opera," says Mr. Miller. "He had all the costumes made from different periods. Since we were inside an opera theatre, the costumes, in order to be more striking, could come from different periods. When he got to Beijing, and the opera was performed on a Ming Dynasty stage—temple. Zhang said 'The Chinese would laugh you off the stage if you showed 17th or 18th century costumes on a

15th century stage.” In order to accommodate Zhang’s interpretation, thousands of local people sewed and embroidered new costumes for the opera at a cost of about 600 thousand dollars. The Beijing production, because it was so enormous and had such a tremendous stage, was able to accommodate the grand scope of Zhang’s vision. Every element, from the Chinese soldiers, to the acrobats, to the onstage drummers who announce the appearance of the emperor had to be executed in the traditions of the Ming Dynasty. To watch Zhang’s Beijing production is to witness a fascinating union of Chinese tradition with a Western art form.

Mr. Miller realized what an incredible opportunity Zhang offered him when he started shooting and learned that there would be no limits on what he could film. “The extremely impressive thing was—for a documentary filmmaker whose main task is to get access—to be in places where normally there wouldn’t be anybody bothering the directors, where maybe there are things they don’t want you to know. Zhang Yimou was totally accessible. He conferred with his staff; he bawled them out and he inspired them. He let us into situations where great decisions were being made and where he was in difficult circumstances, where he had fights, where he was happy, and where he was unhappy. He was totally open to us. And in 20 years of making films about important people, I’ve never had that kind of access. He is very strong.”

The film also captures Zhang and Mehta’s close relationship. In spite of the fact that all of their communication had to be conducted through a translator, the two were utterly united in their passion and drive to mount the productions. Mr. Miller shows the care and intensity that the men had not only for the project, but also for each other: “The two were like cousins, if not brothers... Each gave the other total devotion, respect and cooperation from their separate halves of the production... So the two of them really united in this impossible task.”

“Zhang’s Beijing production was really an act of love for his homeland,” Mr. Miller continues. The director is passionate about China, in spite of the fact that the government has suppressed many of his films and made it difficult for him to live and work there. “The reason he wanted this job was to bring honor to the Chinese. I think the feeling was: We have the facilities and the interest in doing something worldwide, global. We’re not restricted to our local traditions. We can do something that will attract major Western artists. Zhang Yimou’s commitment to China grows stronger and stronger with each day of his life.”

In making **The Turandot Project**, Allan Miller's goal was more than to create a "making-of" film. "I wanted to show all the things that went into this most incredibly ambitious undertaking—musically, tactically, financially. But I wanted to reveal the dedication of the various artists involved, especially the enormous commitment of Zhang Yimou and Zubin Mehta. By the time you see the actual production [excerpted in the film] you're not just enjoying the incredible spectacle. You're watching how they got there... Mehta says: 'Nobody thought we could do it.' That's what the story is about...How the hell did they ever do it?"



## Puccini's *TURANDOT*

Set in ancient China, the opera opens in front of the very walls of the Forbidden City in which the Mehta/Zhang performances take place. The vengeful Princess Turandot has decreed that anyone seeking her hand in marriage must answer three riddles or die. Many princes local and foreign have tried, failed, and been summarily executed, their heads displayed before the crowd.

Calaf, a foreign prince in disguise, is struck by Turandot's beauty and resolves to win her, despite the pleas of his blind father Timur, who has fled his native country and come to Peking in disguise. He is attended by the slave girl Liu, who has loved Calaf from afar. She begs Calaf not to attempt the riddles. Three ministers, Ping, Pang and Pong also try to dissuade Calaf, but he is inflamed by Turandot, and he strikes the gong three times, declaring his candidacy.

Turandot appears, more beautiful than ever. She explains that years ago an ancestor of hers was ravished by an invader; in revenge, she has sworn that no man will have her unless he solves the riddles. To the dismay of Turandot, and the delight of the crowd, Calaf answers the three riddles correctly. Turandot begs her father the emperor to release her from this stranger, but he refuses. Calaf then offers to die if Turandot can guess his name by the next morning. That night, Turandot sends her troops throughout Peking to discover Calaf's name. She finds Liu and tortures her, but Liu kills herself and his secret dies with her. Calaf sings "Nessun Dorma" (No One Sleeps); Turandot will not guess his name—by dawn he will be victorious.

It is morning. Turandot and Calaf confront each other. Despite Turandot's pleas, Calaf declares his love, and forces a kiss on her. Turandot melts, and Calaf reveals his name. Turandot summons her court and declares she has learned the stranger's name - it is "Love." The nation rejoices.

*Turandot* was Puccini's last opera. He died in 1926 before it was finished, and the composer Franco Alfano was given the task of completing the opera, using many of Puccini's sketches.

At the first performance, on April 25, 1926, conductor Arturo Toscanini stopped the music, and laid down his baton at the end of Liu's death. Turning to the audience he said: "The opera ends here, because at this point the Maestro died."

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TURANDOT  
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