



## LIBRETTO

HMDT invited librettist Stephen Plaice to create a piece using Chinese myths and legends, which would be divided into six scenes in order that each primary school could create, produce and perform their own scene, both for practical reasons and to give them an ownership of their own part of the opera.



## Writing *Confucius Says* Stephen Plaice – Librettist

It is significant that, as China emerges as a dominant economic power, culturally it is returning to Confucianism. The writings of the sage do not address the mystery of life; you have to turn to Lao Tsu and to Taoism for that. The Confucian Analects is a practical handbook, rather than a sacred text, and it focuses on the right way to conduct oneself towards oneself, society and the ancestors. After the myth-erasing materialism of Mao, China is now returning to this older philosophy, which itself looked backwards in time for its inspiration.

In *Confucius Says*, I didn't simply want to write a libretto based on the conservative wisdom of the philosopher, even though he was undoubtedly attempting to guide young people towards what is right. As Nü Wa discovers, the deep cautious thinking of Yin must be balanced out by the energy and impulse of Yang. The ironic wisdom of Chinese folk-tales (of which I read over 300 before choosing the six for the opera) gave me the other

element I was looking for – the human latitude to experiment and to make mistakes.

Most of the stories I chose show pitfalls in human behaviour. In *The New Shoes*, Mr Ling puts his trust in the empiricism of Mr Chang. In *The Walk Learner* Sammee-Jo always wants to copy what is stylish. Wei Nian's curiosity gets the better of him and he opens the cricket's cage (*The Cricket Warrior*). These are mistakes we readily recognise in the young. But in the tales there are also the follies of the elders – in *The First Pass Under Heaven*, Xiao Xian allows himself to be rushed, Zhu Xi neglects to feed his ancestors (*The Hungry Ghosts*), Cheng Ming makes the same mistake for which he has berated his son in *The Cricket Warrior*.

There is a balance here, between thought and impulse, Yin and Yang, but it is also a balance between old and young and what they have to teach each other. This balance was very evident in the production of



*Confucius Says* – both in what the children learned from the adult performers, and also in what they brought dramatically themselves, without self-consciousness.

It is to be hoped that this balance will again be struck in the emergent China, as it rediscovers the more subtle myths on which its civilisation has been based, as well as the conservative wisdom of Confucius.

