

Son of Heaven

Libretto

Original version

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Characters:

The first Emperor

Huhai, the youngest son of the first Emperor.

Zhao Gao, eunuch at the court and instructor of Huhai.

Li Si, imperial chancellor

The immortals:

The Fool (also incarnating **Fusu**, the first Emperor's oldest son).

The Warrior (also incarnating **Kuan Yin**, the first Emperor's dead wife.)

The Poet

The Magician

The Dancer

The Blind

ACT I

Prologue. Beyond time and space. Stylized stage (inspiration Noh theatre).

(The immortals appear one by one, taking in the audience in an open, child-like way).

THE BLIND *(appears, listening intently)*:
Shiver of hearts, freezing blood.
The blind smells the fear of death.

THE FOOL *(appears)*:
The fool flew here, dreaming she was a bee.
Or was it a bee dreaming it was she?

(The Fool opens her hand and watches the imaginary bee disappear into the air. Pursuing the flight of the invisible bee with her eyes, The Poet appears).

THE POET:
The poet moved lightly through ice and snow
eating the wind, drinking the dew.

(The Dancer appears, with the rocking movements of a dancing bee).

THE DANCER:
The beginning is dance, the end is dance.
End begins end in the dancer's dance.

(The Warrior appears, aiming with her sword).

THE WARRIOR:
Spotting, aiming, the warrior strikes
using her sword as a skateboard.

THE MAGICIAN (*appears as if out of nowhere*):

The magician spits and all disappears
She spits again and the disappeared appears.

(The magician opens her hand and releases the bee anew. During the coming lines, sung in unison, the immortals move together as one body, making a common rhythm by stamping with their feet between the lines, stopping at the same time to continue singing, moving on silently at the same time and so on).

THE IMMORTALS:

Once mortal like you,
undone since long.
The echo of life
fades in our song
The tale we tell
is here - and gone.

(They come to a halt, looking at the audience).

THE POET:

Once upon a time...

THE BLIND:

... a moment ago...

THE FOOL:

...the great Emperor, ruler of all...

THE WARRIOR AND THE POET:

...every man, every beast, under sun under moon...

THE DANCER:

... travelled two months away from home...

THE MAGICIAN, THE DANCER AND THE WARRIOR:

...in search of the herb of deathlessness.

THE FOOL AND THE POET:
He lies near the campfire, the night is cold.

THE BLIND, THE POET, THE MAGICIAN AND THE FOOL:
Wild beasts howl.

THE BLIND AND THE MAGICIAN:
The mountain keeps silent.

THE DANCER, THE POET AND THE FOOL:
The sea lies still...

THE WARRIOR:
...vast and deep.

Scene 1. Outside the Emperor's dwellings in the mountains.

(Wrapped in blankets, the Emperor becomes visible in the light of the glowing campfire. Shivering with fever, he is haunted by a nightmare. The Fool puts on the mask of a young man and moves closer to the Emperor. The other immortals withdraw into the background. Startled out of his sleep, the Emperor suddenly sits up straight).

THE EMPEROR:
Fusu, my son!
I dreamed you were done for!

THE FOOL *(with a new voice, incarnating Fusu)*:
I heard your cry in the rains, in the rivers.

THE EMPEROR *(makes an effort to collect himself)*:
The missing words. We are ready to hear them.
(Fusu is silent. The Emperor is dissatisfied).
We sent you away to the front – why?

FUSU:
The words in my mind are the same as before.

THE EMPEROR:
You refuse to apologize.
You who dared to protect the traitors
defy our will, defame our name.

FUSU:
What was their crime?
To sing the old songs
and read tales of the past.

THE EMPEROR:
They defied the new order..

FUSU:
...and were buried alive.
Sent to build the Great wall,
your tomb, your palace,
sacrifice their children
in your futile quest.

THE EMPEROR:
Your mind is as black as their grave.
May the enemy's blood wash it clean!

(The Fool retreats, removing the mask of Fusu. Now, fully awake, the enraged Emperor looks around for his servants).

Scene 2. As above.

THE EMPEROR:
Our medicines! Our tea!
Bring us the findings from last night's quest!

(As if in silent agreement, the immortals turn into "The recipe men" by putting on masks and surrounding the Emperor).

FIRST RECIPE MAN (*holds forth a cup*):
Mother of pearl in sulphur sauce.

(The Emperor makes an impatient gesture).

THE EMPEROR:
As impotent as yesterday! Next!

SECOND RECIPE MAN (*holds forth a small bottle*):
Crushed quartz in the viper's...

FIRST RECIPE MAN AND SECOND RECIPE MAN:
...the viper's venom.

THE EMPEROR:
Take it away! Next!

THIRD RECIPE MAN (*holds forth a long, wet object*):
A stalk of the fern that enlivens the spirit
dipped in the...

FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD RECIPE MAN:
...urine of the holy hermit.

THE EMPEROR:
To the dogs! Next!

FOURTH RECIPE MAN (*holds forth a round golden ball*):
Jade and lead, stone and iron
iron and stone, lead and jade
coated in a...

FIRST, SECOND, THIRD AND FOURTH RECIPE MAN:
...crust of the purest gold.

(The Emperor rejects it with an impatient gesture and turns to the two remaining recipe men.)

THE EMPEROR:

The immortal spirits – where do they dwell?
Where is the herb that they keep to themselves?

FIFTH RECIPE MAN:

I sacrificed to the sea god.

SIXTH RECIPE MAN:

I shot the giant whale.

THE EMPEROR:

And what did you find?

ALL THE RECIPE MEN:

/ Nothing, nothing divine Emperor.
/ Nothing but nothing from dawn until dusk.
/

/ THE EMPEROR (*enraged*):

/ You sacrifice and kill,
/ feed us metals, make us ill.
/ Find the magic herb
/ or you shall be thrown into the sea.

(The recipe men withdraw into the background, leaving the Emperor to himself).

ARIA
"Body on fire"

THE EMPEROR (*tormented*):

Body on fire. Blazing soul.
Insides ravaged, torn, enflamed.

If only there was motion, a shift of wind.
A hand on the forehead, cool and swift.
If only there was a breeze, through the grass, in the trees.
The whispering silk of the bamboo leaves.

Body on fire. Soul in flames.
Vessels boiling, melting veins.
Burning. Burning. Burning.

Scene 3. As above.

(Li Si, already a man of age, appears, dragging a wagon loaded with documents. Bows deeply before the Emperor).

THE EMPEROR:
The sun rose but Li Si kept snoring.

LI SI *(bows again)*:
Forgive your mortal Chancellor, divine Emperor.

THE EMPEROR:
Crows and charlatans are more loyal than he.

LI SI:
Divine Emperor...

THE EMPEROR *(stretches out his hand)*:
The documents from the judiciary, the court,
the warring states!

(Li Si bows and starts to search among the documents).

THE EMPEROR:
How many heralds?

LI SI:
Five in all.

THE EMPEROR:
You kept them till dawn?

LI SI:
Till each face was clear.

THE EMPEROR:

You watched them leave?

LI SI:

Twenty horse legs, five empty wagons
leaving on the road which lay empty yesterday
nor will be used by tomorrow's heralds.

THE EMPEROR:

And yet you appeared long after sunrise.
The truth, Li Si. Who is scheming against us?

LI SI:

/ Your youngest son.
/ May his age excuse his disrespect.
/ Morning after morning he neglects his lessons
/ in the arms of another concubine.
/

THE EMPEROR:

/ Who is scheming against us?
/ We brought peace, rice, laws.
/ We unified states, weights, thoughts.

Our sons can accomplish nothing!
Time to move on and renew our quest.

LI SI:

The divine Emperor is shivering with fever.

THE EMPEROR:

/ Time to move on and renew our quest!
/

LI SI:

/ Time to return to the capital!

DUET

"Soon it will be too late"

LI SI:	THE EMPEROR:
/ Soon it will be too late to keep	Soon it will be too late to save the Empire.
/ troubles away.	
/ From sea to sea, from south to north	From sea to sea, from south to north
/ the wind whispers of rising riots.	the wind whispers of our decay.
/ The forgotten Empire brawls and quarrels	The heavenly son must defy the rumour,
/ like an abandoned son craving his father.	silence the gossip, cut off slander's tongue.

THE EMPEROR:
Send two servants up the mountain.
They shall find the herb - or be fed to the fish.
And tell Huhai to appear before us.

(Li Si bows deeply and exits. The Emperor tries to concentrate on the documents but is overtaken by weakness and falls into a doze.)

Scene 4. Zhao Gao's quarters, in parallel to the Emperor's dwellings.

(The eunuch Zhao Gao prepares for Huhai's daily lessons.)

ZHAO GAO:
The imperial mandate to train a horse is more rewarding
than training the Emperor's son.

ARIA

*"The poison
ripens"*

A sluggard. A snail.
A good-for-nothing unworthy of a bastard's care.
I, the Emperor's worthy successor got the part chopped off
which makes man, a man.

THE DANCER AND THE POET AS FIRST AND SECOND CONCUBINES (*offstage*):
Makes man a man...

ZHAO GAO:

I, the son of a retarded whore was forbidden to spread
my inferior seed.

The poison ripens. The venom darkens.

All creeps crumble under my breath.

I will crawl in silence. Slip into each corner.

Sharpen my tooth on the edge of death.

Maimed at birth by a cruel father

I will spoil his seed with his own foul deed.

*(Towards the end of Zhao Gao's aria, two of the immortals in concubine masks bring in Huhai, a sul-
len adolescent, and lead him to the campfire. Huhai reluctantly approaches the dozing Emperor. The
concubines retreat into the background. Huhai takes the document from his father's hand. The Emperor
wakes with a start).*

THE EMPEROR *(collects himself)*:

We hear you keep thinking in the wrong way.

What is your excuse today?

HUHAI *(steps back, defensively)*:

All day long I stare at books.

Dusty laws of interest to no one

but a crippled fool with no beard.

You promised adventures, spirits, immortals!

THE EMPEROR:

You are here to grow up, not indulge yourself!

HUHAI:

I want your permission to go home.

THE EMPEROR:

Rejected!

HUHAI:

Let me assist my brother at the front!

THE EMPEROR:
Rejected!

(Zhao Gao listens intently to the increasing hostility between father and son).

TRIO

"The black sheep"

/ HUHAI:
/ My brother is sent away
/ my brother is free.
/ My brother is virtuous
/ I – the black sheep.

THE EMPEROR:
The son of heaven
was chosen at birth
to punish the idle
root out selfish lust.

ZHAO GAO
/ (WITH FIRST AND
/ SECOND CONCUBINES
/ OFFSTAGE):
/ The poison ripens.
/ The venom darkens.
/ Maimed at birth by a cruel
/ father
/ I will spoil his seed with his own foul deed.

HUHAI:
Caught by his gaze
his plain disgust.
I might as well indulge
in lust.

THE EMPEROR:
Yet the branch from our seed
is foul and weak.
A puff of wind – and it
cracks like a stick.
Your brother's brains made
him too proud
- you have neither pride nor
brains.

(The Emperor exits, leaving Huhai to his frustration).

Scene 5. The same as above.

(Bowing deeply, Zhao Gao approaches Huhai with a heap of thick books).

HUHAI:
Paragraphs, paragraphs, paragraphs!
Feed your laws to the jackals, Zhao Gao!

ZHAO GAO:
As your highness wishes.

*(Huhai takes the books from Zhao Gao and collects them in a heap on the ground.
As Huhai angrily prepares to set fire to the books, Zhao Gao watches him in silence. Brings some more
books and hands them to Huhai. Huhai looks up in surprise).*

ZHAO GAO:
The focused mind feeds the focused deed.
(squats down next to Huhai)
Set fire to the old and the new will arise.
Let the past turn to ashes, see the future in the sky

HUHAI:
Past or future makes no difference to me.

ZHAO GAO:
Wisely said, your highness.
Impatience in youth is like spice in the soup.
And substance without taste
becomes the downfall of the great.

HUHAI:
Quit the rubbish, eunuch!
I'm bored to death.
I want friends, fun, sex.

ZHAO GAO:
Your highness wishes to profit himself.
The true sign of greatness.

HUHAI *(gets up on his feet)*:
You make fun of me
- just like my father and brother!

ZHAO GAO (*gets up as well*):

Your brother, Fusu is the one to be made fun of.

(Moves closer to Huhai who looks at him not knowing what to think. Puts his hand on Huhai's shoulder).

When the sovereign to be, dares to value his lust
the powers of heaven know whom to trust.

(They exit, Zhao Gao with his arm around Huhai's shoulders).

Scene 6. The Emperor's dwellings.

(Night and stars. The Emperor sits at the campfire, wrapped in blankets. He is surrounded by six guards wearing emperor masks and clad as identical copies of himself. The Emperor stares gloomily into the fire).

ARIA
"You again"

THE EMPEROR:

Waking night, wailing seagulls.

Aching bones, skin like needles.

If the stars keep staring

we shall punish them for treason,

pierce them with spears for keeping dawn away.

(A sudden movement in the dark makes the Emperor jump to his feet).

You again, shadow without host.

You again, chill without wind,

presence without being.

(He searches behind the guards as if for a hidden spy).

You think you can snatch us like the rat, the mouse,

swallow us whole in gluttonous gulps.

(Moves cunningly from guard to guard).

Who is the right one, on whom will you feed?

Who is the doomed one, he or we?

You pretend to be choosy, have a call.

One or seven – you have place for all.

Spirits and demons from far and near

- reveal your secret here and now!

All under heaven cannot be undone!

(He comes to a halt and listens. An "unreal" tone comes from the six guards in unison. One of the guards removes the Emperor mask and reveals herself as being The Fool).

THE FOOL:

The fool dreams the fool is a bee.
Is the fool dreaming or is it the bee?

(The next guard has removed the mask, revealing herself as The Poet. With each immortal removing her mask the voices are added to the previous, repeating fragments of the couplets).

THE POET:

When the poet is burdened
with the weight of herself
she steps on a cloud and turns into air.

(The third guard removes her mask. It is The Magician).

THE MAGICIAN *(with a conjuring gesture):*

The magician moves and Nothing appears.
She moves again and Nothing disappears.

(The Emperor looks around in awe, slowly realizing the nature of the beings he has encountered).

THE EMPEROR:

Am I awake or dreaming?
Have I entered the otherworld?
If not my guards, who are you?

THE DANCER *(removes her mask):*

The dancer is water, the dancer is stream.
The dancer is all that moves with the wind.

(The fifth guard removes her mask, revealing herself as the Warrior with her sword).

THE WARRIOR *(swings her sword):*

The demon without is the demon within.
The warrior strikes - and conquers the fiend.

THE EMPEROR (*ingratiatingly*):
Dancers and poets who own the truth, be so kind.
What is the source of eternal life?

(The sixth guard removes the mask. It is The Blind with a big bag over her shoulder).

THE BLIND:
The blind hears the throbbing heart.
Smells the fear, the strangled cry.

THE EMPEROR (*with an impatient gesture*):
Riddles and jokes are the games of children!
All under Heaven must have the cure
before the Empire crumbles like a castle of sand!

(greedily).

Over your shoulder
- what do you carry?
Show your secret – obey now!

(While the Blind opens her bag, the immortals gather around her as one body, alternately pausing, moving and coming to a halt at the same time. The Blind solemnly takes out a leaf and hands it to the Emperor. He looks at it in bewilderment).

THE EMPEROR:
A leaf of the maple tree...?

THE BLIND:
Step on to the leaf and sail out to sea.
Glide forth with the waves and you shall be free.

THE EMPEROR:
How dare you, cripple!

THE POET:
When the poet is
burdened
with the
weight...

THE MAGICIAN:
The magician moves
and Nothing
appears...

THE FOOL:
The fool dreams
the fool is a bee...

THE BLIND:
The blind hears
the throbbing
heart...

THE EMPEROR:
The remedy!

THE WARRIOR AND THE DANCER:
The grip of life stiffens the bones,
turns limbs to wood...

THE MAGICIAN AND THE FOOL:
... hearts to stone.

THE EMPEROR:
Or you shall all
be hanged in the maple trees!

THE POET AND THE BLIND:
It's hard for the spirit to be on cloud nine
to rise, to lift...

THE DANCER AND THE WARRIOR:
...to levitate...

THE MAGICIAN, THE WARRIOR, THE FOOL AND THE BLIND:
...when the claws of life tickle your soul,
hold on to your toes...

THE DANCER AND THE POET:
...like...

THE DANCER, THE POET, THE MAGICIAN AND THE WARRIOR:
...grim...

ALL THE IMMORTALS:
...death.

THE EMPEROR:
Stay! I order you!

(The immortals escape the Emperor, one by one, jumping through the flames of the campfire and disappearing. The Emperor is left alone and frustrated in the night with the leaf in his hand.)

END OF ACT I

ACT II

Scene 7. Dawn on the outskirts of the camp.

(Li Si ponders over the bodily remains of two servants. Two immortals in masks linger in the background).

LI SI:

Two more servants, devoured by beasts.
Our futile quest must come to an end
before we shall dig our own graves!

(Zhao Gao suddenly appears out of nowhere. Li Si jumps).

Zhao Gao! You sneak like a snake!

(Zhao Gao looks at the bodily remains and shakes his head).

ZHAO GAO:

A grave end for an imperial servant.

LI SI:

What makes you rise at this early hour?

ZHAO GAO:

Your worries crept into my bed, whispered in my ear.

LI SI:

The sun has barely risen. Go back to bed!

ZHAO GAO:

Hush, chancellor! Why so harsh?
A softer tone might save your skin
when the second Emperor mounts the throne.

LI SI:
The divine Emperor is here to stay.

ZHAO GAO:
Maybe so, maybe no.
(Moves closer to Li Si)
What will Fusu make of you?
The advisor who sent him away to the front?

LI SI *(with an impatient gesture)*:
Prophet of woe! Go!

(Zhao Gao recoils. Then he slowly starts to approach Li Si again).

ZHAO GAO:
If Fusu is the stem, Huhai the leaf,
tossed by the wind, floating with the stream.
Both may be nourished by the hidden roots,
the invisible rays, the secret scheme.

LI SI:
Speak your mind, reptile!

ZHAO GAO:
With Huhai on the throne you can act from below.

LI SI:
A spoiled child as the heavenly heir!
Never!

ZHAO GAO:
You might think it over when your feet get colder.

(Zhao Gao exits. Li Si looks after him in apprehension and disgust. Exits in the other direction).

Scene 8. Outside the Emperor's dwellings.

(Whispering trees, incarnated by the Immortals in masks, surround The Emperor who seeks some solace in their shadow after another exhausting fever attack).

THE EMPEROR:
/
I, the force, the heart, the core
/
shall crumble like powder, turn into dust.
/
THE IMMORTALS:
/
The wind comes the wind goes
/
sweeps the dust away.

(The Warrior puts on the mask of a young woman, Kuan Yin. She comes up behind the Emperor and gently puts her hand on his forehead).

THE EMPEROR *(eyes still closed)*:
Soft touch, light and cool.
Swift caress, white and pure.
Kuan Yin, my wife with the full moon eyes
Your love for my being brings you back from
the dead!

(The Emperor opens his eyes and reaches out for Kuan Yin but is overtaken by weakness).

KUAN YIN:
I was sent by Fusu, our forsaken son.

THE EMPEROR:
Fusu is a traitor – once coiled up in your womb!

KUAN YIN:
Your only future is the future of your sons.

THE EMPEROR *(jumps)*:
The past and the future belong to me,
father of the Empire, heaven's son!

(The Emperor collapses from the exertion. Kuan Yin catches him in her arms. The Emperor gives in to her and relaxes in her arms. She rocks him gently, like a child).

ARIA

"Light of Love"

KUAN YIN:

Leave your love behind when you go.
Let all under heaven feel its glow.
Give it to the birds, the first morning cry.
Delight in its reflection in the eyes of a child.

THE EMPEROR *(with renewed anxiety)*:

Will the sun still rise when I am gone?
Will the wind still blow when I am no more?

KUAN YIN:

Spill it in the sea like the pink evening sun.
Let it light the way of your sons at night.

/

/

/

THE IMMORTALS:

The wind comes the wind goes
blows the dust away.

/

/

/

THE EMPEROR:

Will the sun still rise when I am gone?
Will the wind still blow when I am no more?

/

/

KUAN YIN:

The wind blows your pain away.

/

/

/

THE IMMORTALS:

The wind comes the wind goes
blows the dust away.

/

THE EMPEROR:

Hollow, drained, my powers run out.
I can do nothing forevermore.

KUAN YIN:

Nothing done, nothing undone.

THE EMPEROR:
No shape, no name.

KUAN YIN:
Nothing done, nothing spoiled.

THE EMPEROR:
I shall be nothing forevermore.

KUAN YIN:
Nothing seized, nothing lost.

THE EMPEROR:
In the otherworld you shall be at my side.
/
/
/
/
/
KUAN YIN:
/
We shall be we forevermore.

(The Emperor lies still with closed eyes, his face finally calm. Taking off her mask Kuan Yin gently rises, joins the immortals and retreats with them into the background).

Scene 9. As above.

(Li Si appears and catches sight of the Emperor on the ground. Picks up a blanket and rushes to his side).

LI SI:
My divine Emperor, what a sight!
The cold bites everyone alike.

(Li Si helps the Emperor sit up and puts the blanket over his shoulders).

THE EMPEROR:
A letter shall be sent to my son, Fusu.

(Li Si gives a start).

LI SI:

Divine Emperor, I object.

With my life on the line, hear my counter-advice.

THE EMPEROR:

Do as I say and write!

(Li Si hesitates. Reluctantly picks up writing utensils from his pocket).

THE EMPEROR *(dictates)*:

Fusu, my son. The time has come...

(Stops and looks at Li Si).

Your hands are idle.

LI SI *(hurries to obey)*:

Fusu my son, the time has come.

THE EMPEROR *(continues dictating)*:

...to speak to you, father to son...

(looks at Li Si who stands motionless)

LI SI *(writes)*:

...speak to you father to son...

THE EMPEROR:

If my tongue has been sharp, my heart stern,

I ask your forgiveness.

(He stops, unable to continue. Li Si waits in tension. The Emperor collects himself and continues dictating).

You must travel in haste.

Return to the capital and host my funeral.

LI SI (*jumps*):

No, divine Emperor! We must live! Live!

THE EMPEROR:

The letter must be sent without delay.

(Li Si looks at the Emperor dumbfoundedly. The Emperor makes a weak gesture).

Get Huhai, my youngest.

(Li Si hurries to obey. Stops and looks hesitatingly at the letter in his hand. Puts it in his pocket and disappears).

Scene 10. As above.

(The Emperor, alone, looks out at the sea).

ARIA

"Universe
of clay"

THE EMPEROR:

Stars of shells, planets of pearls.

Rivers running into the sea.

Riders of straw, horses of clay.

An army of sticks keeps invaders away.

Mother stands behind me, I hear her words.

My little Emperor made the universe.

Scene 11. As above.

(Huhai comes up behind the Emperor. Stops at a distance, apprehensively).

THE EMPEROR (*without turning around*):

Huhai, my son, help me lie down.

(Huhai puts his arm around the Emperor and escorts him back to the campfire.

The Emperor looks at Huhai, as for the first time).

Eyes like your mother.

Chin and nose like mine.

HUHAI:

Yes, divine Emperor.

THE EMPEROR:

Father.

With the new moon I shall be gone.

An echo in your mind - before long.

Stay at my side...

HUHAI:

As you wish...

(hesitates)

Father.

(The Emperor reaches out with his hand. Huhai kneels down beside him).

THE EMPEROR:

Flesh of my flesh. Blood of my blood.

Two months away from my grave

in your hands I trust my remains.

HUHAI *(horried)*:

Divine Emperor! I am too young!

(The Emperor puts his hand on Huhai's head. He bows his head, overwhelmed).

DUET

"Trust me"

/

THE EMPEROR:

You must be mature, you must be brave.

/

/

HUHAI:

I will do my best to do as you say.

/

/

THE EMPEROR:

At your age I was already king.

/

/

HUHAI:

At last you will get the son you need.

/

/

THE EMPEROR:

Chosen by heaven to be the master of all.

/

/

/ HUHAI:
/ I will make up to you for all the pain.
/
/ THE EMPEROR:
/ For the good of the people I became their Emperor.
/ Through my son, the people shall remember my name.
/
/ HUHAI:
/ I shall continue the duty in your name.

/ THE EMPEROR:
/ Until your brother takes over you will be obeyed.

(Huhai, surprised, looks at the Emperor).

HUHAI:
My brother? Fusu?!
You were trusting the Empire to me!

(The Emperor, astonished, bursts out laughing).

THE EMPEROR:
It would be like letting an infant drown!

(Huhai pulls his hand back and gets to his feet).

"In the shadow" HUHAI:
Always the fool, always at fault.
Always in the shadow, compared to the sun.
I get your sneers, he gets your praise.
/ Your respect, honour, your smile and your care.
/
/ THE EMPEROR:
/ Respect is deserved, not a right by birth!

HUHAI:

I, the worthless, make you shrink in shame
avert your eyes, turn your head away.
If the Empire is his, half is mine!

/ HUHAI:

/ Blind and deaf from selfish needs.

/ May you die up here and set me free!

THE EMPEROR:

Blind and deaf from selfish needs.

You will never be the son I need!

(Huhai rushes out in anger, leaving his father to die alone.)

Scene 12. The Emperor's dwellings and the outskirts of the camp simultaneously.

(The immortals, incarnating servants and concubines, gather around the dying Emperor to comfort him. Simultaneously, Zhao Gao, Huhai and Li Si, meet in a silent corner in the outskirts of the camp).

THE EMPEROR *(weakened)*:

Look at me now and recall my face.

SERVANTS AND CONCUBINES:

Weep and recall, weep and recall.

THE EMPEROR:

In a moment your Emperor shall be
no more.

LI SI:

My Emperor needs me at his side.

ZHAO GAO:

The shaken son needs your wise advise.

SERVANTS AND CONCUBINES:

Stay, Emperor! Do not leave us behind!

ZHAO GAO *(comes up to Li Si)*:

Looked at from here, it turns upside-down.
The shaken chancellor needs our advice!

LI SI:

Your point, Zhao Gao!
Time runs out.

ZHAO GAO:

When the divine body begins to rot
the smell will drift to the capital.

LI SI:

Our loss must arrive no sooner than us!

ZHAO GAO:

And the troublesome heir be kept away.

LI SI (*hesitates*):

Fusu is the heir by heavenly law.

ZHAO GAO:

On earth, the law is rewritten by us.

HUHAI:

Fusu shall never rule over me!

ZHAO GAO: (*pulls a letter out of his pocket*):

This letter will remind Fusu of his deeds.

Your imperial seal is all we need.

LI SI:

A letter was written from father to son.

(*pulls a letter out of his pocket*)

But never sent.

(*Zhao Gao stares at the letter in Li Si's hesitating hand*).

/ TRIO with Emperor and chorus

/ ZHAO GAO:

/ Letter against letter, word against word

/ a sudden snatch and all is arranged.

A touch of fire, a lick of fate

/ a taste of the flame and sons are exchanged.

/

/ LI SI (looks from letter to letter):

/ One wrong move, a twist of fate.

/ A hasty choice may lead to our fall.

/ With Fusu on the throne, good might be saved

/ with his brother there I can save myself.

/

/ HUHAI:

/ Always Fusu in his mind.

/ Always Fusu in his voice.

/ Fusu got all there was to have,

/ the Empire I shall keep to myself.

THE EMPEROR (with effort):

Be loyal to Fusu and recall my
name. Care for my son like you cared
for me.

SERVANTS AND CONCUBINES:

At the end of the shore, at the
Great wall, the earth shall crumble
under our tears.

(Li Si takes the letter from Zhao Gao and gives him the letter in his own hand. Zhao Gao sets fire to Li Si's letter. Together, they watch it burn in silence).

THE EMPEROR (with enormous effort):

The son of Heaven is here - and gone!

(He dies.)

END OF ACT II

ACT III

Scene 13. Beyond time and space.

(The immortals enter the stage making their common rhythm, as in the prologue, by stamping with their feet, stopping at the same time and moving on silently at the same time. They end up in a line and the Magician conjures a letter out of her sleeve).

THE MAGICIAN:
Through forests and fields
Through rain and hail...

THE WARRIOR *(takes over the letter)*:
...lost by the herald, buried in snow.

THE DANCER *(takes over the letter)*:
Retrieved by a wind, sent out to sea...

THE POET *(takes over the letter)*:
...unread and forgotten under the stars...

THE BLIND AND THE MAGICIAN *(takes the letter from The Poet)*:
... found on the shore, reached its goal.

(The Fool, as the last one in the line, receives the letter from The Blind and opens it. The other immortals gather around her, curious to read what is in the letter).

THE FOOL *(reads from the letter)*:
"Fusu, the time has come
to speak of your sins, account for your crimes."

THE POET *(reading over The Fool's shoulder)*:
"No longer considered the lawful heir,
your brother shall succeed us when we are gone."

THE BLIND (*reading over The Fool's shoulder*):

"You, we no longer regard as our son.

May we never...

THE BLIND AND THE DANCER:

... see or hear from you again."

(The Fool, affected by the reading, lets the letter sink).

THE FOOL (*incarnating Fusu*):

Punished with exile, curses, wars!

He may punish me with death,

still I am his firstborn son!

(Hesitates. The other immortals watch dumbfoundedly).

ARIA

"If this is his will"

He called me a traitor when I spoke from my heart.

He called me unrighteous, when I followed the way.

If blinded by arrogance, the fault is mine.

Like grass in storm I must bend my head.

My father's rejection cuts through my veins.

If this is his will, I will obey.

(The Fool draws her sword and cuts her throat, like Fusu once did. On a different part of the stage Zhao Gao and Li Si in funeral clothes begin to dress a visibly uncomfortable Huhai in the outfit of the new Emperor. The Immortals carry away The Fool, as if she were dead).

Scene 14. The imperial palace.

(Documents and papers fall down from above as if heaven is coming off in flakes. Li Si rushes in, trying to collect them before new ones hoard up).

ARIA
"Threats"
LI SI:
Riots and rebellions. Threats from barbarians.
Loyal governors taking to arms.
Fear and suspicion spread like fever,
terror travels by land and sea.
The Empire whines like a fatherless child
while Heaven's son bathes in wine.

(During Li Si's aria, concubines incarnated by the immortals in masks enter, pushing a bathtub where the half-drunk Huhai sits immersed in foam, with a concubine perched on each side of him. Li Si turns to Huhai with a deep bow).

LI SI:
Divine Emperor..
Forgive your humble servant for intruding into your chamber.

HUHAI *(to the concubines)*:
What rotten luck!
A noisy, old fly has joined our feast.

THE CONCUBINES:
Forget your troubles and feast with us!

LI SI:
Time runs out, I have come to warn you.

HUHAI *(to the concubines)*:
What a boring buzz. Whisk him off!

THE CONCUBINES:
A whisk of the tail and the buzz is gone!

LI SI:

Your adviser Zhao Gao is not to be trusted.
His greedy desires. His lust for power.
He kills the loyal and bleeds the poor.
The powers of Heaven will punish us all!

UHAI (*to the concubines*):

What shall we do with this prophet of woe?
Cut off his prick? Bite off his nose?

(The concubines mimic biting off a nose and cutting off a prick).

THE CONCUBINES:

A bite and a lick and the woes are gone.

LI SI (*in increasing frustration*):

The sovereign must win the hearts of the people,
not fill his stomach with food and wine.
You ignore your tasks, neglect your duties.
Your father would not have approved of your rule.

HUHAI:

Watch your mouth, traitor!
Who sealed the letter to his favourite son?
/ Leave before my patience runs out!

/

/

/

THE CONCUBINES:

/ Fly old prophet before his patience is gone!

(Li Si lingers despite the warning).

ARIA

"Eternal shame"

LI SI:

A concubine's daughter was raped at the palace.
Your father's servant was put to blame.
The servant confessed what he had never done
while you remained silent at his side.

HUHAI (*in increasing distress*):
Enough, old fool! Your time is up!

LI SI:
Your belt was found with her torn tunic
two moons later and a cut-off head.

HUHAI:
I forbid you to indulge in the past!

LI SI:
Disappointment was written in your father's eyes.
Black pain. Eternal shame.

HUHAI:
Enough, I said!

LI SI:
Your father's gaze chilled your bone.
His stare sank your heart like a stone.

(Huhai, enraged, suddenly raises himself out of the water. Foam and water pour from his naked body).

HUHAI:
Cut this creep in two and throw him to the dogs!

(Two guards come rushing in and chain Li Si's arms and legs. He is taken away, a broken man).

Scene 15. As above.

(Huhai, in Emperor clothing, sits at the throne, staring into nothingness. Zhao Gao, enraged, enters together with two military messengers incarnated by immortals).

ZHAO GAO:
Cowards! Vermin!
Tell the Supreme one about your deserters.

(The messengers bow deeply before Huhai).

MESSENGER1 AND 2:
Divine Emperor, the rebels are but two weeks away.

MESSENGER1:
Hardened by hardship...

MESSENGER2:
...strengthened by suffering.

BOTH MESSENGERS:
Prepared to fight till the last drop of blood.

ZHAO GAO:
Tell the Emperor about your fleeing hares!

MESSENGER2:
Our troops are poorly clothed.

MESSENGER1:
Fed on rice and water.
The men too few in number.

MESSENGER2:
Their spirits weak and low.

MESSENGER 1 AND 2:
The shaken Empire needs the Emperor's support!

(Huhai stares like before, showing no signs of reaction).

ZHAO GAO:

The Emperor's answer is fierce like thunder.

Arrest the governors!

(He puts a document and a pen in front of Huhai. Huhai writes down the order with a motionless face).

Put the deserters to death!

(Huhai writes it down, as before).

For every standing rebel a commander's head!

(Huhai's hand remains limp. Zhao Gao impatiently writes down the order, using Huhai's hand. With a sudden gesture, Huhai pulls away from Zhao Gao).

HUHAI:

You speak with my mouth, creep into my brain,

You push me into the shadow and take my place.

I am the son, I am the ruler!

I am the Emperor and the Empire is mine!

(Zhao Gao stares at him. Bows deeply).

ZHAO GAO:

Our Emperor has spoken.

(Hands the paper to the messengers).

Return to your duties and execute his commands.

(The Messengers retreat. Zhao Gao leaves).

HUHAI:

Those staring eyes. That loathing gaze.

It empties my head, numbs my limbs,
freezes my breath, stops the blood in my veins.

(Tears open his gown at the neck)

Nothing I do can take it away!

ARIA

"That loathing gaze"

Scene 16. As above.

(Nervously chattering, servants and concubines incarnated by the immortals, enter, carrying a big covered cage).

SERVANTS AND CONCUBINES *(as if reminding each other)*:
Tickle his muscles...tickle his senses...
...keep to the joke...or we shall all be beheaded.

(They put the cage down on a small stage and scatter around it. Zhao Gao enters).

ZHAO GAO:
The prosperous Emperor learns from the wise.
He keeps his spirits high in the worst of times.
(Zhao Gao makes the reluctant Huhai sit down in front of the covered cage. Zhao Gao claps his hands).
The Emperor is here to be entertained!
This fair creature was captured for his sake.

(Two of the servants hurry to pull away the cover. The cage is empty. Huhai puzzled, is captured by a beautiful voice).

ARIA

"Captured"

THE DANCER *(incarnating "the captured creature" with her voice)*:
Heart throbbing, limbs on fire.
Hunted by shadows, chased by desire.
Captured by mortals, deaf and blind,
put in a cage by greedy hands.
Hear them calling, the distant hills...
...the scent of water...the touch of leaves.

(The deer is suddenly overtaken by frenzy).

/ Force, ram down, the walls, the doors!
/ Find the way back, the traces in the snow!
/
/ *(Huhai, visibly moved by the pleading voice, rises from his seat).*
/
/ HUHAI:
/ Divine creature, you crush my heart.

/ Reveal yourself here and now!

(The servants look hesitatingly from Huhai to Zhao Gao. Zhao Gao shakes his head as if in great concern).

ZHAO GAO:
Divine Emperor.
We brought you a deer.

HUHAI:
You are drunk or delirious!
(Watches the cage. Suddenly uncertain, he turns to the servants).
A deer or nothing. What do you see?

(Zhao Gao looks exactingly at the servants and concubines. They bow deeply in front of Huhai).

SERVANTS AND CONCUBINES:
Divine Emperor, a captured deer is
what we see.

ZHAO GAO:
/ A deer is a deer.
/
/ THE SERVANTS:
/ Nothing but a deer.
/
/ HUHAI:
/ Nothing is nothing and nothing but nothing.

(All eyes rest on Huhai in silence. Huhai looks uncertainly from the servants to the cage).

HUHAI *(in sudden anger)*:
Take it away whatever it is!

(Zhao Gao nods to the servants. They throw the cover over the cage and carry it away. Zhao Gao moves up to the bewildered Huhai).

ZHAO GAO:

When deers become nothing we must get concerned.
The Emperor's wits are not what they were.
A dreadful crime burdens your conscience.
A brother's fate weighs on your soul.
Pray and sacrifice to the powers of Heaven
lest their rage shall poison the rest of your days.

(Leaves. Huhai, alone, is overtaken by anxiety. During his breakdown the stage darkens until only Huhai's desperate, glowing face can be seen).

HUHAI:

I see what I see...I know what I see...
...I know what is there that I know that I see.
I see what I see...the loathing...the gaze..
...his loathing gaze that I know is there!

Scene 17. The Emperor's mausoleum.

(The light goes up at the back of the stage. As if in Huhai's hallucination, we are in the mausoleum with the Emperor's coffin guarded by six warriors of clay. Huhai turns around and becomes terrified at the sight. Slowly, he approaches his father's coffin. Kneels down beside it).

HUHAI:

Divine...father. Give me a sign.
I thirst for your blessing, hunger for your advice.

(He scrutinizes his father's motionless face. In a sudden feeling of being watched, Huhai rises and looks around. He slinks between the clay warriors, closely observing their faces).

Your hollow eyes. A distant light.
What do you look at? At whom do you stare?
(suddenly horrified)
Fusu, it is you!
Your spirit has returned to punish me!

(One of the clay warriors has come alive, holding a letter. One by one, the warriors come alive as their voices are added to each other and the letter is passed between them in the direction of Huhai).

Sextett:
"Spirit of rage"
WARRIOR 1:
I wake up at night, spread with the light.
I cover the sun, darken the sky.

(The letter is passed on to Warrior 2)

WARRIOR 1 and 2:
I make heaven rumble, shake the earth.
I make children cry, tear lovers apart.

(Huhai, terrified, follows as the letter is passed on to Warrior 3.)

HUHAI:
Spirits of rage, real or dreamt.
Have mercy upon the sinner who
wakes up too late!

WARRIOR 1,2 and 3:
I make courts crumble, cities tremble.
I hang my neighbour from the prison gate.

(The letter is passed on to Warrior 4):

WARRIOR 1,2,3 and 4:
I make men cut men, like branches from trees.
I make skulls split open, blood gush out.

(The letter is passed on to Warrior 5).

WARRIOR 1,2, 3,4 and 5:
Only birds evade me, only dragons escape me.
With me on the throne, the world shall end.

(The letter reaches the last Warrior. She turns towards Huhai as Fusu, her face covered by a mask).

HUHAI *(recoils in panic)*:
Go back to where you came from, ghastly spirit!

(Fusu holds out the letter. Huhai hesitates. Takes a step towards Fusu and grabs the letter from his outstretched hand. Opens it).

HUHAI (*reads*):

"...no longer considered the lawful heir,
your brother shall succeed us when we are gone.
You, we no longer regard as our son."

(*looks up*)

I wanted respect-not my brother's death!

FUSU (*gently*):

Forever hurt, left with your pain.
Blinded by rage, enraged with yourself.

HUHAI:

Always forgiving in word and thought.
Even in death you are superior to me!

FUSU:

Forever the boy with the sullen face.
Forever in shadow, unnoticed, unseen.

DUET /
"Forever /
the boy" /

/

/

HUHAI:

I lusted for your fate, your place in the sun.

/

/

FUSU:

Noone saw your longing eyes.
Noone heard your call from the void.

/

/

HUHAI:

I wanted to choke you, rip off your face!

/

/

/

FUSU:

Noone listened to your crying heart.
Noone took you in his arms.

/

/

HUHAI:

Punish me with respect like he punished you!

/

/

FUSU:

I, your brother, abandoned you.

HUHAI:

I betrayed the Empire, I betrayed the Way.

(Suddenly stops and continues in a completely different voice).

In betraying you, I betrayed myself.

(Draws his sword and cuts his own throat. The immortals slowly gather around Huhai's dead body).

THE IMMORTALS:

The glowing rage flares up and fades.

In the dark year of Yin the Empire falls.

(The immortals carry away Huhai's body).

Once mortal like you,

undone since long.

The echo of life

fades in our song

The tale we tell

is here - and gone.

END OF OPERA