

## THE FIRST EMPEROR

By Tan Dun - The First Emperor is an epic story of love, power, and betrayal. The story centers on the Emperor Qin — the first emperor of China — a controversial and brutal ruler best known for unifying the country, building the Great Wall, and creating a vast army of terra cotta soldiers to guard his tomb.

### ACT I. SHADOW:

SCENE 1. The Yin-Yang Master performs sacrificial rites and traditional chants in the presence of the imperial court. The Emperor is displeased: he dislikes intensely the ancient music of his country and seeks an anthem that would aptly glorify his mighty and powerful empire. He wants his childhood friend, composer Gao Jianli, known as the Shadow and the Sage of Music, to compose this anthem. Knowing that Jianli resides in Yan, one of the states that remains to be conquered, he changes his war plans and sends his General to defeat Yan so that Jianli may be brought quickly to him. The Emperor also promises the General he can marry his crippled daughter, Princess Yueyang, if he returns victorious. As the people clamor for battle, the Shaman warns of the destruction of war.

SCENE 2. Although China is unified, chaos remains. The Emperor discusses his severe plans for strengthening his rule with the Chief Minister. The General announces that Jianli has been captured, and the Emperor orders him brought in. The Emperor greets him as a brother, and his affection for such a broken slave surprises Princess Yueyang. Jianli responds with hatred, blaming the Emperor for the destruction of his village and the violent death of his mother — he would rather cut off his own tongue than call the ruler “brother.” The Emperor explains that sacrifices must be made to unify the country and achieve a lasting peace, and reminds Jianli of his promise to compose an anthem for the empire. Jianli declares he would sooner die than compose the anthem. Princess Yueyang’s admiration for Jianli grows.

SCENE 3. Princess Yueyang strikes a deal with her father: if she succeeds in convincing Jianli to live and compose the music, she will own him. Emperor Qin agrees. Princess Yueyang tries various methods to persuade Jianli to eat, without success. Finally, she feeds him from her own mouth, and Jianli finds his heart stirred. The couple makes love passionately, and Princess Yueyang miraculously regains the use of her legs. Emperor Qin is overjoyed to see her walk, but soon becomes enraged when he understands the source of her cure. The Emperor wants to kill Jianli for violating Yueyang, but holds back because he wants him to write the anthem.

### ACT II. ANTHEM:

SCENE 1. Deeply in love, Jianli gives Princess Yueyang a music lesson. He pauses to listen to the slaves’ chorus as they build the Great Wall and is deeply moved. The singers are interrupted by Emperor Qin, who insists that his daughter honor her marriage to the General. She threatens suicide. The Emperor then appeals to Jianli to give her up — temporarily. He is confident that the General will perish soon in battle, at which point Princess Yueyang could return to Jianli. The composer agrees to wait and to finish the anthem. The Emperor asks to hear the melody but Jianli refuses.

SCENE 2. The court attends the imperial inauguration. Approaching his throne, the Emperor meets the Shaman, who gives him misleading and confusing information. Next he encounters the ghost of Yueyang, who tells him that she committed suicide because she was unable to sacrifice her love for the sake of the country. Wracked with grief, the Emperor continues climbing. He is again interrupted, this time by the ghost of the General, who asserts that Jianli poisoned him; the ghost warns the Emperor of Jianli’s plans for vengeance. The Emperor continues toward the throne. Suddenly, Jianli bursts down from the summit. He doesn’t want to live without Yueyang. Grief-stricken and crazed, he bites off his own tongue and spits it at the Emperor. The Emperor lunges at Jianli with his sword, sparing him a slow and painful death. He finally reaches the throne and for the first time hears the anthem — it is the slaves’ song. The Emperor is shocked and realizes that this is Jianli’s ultimate revenge.