**Cathay: 3 Tales Of China**

By Andy Propst

Presented by the New 42nd Street, produced by Ping Chong & Company in partnership with the Shaanxi Folk Art Theater and Seattle Repertory Theatre, at the New Victory Theater, 209 W. 42nd St., NYC. Oct. 28-Nov. 13. Thu.-Sat., 7 p.m.; Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., noon and 5 p.m. (212) 239-6200 or (800) 432-7250.

Two guardians of a tomb -- oversized gilded statues that look like a cross between a cat and a dragon -- bicker as Ping Chong's *Cathay: 3 Tales of China* begins. Although entombed for centuries, these creatures still remember when China was a crossroads of the world. In the following three puppet plays, audiences will come to understand that China never really ceased to be a global mecca.

These two huge creatures with blue glowing eyes, heads that swivel, and small flapping wings are just the beginning to the visual wonders of *Cathay*.

In "The Lady and the Emperor," a Tang Dynasty emperor weds a commoner, whose family exploits her rise to power, causing dissent among the population and weakening the state until it is vulnerable to attack. Puppet designers Stephen Kaplin and Wang Bo employ a combination of exquisitely detailed rod puppets and shadow puppets to tell the story. As it unfolds, we are mesmerized by an intricate dance performed by the empress, in which the extended sleeves of her kimono twirl delicately, and intrigued by the designers' ability to show palace activity as if from an aerial camera shot.

In the World War II-era "Little Worm," the creators use shadow puppets that look like pen-and-ink drawings to tell the story of an unusual act of kindness by one Japanese soldier. The delicacy of the color palette brings to mind parchment drawings in which monochromes blend with delicate yellows and blues.

Chong explores China's progress toward modernity in the evening's third piece even as the other tales converge. Here the equivalent of cinematic jump cuts between rooms in an opulent hotel is created with precision. The evening ends with a truly panoramic "shot" of the building's lobby (set designer Randy Ward provides glorious environments throughout). One leaves *Cathay* thrilled by its artistry.