Magical Puppets and More
“Cathay: Three Tales of China”
Ping Chong & Company and the Shaanxi Folk Art Theater
Terrace Theater/The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
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by Naima Prevots

Magical puppets, brilliant story telling, innovative digital animation, amazing multiple images, and true cross cultural collaboration were all part of “Cathay: Three Tales of China”. Ping Chong, author and director, gave us an unforgettable evening that was original, imaginative, and provocative. All three stories were based in Xian, the ancient capital once the crossroad of the world, during the Tang Dynasty. Collaboration was with the Shaanxi Folk Art Theater and the Carter Family Puppet Theater (based in Seattle). Stories ranged from a traditional tale about a king and the sacrifice of his beloved wife and consort, to one about the Japanese invasion of China, to a contemporary commentary focused on characters in a fictional Grand Hotel. Chong wrote in the program notes about his first visit to Xian in 2000, when ancient history was the predominant theme. He contrasted this with his 2002 visit, where the sleepy city had witnessed a rush “to modernity and entrepreneurial frenzy” but he noted “something quintessentially Chinese remained.” With dazzling artistry, all parties involved in this production succeeded in keeping the audience spellbound. The puppets seemed human, as they did what seemed impossible, from the smallest most subtle of gestures, to the largest leaps and bounds. There were numerous images that appeared on multiple screens of various sizes, always distinct and visually striking. There was humor, tragedy and love, as the tales unfolded, capturing our hearts and eyes.

Each story was introduced by two larger than life keepers of the tombs, reminiscent of majestic Terra Cotta figures. They conversed with humor about their enforced underground life, and about each other as companions. The first story was a traditional tale about a Tang Dynasty king who fell in love with a beautiful woman, and made her his consort. Her family rose to power, and one of them became an evil prime minister, who hoarded gold from the kingdom and created unrest among the king’s subjects. As the people rebelled, they demanded the consort’s sacrifice, and we witnessed the tragedy of her willing death to save king and kingdom. Various scenes depicted the king and his court, the consort and her maid, the people’s army, the lovers as they met and parted. Sound and dialogue accompanied actions in a way that made these people come to life.

The second story opened with delicate scenes of a Chinese family in a village during World War II, just before Japanese planes and soldiers descended into the area. There was no vibrant color here, but shades of black and white and charcoal gray, as mother, father, young boy and girl went about their lives. The young girl played with her brother and was told to finish her rice. A family dog bounded into the house, and the boy took the family cow through the village and made the recalcitrant animal walk over a small bridge. Mother invited daughter to help her make a special desert, and we watched as they stirred the pot. We met members of the village while children, father and mother greeted neighbors and relatives as the day progressed. We were alerted to concerns about an attack, and suddenly Japanese planes overwhelmed the screen as they came zooming down on this village. Puppets became cruel Japanese soldiers, intent on conquering and killing. As
soldiers talked of more death and destruction, scenes of the young boy asking for food and help were shown, making it clear he was the only family member left. In an unusual twist, one Japanese soldier found it hard to kill this young man, and his gun shot a bullet up in the air, purposefully avoiding his target.

A fictional “Grand Hotel” in contemporary China was provided a setting for the third story. There were delicious portraits of an American tourist couple, a supercilious Tang scholar from France prepared to present his conference paper, a self-important and globally oriented businessman, and a harried secretary. Characters from the other two stories reappeared. The village boy, who was now a grandfather, was there to meet with the Japanese soldier who spared his life. The Tang king and his consort, who had vowed to meet in another life, reappeared as grandson of the village boy and the female hotel receptionist. As they prepared to enter an elevator, we knew they have fallen in love and fulfilled their destiny. The Grand Hotel scenes showed us a new China of consumerism, global business, tourism, but also showed reverence of the past. All floors of the hotel were named for different past dynasties. Underground keepers of the tombs reappeared in the hotel lobby, full of humor and wise commentary as in the beginning. New life in China swirled around them, and their presence was a symbol and reminder of ancient glories and history.

Ping Chong’s great artistry was in his attention to characters in a broad scope, and also to numerous details that amplified our perceptions and made everything come to life. We saw geese flying, cocks fighting, butterflies swooping, leaves falling, and horses racing across the landscape. We saw the King’s consort in her private moods and with her lady servant, and we become part of mother and daughter’s interactions in their small village house as they cooked together. Each environment in the Grand Hotel was made distinct with specific furniture and décor, and all the various characters had gestures and movements that were specific to them. There were small and large screens that encompassed action at various times, and they seamlessly appeared and disappeared as scenes moved from side to side and to the middle of the stage. It was hard to believe that these were puppets we were watching. Every single part of the body was made mobile and expressive, and people and animals alike came alive and were made three dimensional.

Many facts and facets of production emerged during an excellent post-performance discussion led superbly by Dana Tai Soon Burgess. Participating in the panel were Ping Chong, Liang Jun of the Shaanxi Folk Art Theater, and Dmitri Carter, from the Carter Family Puppet Theater. We found out the puppet group from China has 137 members who perform with a live orchestra, and work with four kinds of puppets: hand, rod, string and shadow. Seventy five percent of the puppets were made in China, with the rest being finished in the U.S. Virtuoso puppet handlers were involved in split second timing, with hundreds of motion and sound cues, and constant movement behind the scenes. A glimpse behind the curtain would have shown performers moving from one spot to the next, while sitting or lying back on wheeled coasters low to the floor. This helped them arrive at their particular puppet window exactly at the right time. Ping Chong felt his stories showed “the rise and fall and rise of China”. He made four trips to Xian in process of collaboration with the Shaanxi Folk Art Theater. Digital animation emerged as a new option as certain objects and scenes were photographed, and then projected on one of the many screens. Shaanxi Theater participants arrived in Seattle for a month of rehearsal with American collaborators, and this was followed by one month of performances in that city, prior to arriving at The Kennedy Center. It was made clear during the panel this was a crucial period of time to make the production come together.

This feast for mind and eye will be at The New Victory Theater in New York from October 28-November 13. If you have not already seen this marvelous production, catch it if you can!