Cathay: Three Tales of China
Directed by Ping Chong
Starring members of the Shaanxi Folk Art Theatre of Xian China, and members of The Carter Family Puppet Theater
Seattle Repertory Theatre
September 14-October 9th

By Rajkhet Dirzhud-Rashid - SGN A&E Writer

Some love stories require more than one take to tell the whole story and even span more than one lifetime, and according to many cultures, if love is true, and pure, the lovers may be separated in one life, but can reincarnate to love again. A rather ‘woo woo’ concept for a lot of folks to wrap their brains around, but in Ping Chong’s ‘Cathay: Three Tales of China’, not only do the lovers (played by beautifully crafted puppets from the Shaanxi Folk Art Theatre of Xian, China, and voiced by humans, who are never seen) get to reincarnate and find each other again, but two people brought together by war are able to meet, in this life, when they are older and make peace with what could have been a deadly moment in both their lives.

The first story traces the love affair between a legendary emperor who comes to love and marry a beautiful courtesan, only to find that her influence distracts him from the evil ministrations of her brother, who brings the kingdom to near ruin. This then leads the newlywed empress to sacrifice herself to save the kingdom and satisfy the unruly troops, but a promise of love forever is made between emperor and empress before she dies. And the second story, though it happens in the same region of China, progresses the brewing revolution of the imperial time, to the historical events around the Shaanxi Massacre of many Chinese villagers at the hands of Japanese troops, many years before Pearl Harbor brought the U.S. into battling the same Japanese army.

In this story, a young boy is nearly killed by one of the soldiers, and it is not until the last tale that we, the audience get to see that the soldier showed mercy, as again history marches forward into our modern age. And in this age, the imperial story of ‘forever love’ is brought full circle as a young man and woman meet, feel they have met before and a new relationship is born between them, looping all of the stories together with one common thread of love, human frailty and a much needed theme of compassion in the midst of war.

Having seen some of Chong’s earlier work at the Seattle Repertory Theatre, I have to say this is his most realized and most accessible piece, and that it is a rich experience both visually and emotionally. Also, in light of recent events, ‘Cathay: Three Tales of China’ is a wonderfully refreshing reminder that love, and hope indeed, do conquer all things. For more information on tickets, call: (206) 443-2222.