"Cathay: Three Tales of China" is perfect.

It has beauty, humor, tragedy, sex, satire, music, dance, wounding, healing, wisdom and goofiness. It is spiritual tourism. It takes you, simultaneously, into yourself and out of yourself.

"Cathay," which is receiving its premiere production at the Seattle Repertory Theatre, is a collaboration between Ping Chong, an innovative New York writer/director/visual artist, and the Shaanxi Folk Art Theater of Xian, an ancient city in northwest China.

Some of the "Cathay" characters are ornate rod puppets. Others are translucent shadow puppets. And two of them -- immense cat monsters with glowing sapphire eyes -- are bunraku figures (each with its own black-clad puppeteer).

These latter characters are tomb guardians of the sort unearthed by archaeologists working in Shaanxi Province. When not engaging in grumpy chitchat, the monster cats function as narrators. They help us orient ourselves in three time frames: the 10th-century A.D. Tang Dynasty, the Japanese occupation of China at the start of World War II and a present-day five-star hotel in bustling modern Xian.

The three stories, with the help of reincarnation and archetypes, mesh. An emperor reappears as a prosperous businessman. A celebrated palace beauty reincarnates as a sleek desk clerk. And is that the conniving eunuch reappearing as a lubricious Frenchman? A rapaciously greedy politician returning in the form of a hustling Chinese hip-hop star? A clique of malicious, gossipy, envious women is archetypal. A thousand years pass and they are still a clique of malicious, gossipy, envious women.

Blurry wartime newsreel projections with Japanese bombers in the foreground, underscored by the roar of airplane engines, are terrifying. A shadow-puppet confrontation between a starving Chinese refugee boy and a Japanese soldier is heart stopping. A reunion between these two (in the five-star hotel) 63 years later is heartwarming and overwhelmingly beautiful.

"Cathay's" three stories are disparate and yet coherent. Some scenes are celebrations of puppet virtuosity. Not only can the Shaanxi artists set a flock of geese in motion, they also can have one of the birds defecate while passing over a clump of cattail reeds.

Chong has been a regular visitor to Seattle for 20 years. His work invariably combines visual beauty and novel storytelling with pathos, humor and compassion. In "Cathay," six puppeteers from China and three from Seattle work with a team of 10 technicians and artists, some Americans, some Chinese. The result is a particularly intense expression of the characteristic beauty, freshness, wit and compassion of Chong's art.

"Cathay" runs at the Rep through Oct. 9. Tickets are $27-$36, under 25 $10, $20 half hour before curtain, discounts for seniors and groups; 206-443-2222, 877-900-9285 or www.seattlerep.org. The theater is in Seattle Center.