Theater Review

"Cathay": Allegories of past, present in puppetry

By Misha Berson
Seattle Times theater critic

As a play, "Cathay: 3 Tales of China," Ping Chong's trypich of stories about China, is disappointingly uneven.

But if the script for this world-premiere puppet spectacle at Seattle Repertory Theatre is a letdown, its multimedia pageantry is not.

Working with Chinese puppet idioms dating back 1,000 years, wedded to state-of-the-art video and sound, "Cathay" is a technical marvel.

Commissioned for the Kennedy Center's Festival of China in Washington, D.C., it is also Chong's fruitful first matchup with China's Shaanxi Folk Art Theater of Xian and Seattle's Carter Family Marionettes.

In both personal and historical terms, "Cathay" scans China's culture from its imperial past to its new status as a global economic juggernaut.

The primary set is a wall of windows, which open to reveal a checkerboard of puppet ministages where scenes are performed, separately and in multiples by an expert crew of (usually) unseen puppeteers.

Introducing the three Chinese stories (one an old folktale, the others original and modern) are a pair of archetypal bronze temple statues. These comic sentries are part of a cast of 150 vibrant rod and shadow puppets, designed by Stephen Kaplin and Wang Bo.

First comes the story of lovely Lady Yang, consort to a Tang Dynasty monarch whose "absolute" power is undercut by love and political chicanery. It ends with the kind of ennobling suicides old lore is full of.

But the pathos is marred by dicey dialogue that mixes romantic sincerity and arch mockery. (A panting puppet sex scene is a real spell-breaker.)

Still, the puppetry amazes. Lady Yang is played by several rod puppets of different sizes, viewed from shifting perspectives and enhanced by Christopher Walker's complex sound design and Randy Ward's sets and superb lighting.

The second tale, the most compact and profound, is enacted by shadow puppets resembling marvelous pen-and-ink drawings on the move.

The World War II-era story concerns a young lad whose rural pastimes — catching frogs, helping his father, greeting fellow villagers on a well-worn path — are lightly, sweetly evoked. But his life shatters when the Japanese Army invades, bringing starvation, rape and murder to the village.

That brutal time is echoed in "New," the finale of the 90-minute show, and in a serio-comic look at modern guests bumping up against China's past in a Xian luxury hotel. Alas, some of them are glaring caricatures.

Due to that flaw, and others, "Cathay" isn't the masterwork hoped for from Chong. But viewers intrigued by agile puppetry and Chinese history can still find in this unusual piece unique visual charms worth the price of admission.

Now playing: "Cathay: 3 Tales of China" by Ping Chong, Tuesdays-Sundays, through Oct. 9, at Seattle Repertory Theatre, Seattle Center. Note: not suitable for young children; $10-$46 (206-443-2222 or www.seattlerep.org).