Shadows and Light

*Ping Chong creates a shimmering saga of Chinese endurance.*

by Steve Wiecking

**What you'll remember is the light.** *Cathay: 3 Tales of China* (through Sunday, Oct. 9, at the Seattle Rep; 206-443-2222), the latest puppet piece conceived, written, and directed by Ping Chong (in collaboration with the Shaanxi Folk Art Theater of Xian, China), fairly glows with light—as iridescent and visually stirring as the shadows and sunshine of most filmic fantasies. The lustrous celluloid mood created by scenic and lighting designer Randy Ward turns *Cathay* into a small-scale spectacle.

The production, too, represents a leap forward for Chong, whose 2002 *Obon: Tales of Rain and Moonlight* contained much of the same ingenuity but none of the thoughtful sense of continuity or purpose. This is a more complete and ambitious experience, created with the intention of doing something larger than sharing evocative folk tales.

*Cathay* joins at first very dissimilar, sometimes jarringly downbeat, narratives: "The Lady and the Emperor" describes the ancient devotion of the perpetually distressed Lady Yang for her equally dedicated but soon to be fatefully tested husband; "Little Worm" unravels a day in the idyllic rural life of a young boy and his family during World War Two, an existence about to be literally exploded by the bombs of the invading Japanese; China has become a place of commerce and commodity in "NEW," about an up-to-the-minute hotel in which each of the 24 floors is named after a different dynasty, and a florid Frenchman swears that he's met the front desk's delectable Miss Yang in a previous life.

Our "hosts" for the evening are two large talking statues, anachronistically wisecracking companions (has Chong been watching Disney?) who are at first steeped in the darkness of a royal tomb and then unearthed to serve as glass-encased artifacts in the final story's plush hotel. After they trade quips ("I can't remember what my face looks like, let alone what year it is"), a series of sliding panels open onto the tales' various scenes. As in *Obon*, each screen reveals a different puppet perspective on the matter at hand, in meticulously conceived, almost cinematic terms. Tiny silhouette armies are seen from a distance, storming across hills at sunset; a conglomeration of nattering faces in close-up serves to represent the envious gossips plaguing the lives of both Yang women. Once, we even hover amusingly above the action, looking down on the sight of Lady Yang's hungry dog skittering across the floor to her table.

**Your engagement** in any of this, of course, is limited by how emotionally invested you can possibly become in the elucidation of stick-figure travails. Though every corner of the piece is filled with a bewitching delicacy of detail—Lady Yang drowsily brushing away butterflies during a moonlit sleep, a red curtain blowing in the wind behind her evil, plotting Prime Minister brother—you cannot escape the cold, hard fact that these are, after all, *puppets*. Any bourgeois audience members willing to admit to lowbrow influences will struggle against cultural references like Gerry Anderson's stilted "Supermarionation" series *Thunderbirds* and its recent wanton spoof, Trey Parker and Matt Stone's 2004 *Team America: World Police*. (There's even a—intentional?—nod to *Team America's* notorious sex romp: Emperor and Lady Yang make love with a series of "oohs" and "aaahs" that goes on far longer than aesthetically necessary.)

The show also paints in very broad strokes. The Japanese soldiers resemble the snickering, nefarious villains of vintage Hollywood lore, and Americans don't fare much better (one of the hotel's guests is a crass, Pringles-eating Sonics fan; another is a businessman angling for "a slice of the Chinese cake" over his cell phone). And if you look too closely to locate the message beneath, you might find yourself stymied by a question or two: What exactly are we mourning here? The passing of peasant life? The days when emperors' wives had to hang themselves to appease a superstitious army?

But this is carping. By eventually linking *Cathay's* trio of stories, the show reaches to say a bit about the relentless march of time, to salute the sacrifices and salvation that are a part of its nation's passage. "Endurance was the Chinese secret weapon," an aged veteran of Japan's army later gently notes to another of the survivors in "Little Worm." *Cathay* may, in the end, really only say just that bit, but its compassionate objective saves it from being so much shimmering surface play.