Three tales set in China: ancient, World War II and contemporary
by Peg Doman

Ping Chong has created another masterpiece in collaboration with Shaanxi Folk Art Theater of Xian called “Cathay: Three Tales of China.” It was commissioned by the Kennedy Center for the 2005 Festival of China and is being performed at Seattle Repertory Theatre.

This is literally three Chinese stories: of Emperor Huang and his consort Lady Yang, the invasion of China by the Japanese in World War II and its consequences on Little Worm, a small boy; and the stirring of an economically powerful nation in contemporary times at a luxury hotel.

The three stories are told completely with puppets. The stage is set up so there are three large windows that open and close, as well as wider but shorter windows above those three, where a panoramic scene is displayed. More than 140 puppets of every variety have been created for this production, most notably, traditional Chinese shadow and rod puppets.

Puppeteers from Xian as well as from the noted Seattle group Carter Family Marionettes are featured.

The story is strikingly told. The stage is darkly lit and the opening dialogue is between two tomb guardians, guarding the ancient tomb of Emperor Huang. In contemporary dialogue, they discuss their hopes of ever seeing light again and guesses about how much time has passed since they were placed.

Then it is the story of the Emperor Huang, who takes as his consort the noted beauty Lady Yang. He is so taken with her he withdraws from public life and leaves the management of the kingdom to the hands of Lady Yang’s corrupt brother, who has been made Prime Minister. The barbarians invade from the north and the city is under siege. The emperor exhorts the people to rise and fight, but they won’t until he sacrifices his beloved because of her brother’s sins. He must make the difficult choice between her and his country.

The puppets are extraordinary. We see the Emperor and the consort in rich robes. We see the court underlings in cotton dress. We see the invading army across the top of the stage in shadow, with the horses and riders with their pennants bumping along. We even see a view from the top of Lady Yang’s chambers, and the faces of a claque of viciously gossiping court women.

The “Little Worm” story begins with a family in a small village worrying about the approaching Japanese troops. The family lives a subsistence life, a stark contrast to the Emperor’s court. Footage of the Japanese invasion is projected on the screen and shows the relentlessness and butchery that result. Little Worm’s family is killed, and he wanders, starving, near a Japanese bivouac. There he finds some food, but he’s discovered. One soldier, a poetry reading, sensitive man, is forced to shoot the boy. At the last minute, he shoots over his head, thus sparing Little Worm and insuring good karma for himself.

“New” is set in a luxury “grand hotel.” Miss Yang is a desk clerk and we see the updated viciously gossiping claque of other clerks. A Chinese rap star, a French reincarnation of the generous soldier and a young businessman are staying there as well. There are even Seattleites, complete with team logo sweatshirts and a desire to not eat Chinese food even one more night. They decide to go to the Pizza Hut outlet down the street. True love wins out as the ancient lovers meet in a current reincarnation.
I find it extremely difficult to say how enchanting this production is. The fact that it is set in China takes the strangeness away from the puppetry. If all you have seen of puppets is Maria and the children’s “Lonely Goatherd” in “Sound of Music,” you are in for a revelation. These costumes are sumptuous; the settings are romantic and the beautiful stories are lovingly told. Of course, the tomb guardians are finally freed from the earth and have the last word.

*Cathay: Three Tales of China runs through October 9. For ticket information call Seattle Rep’s box office at (800) 900-9285 or go to www.seattlerep.org.*