Cathay: 3 Tales From China

Seattle Repertory Theater/Leo K. Theater; 286 seats; $46 top


By Lynn Jacobson

Multimedia artist Ping Chong has now premiered two of his three puppet plays at Seattle Repertory Theater: the ghostly 2002 "Obon: Tales of Rain and Moonlight" and his new romance, "Cathay: 3 Tales of China." Both are beautifully rendered, using stick puppets, shadow puppets, life-size constructed figures, projections and moving scenery to tell three related stories. But "Cathay" one-ups the former by more successfully weaving its trio of tales together into a cohesive whole.

Chong is a performance artist, but "Cathay" is more easily compared to certain movies than to other plays. Like "The Red Violin," it follows one thing -- in this case, a soul -- as it traverses generations. The first section, set in the Tang dynasty, depicts a doomed affair between an emperor and his beloved. The second part (told entirely with shadow puppets) shows the horrors of life in China during the Japanese occupation of WWII. The third segment ties plot threads from the first two together in the halls of an ultramodern Chinese hotel in present-day Xian.

Cinematic, too, is "Cathay's" execution. Onstage are a number of sliding screens, which open to reveal various scenes. Sometimes the puppets are huge, as if in close-up; other times we see whole vistas, with parades of horses or courtiers. Chong also plays with perspective, showing us the action from the front or up above, or even mimicking the motion of a roving camera by moving set pieces around midsence.

Performed by the marvelous puppeteers of Xian's Shaanxi Folk Art Theater, supplemented by Seattle's ingenious Carter Family Puppet Theater, "Cathay" evokes a world at once epic and tightly focused.

One remarkable sequence brings to mind the scarf dance from "House of Flying Daggers," but occasionally, the play recalls movies you'd rather it didn't -- specifically, Trey Parker and Matt Stone's "Team America: World Police." An early love scene in "Cathay" is so overwrought it feels like it must be intentionally satirical. But it falls so short of the outrageous "Team America" puppet-sex scene that the joke seems underfed.

For the most part, though, Chong hits his moods right on. "Cathay" is arty but not precious, observant but not preachy. His two narrators framing the action -- a pair of wisecracking tomb statues who survive from the Tang dynasty to inhabit the lobby of the Xian hotel -- trade barbs between sage comments about the infinitude of time and the endurance of the Chinese people. Like all of Chong's best work, "Cathay" is entertaining, thought-provoking and wise.

"Cathay" has the feeling of an ending of sorts. It's the third of Chong's three-part puppet plays. And it's the last Seattle Rep piece to bear the stamp of former artistic director Sharon Ott, who initiated the theater's relationship with Chong.

But as the play suggests, endings beget beginnings. David Esbjornson's era at the Rep starts auspiciously with this production, and from Seattle, "Cathay" moves on to the Kennedy Center and New York's New Victory, with an Asian tour planned for 2006.