

## **Cathay: 3 tales of China**

Judith van Praag

The Seattle Repertory Theatre presents "Cathay: 3 tales of China", by Chinese American theater artist Ping Chong and the Puppetry Division of the Shaanxi Folk Art Theater from Xian, China. SFAT puppeteers Liang Jun (deputy director of SFAT), his wife Liang Yunru, Feng Mei, Song Dongqing, Wang Bo and Yang Qing are joined by Heather Carter, her brother Dmitri, and his wife Xie Zheng Yang, all three members of the Northwest Puppet Center.

Xie Zheng Yang is the daughter of internationally acclaimed master puppeteer Yang Feng and it's her father who taught her the complex techniques of traditional hand puppet manipulation. She's sixth generation, but the first female puppeteer in her family. In the 1950's and 1960's women started to enter the trade. Thus, Ms. Yang was not the only female student while she followed the six-year program at Zhangzhou School of Puppetry Arts. After graduation Ms. Yang stayed on as an instructor, before following her father to the United States. Together they created performances and toured the U.S. and Europe.

In 1994 Ms. Yang met her father's friends, the Carters, here in Seattle, and by working with them she acquired marionette skills. Through their friends, award winning puppeteers Zheng Li Xu and Yu Qin Wang, she learned rod puppet manipulation. She's an all round and ambidextrous puppeteer.

In 1998 Xie Zheng Yang and Dmitri Carter got married (no puppets were present, nobody had to work).

In China puppetry troupes are found in villages, attracting audiences from the surrounding area. But Ms. Yang's grandfather traveled extensively around the world; so much so, that his son didn't meet him until he was five.

Zheng and Dmitri's son won't have to fear such fate. And if Mom and Dad go on tour –such as is the case in October, when

"Cathay" will be performed back east; the four-year-old puppeteer will travel with his parents.

Puppeteers operate very much the way the Italian Comedia del Arte Troupes, or Shakespearean companies did in the past. It's a lifestyle, so it's no surprise that puppeteers marry within the troupes, some, such as Dmitri Carter and Xie Zheng Yang, creating cross-cultural families.

"Cathay" (the name for North China used by medieval Europeans) was commissioned by the Kennedy Center to be performed coming October during "The Festival of China", in Washington D.C., and in New York City.

Randy Ward's ingenious set –resembling a giant jewelry cabinet with 12 compartments– transforms magically for each of the three tales. From "news room" style windows on the ancient world of "The Lady and the Emperor", and "Little Worm's" China during World War Two, into the "Grand Hotel" for "New", or present day Xian.

During a rehearsal in the Leo K. Theatre, Ping Chong said from his seat in the auditorium, "That window was not supposed to close that way. Is that clear?" His tone of voice invited giggles back stage. The director added in mock anger, "I don't want to see that again. Warning!" His remark was answered by laughter all around.

Clearly this was no sign of indignation. The nine puppeteers are filled with respect; they're tremendously disciplined and proud of their work. Each handles one or more main characters. But when asked, they can't say how many of the more than 100 puppets in "Cathay" are their personal responsibility, they all help each other out, performing small miracles.

Both the show's puppet designer Stephen Kaplin, and Dmitri Carter state that puppets are nearly limitless in their

potential. Unlike actors, puppets can be shown in different scale, something humans can accomplish only on film. To make use of this ability, artisans at Shaanxi's puppet factory, created Lady Yang's character in ten different sizes, to be part of environments of different scale and perspective.

Liang Yunru is the woman behind Lady Yang in the romantic tale of "The Lady and the Emperor". But Dmitri Carter, and Xie Zheng Yang handle the smallest version of Lady Yang and the Emperor in a modest love scene (parental guidance 14). They told me they're not responsible for the couple's sighing, all sound is recorded.

Ping Chong wouldn't be Ping Chong, if he didn't present the audience with something deep to think about. In "Little Worm", the attack on China by Japan, the confrontation between Japanese soldiers and Chinese citizens, combined with Projections Designer Ruppert Bohl's use of actual World War Two footage, creates a few tense moments. Thankfully, resolution and reconciliation occur in the last act when "Little Worm" meets his Japanese savior, and a hint about reincarnation suggests rekindling of an old romance.

The puppets and their costumes are delightful, the tomb guards with their 21st Century gift of gab a riot, the set a treasure chest, the projections and sound highly effective, and the puppeteers masters of their craft.

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