

## RESURRECTION: A *PEONY* BLOOMS IN NEW YORK (PUBLISHED AUGUST 1999, THREE-PART SERIES, CHINANOW.COM)

“HOW LITTLE IT IS KNOWN THAT THAT WHICH CANNOT BE IN THE REALM OF REASON [理] SIMPLY HAS TO BE IN THE REALM OF LOVE [情]!”

--Tang Xianzu, Author's Preface to *The Peony Pavilion* [牡丹亭] (1598)

EVERY ASPECT OF THE *PEONY PAVILION* THAT OPENED ON JULY 7 TO A SOLD-OUT 965-seat house radiated the labors of love invested in this politically and culturally fraught production. Despite an international debacle that sidelined the original 1998 production and the rancorous debates over conflicts between Western and Chinese performance methods, the passion director Chen Shizheng [陈士争] instilled in his *Peony* cannot be doubted, even when ardor blinded better judgement.

The seminal opera of the late-Ming (1368-1644) culture of love [情], *Peony Pavilion* is widely regarded as Tang Xianzu's greatest work and exemplifies Chinese Kunqu Opera at the height of its sophistication and complexity. One hour longer than Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, *Peony* uses 160 characters to spin a 22-hour tale. Set against the political and military machinations of Southern bandits and the vagaries of feudal appointments, a love story both timeless and stateless unfolds between Du Liniang (played by Qian Yi [钱熠]) and Liu Mengmei (Wen Yuhang [温宇航]). Driven by visions of each other in their dreams, Liu renames himself in honor of the beauty beckoning him from underneath the plum tree. Holding no hope that she will be able to consummate her dream-love due to traditional conventions of betrothal, Du slowly pines to her death. Du's death is only the first obstacle to the lovers' union, and not even the most difficult. Before the last of the six episodes of *Peony* draws to a close, the audience follows Du to Hell and back and sees Liu seduced by both a painting and a ghost before the two even meet in the mortal world. Despite their seemingly ill-starred match, Du and Liu's persevering love for one another, with a little Imperial *deus ex machina*, finally conquers all.

Like the characters he sought to bring to life, Chen was possessed by a dream. Driven “to bring Western notions of textual completion and authentic performance practice to an Eastern style known primarily through oral tradition,” Chen not only searched for a complete *Peony* score, heretofore unknown, but also sought to recreate a Ming-era performance space.

Unlike the painfully screeching chirps of Beijing Opera, *Peony* is the most revered example of the more melodious Kunqu opera. Originating over 600 years ago in what is today known as Zhejiang Province, the 1,200 arias of the Kunqu repertory are sung two octaves below Beijing Opera and accentuate the rise and fall of assonance rather than nasal staccato. Lucky for Chen, Kunqu is the only one of some 300 Chinese opera forms that is musically notated, and the earliest extant score was located without much difficulty. Unfortunately, two scenes from the complete lyrics had been excised from the score.

Wildly popular from its inception, *Peony* became an immediate cult sensation in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Tang's impassioned epic highlighting the conflicts between love and reason, autonomy and convention became the mantra of the late-Ming moment. The sensuous and bawdy tale of Du Liniang pining to her death out of desperation to escape the traditional order, and the marriage conventions it included, for the lover she had only dreamed of came to represent the late-Ming desire for personal autonomy that could trump conventional order. This receptivity to claims of love and fascination with illusion did not sit well with the cultural despots of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), to whom order and defined roles were critical to the maintenance of power. Under the Qing reign, Kunqu troupes could no longer perform *Peony* in its entirety. Censorship of the work continued into the 1800s when Emperor Qianlong removed two scenes he thought fueled anti-Manchu sentiment: Scene 15 "A Spy for the Tartars," and Scene 47 "The End of the Siege."

Maybe Chen should have realized *Peony's* early political incorrectness would be a harbinger of difficulties to come, but he and his contemporaries persisted. Finally, musical notations of the two missing scenes were located, likely having been recreated by Cheng Limen before his death due to starvation during the Cultural Revolution. A talented musician, Cheng was tortured by the Red Guards and most of his collection of musical scores destroyed; he managed to preserve only a few pieces by stashing them inside the archive of the Cultural Management Committee in Quzhou City, Zhejiang Province.

Other cultural organizations would prove not to be benefactors of the production. One week before the completed production was to open Lincoln Center Festival 1998, the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Culture impounded six-and-half tons of costumes and sets, and refused to let the actors travel to New York. Labeled "feudal, pornographic, and superstitious," Chen's *Peony* was deemed unfit for consumption.

While feudal, sexual, and superstitious elements are interwoven throughout the performance, this has less to do with Chen's creative direction than Tang's text itself. Tang's ability to capture a glimpse of Chinese society in the late-Ming while creating a love story that seamlessly transcends corporeal and spiritual worlds is a remarkable feat. If Chen could harness the raw and prolific passion Tang spread over 55 scenes and 200 arias, he would present the world with one of the great artistic moments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the world would see neither the greatness of early Chinese literature nor the virtuosity of modern Kunqu performance in 1998.

While Shanghai's formal complaint was on "artistic" grounds, it is likely their opposition to the production ran much deeper and was more personal. Seeing a relic long ignored and deemed backward selected as one of their greatest literary achievements, and then brought back to prominence by American capitalist money employing the greatest artisans of China, seems to have been just a little too much to bear. Injured pride dominated China's diplomacy last in June 1998, and everyone lost out. (How long will it take the Chinese to learn that injured pride is neither at heart a good motive nor an aid to their public relations campaign?)

THANKFULLY, LINCOLN CENTER WAS UNSHAKEN BY THE \$600,000 LOSS DUE TO *PEONY'S* late cancellation (*Peony* would eventually cost over \$1.5 million—kudos to American

capitalist Michael Bloomberg for his support of the 1999 production), and Chen was willing to add yet another year to the previous two he had already labored on *Peony*. Returning to his original mandate to create an “authentic performance practice,” Chen rebuilt the 1999 production on the solid, and visually hypnotic, foundations of the previously impounded costumes and sets.

The 550 costumes designed by Cheng Shuyi alone mesmerize every eye. Over the 22-hours of *Peony*’s opening 1999 cycle, whispers of delight arose from every aisle as the beautiful heroine Du Liniang made each of her entrances in 20 different scenes in a separate delicately embroidered silk gown. The Dragon Robe worn by Du in the landmark “Scene 10: The Interrupted Dream,” took 5 months to stitch, using the hands of six women from three generations of the same family—the mother of the oldest of these women embroidered for the last imperial court. Some 400 other Suzhou needlework masters worked painstakingly on the remaining 549 kaleidoscopically-colored silk costumes. It is unlikely that such loving handiwork will ever again grace a New York stage. So delicate are the costumes, they cannot be cleaned, but rather must only be dabbed with Chinese rice liquor to neutralize sweat and odor.

Yet even before the sheen of silk glistens, the audience is transported to another existence by the simple beauty of *Peony*’s set. When seating finally began at 6:28pm for a 6:30pm opening of the premiere installment of *Peony*’s ’99 run, the groans of frustrated theatre aficionados were transformed into shaken silence and then tranquil amazement by the Ming-style pavilion, complete with a lively pond, erected in what they had expected to be a stage. Designed by Huang Haiwei, and built by 12 carpenters who had previously repaired the Forbidden City, the pavilion roof alone holds 60 hand-joined pieces. Positioned as a proscenium over a 18,000 gallon pond teaming with goldfish, bustling mallard ducks, and parakeets singing from hand-carved wooden cages, the pavilion design creates a space that easily morphs from indoors to out, from secluded ante-chamber to bustling country fair. True to Chen’s intentions, the set creates the feeling of a “place full of life and activity,” more like the traditional Chinese performance spaces of marketplaces, temples and gardens than a Western theatre.

There are times, however, when Chen’s original passion to create an “authentic performance” of Chinese opera in a Western setting becomes ridiculously, and painfully, obsessive. In addition to the intricately carved columns and balustrades of the main pavilion, two narrow, raised platforms extend from both stage left and stage right, the former used mainly for costuming and make-up application and the latter for the musicians’ seating. While the seating of the musicians slightly above audience level would not have been problematic had the score not drowned out many of the arias of several female vocalists and created obstructed sight-lines, prominent and demonstrative application of make-up and dress exemplifies a creative insight tediously forced to its torturous extreme.

By not using a curtain, Chen opened up the stage in an innovative way: the boundaries between on- and off-stage blurred. Suspension of disbelief gave way to a clear sense of performance. Each scene was preceded by a stagehand carrying a hand-scribed announcement of the scene title, in both Chinese and English, a la a WWF title fight. When the 21 actors who played more than 160 characters were not actively participating in the performance, they were easily visible dressing and primping, dozing and playing cards.

Subtle yet obvious, the use of an open back-stage created an oddly refreshing interplay between distance and intimacy while incorporating traditional Chinese performance practice into a Western setting. Creating an additional space that extended out into the audience further than the main pavilion was unnecessary. When another actor applied the make-up of Liu Mengmei to Wen Yuhang on the left platform during the first two scenes of “Episode Two: Pursuing the Dream,” the maternal worry and lovingly nuanced chastising of mother (Madame Du) to daughter (Du Liniang) were overshadowed. Consumed by making an artistic point, Chen eclipsed (or maybe himself confused?) the performance product with the process. Usually more subtle methods of getting across an aesthetic philosophy than bludgeoning the audience are preferred.

CHEN’S IS NOT THE ONLY MEMORABLE MARK LEFT ON *PEONY*, HOWEVER. THE enchanting performance by Qian Yi as Du Liniang gave cohesion to the 20-plus hours, and performances by male actors Lin Sen [林森] as Sister Stone and Yu Qingwang [余庆汪] as Dame Li added infectious spark, while also giving Western drag queens a serious run for their money.

One of two original cast members from the Shanghai Kunqu Company, 24-year old Qian Yi radiates energy and effuses charm onstage. The distance between audience and stage melts under her gaze. Rather than walking individual steps, Qian’s Du Liniang seems to float, using the refined movements of her sleeve-covered wrists to guide her direction. While the strength of her voice is still impaired by a thyroid condition that hit her this past winter coupled with four months of intensive rehearsal without an understudy, the range of emotion and precision of tone that accompany each rendition of her 60-plus arias enralls the crowd.

In “Scene 28: Making Love with a Ghost,” Qian’s clear, siren-like voice, floating gait, and wide, glistening eyes not only make Liu Mengmei think Qian’s Du Liniang is a “celestial sylph,” but also causes the audience to wonder whether Qian’s own presence is ethereal. In contrast, once she is assured of Liu’s love and has convinced him to complete the formal marriage rites, “Scene 32: Spectral Vows” finds Qian goading Liu for his reluctance to help her return to corporeal life with a bawdy jeer reflected in the fire of her eyes: “Dig me up! There are only three feet of earth between us!” The fluctuation of her voice, glint of her eyes, flush of her cheeks and turn of her wrists conveyed her meaning, without aid from the dual-language Chinese-English supertitles.

Much like Western literary construction, Chinese Opera integrates the role of the clown to relieve dramatic tension and add humorous intrigue. Lin Sen’s Sister Stone, so named since her hymen was impenetrably rock-hard, proved to be a crowd favorite throughout *Peony*’s New York run. As a confidante to both Du Liniang’s family and Liu Mengmei, as well as being close cohorts with a string of others, including bumbling Tutor Chen and sly Scabby Turtle, many of the plots most winding twists and most ribald scenes revolve around Sister Stone. With a unique stage presence that incites spontaneous laughter while commanding respect, Lin is the highlight of every scene he enters.

Announced by two five-foot long turkey feathers uncontrollably bouncing with each step, the entrances of Yu Qingwang’s Dame Li are unmistakable. The traditional Kunqu female

gait that makes Qian's Du Liniang appear to hover over the ground rather than step upon it is used by Yu, as successfully as one with clod-hopper feet can, to frame Dame Li as a woman who demands respect for her femininity while enjoying the power and control her more manly size gives her (all the better to henpeck you with, my dear). Chen's insightful decision to cross-dress this role created a more round character than Tang had himself provided by providing a physical explanation to Dame Li's political and sexual manipulations that would have been lost otherwise.

The sheer depth and breadth of Chen's cast astounds. The stagebill nonchalantly acknowledges that Lin not only played Sister Stone but "Janitor, Soldier, six others." Yu Qingwang played 16 roles in addition to Dame Li. Despite the casual noting of every actor's multiple billing—Qian is the only performer in a single role—it is impossible to ignore the incredible stamina and power of memorization each actor possessed.

UNFORTUNATELY, TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES NOT ONLY DISTRACTED FROM THE ACTORS' Herculean performances, but also distorted the underlying themes of the work. At \$210 per person for tickets to the entire show, it shouldn't be too much to expect that supertitles would be provided. While there were Chinese and English words projected onto a screen above the stage's pavilion, the frequent misspellings, obvious time-lags, and blunt editing rendered the purported supertitles to be more of a hindrance than a tool to enjoying the performance.

The unprofessionally poor translation of the text not only eliminated key character development, but also made scenes critical to the developing conflict between love and reason in *Peony* seem irrelevant. Arguably the pivotal scene in *Peony*, "Scene 7: The Schoolroom," reveals Du Liniang's preoccupation with love and her fear that she will be suffocated by the traditional role for women in life and marriage. By using linguistic slapstick between Tutor Chen and the maid Spring Fragrance, the juxtaposition between passionate love and ordered reason is laid as a foundation for the rest of the opera. As this foundation is explicated through the words of the *Songs*, it is lost due to the production's gross inattention to the very text upon which *Peony* is based.

When Du reads the first stanza of the *Songs*, she realizes that she will not be able to fall in love and choose her husband. Rather, principles of family and state will be used to determine whether she is "the virtuous maiden, a fit mate for our Prince." It is this new realization that drives her to walk away from her books, and the reason [理] they embody, and to enter the garden, where love [情] is the dominant force. Chen's *Peony* lacks this key thematic and character development because the supertitles never directly relate the four lines of the stanza in question. Consequently, the audience views a scene integral to the overall meaning of *Peony* simply as a comic interlude.

One would think that after living in the United States for twelve years Chen would have known better than to treat English as an afterthought. It was easy to hear the disconnect between the dialogue on stage and the supertitles—while rapid banter bounced through the air, the same tortured English phrase would be frozen for 45 seconds. Prevented from understanding the action on stage due to linguistic barriers, and duly feeling more than just a little ignored, much of the crowd dozed throughout the performance. Of course some the

snorers may have been incorrigible narcoleptics, but a show that made an attempt to connect with them linguistically as well as aesthetically would have likely proven a powerful remedy for most. Yet even for those who were able to pinch themselves awake, the ridiculously poor supertitles turned *Peony* into a circus-like spectacle rather than a profound and entertaining literary work.

SOME OF *PEONY*'S DIFFICULTIES WERE MORE THAN JUST TECHNICAL. CHEN'S OBSESSION with bringing a traditional Chinese Opera experience to Western viewers seemed to blind him to the limitations of the performance space available and to the theatrical viewing habits of the average New Yorker. In his director's note, he "encourage[s] the audience to move about, eat, drink, talk or even doze as the performance goes on." In a seeming attempt to mandate that *Peony*'s patrons have no choice but to follow the director's orders, each three-and-a-half hour installment of *Peony* was presented without an intermission. And in addition to the linguistic disconnect provided by the supertitles, coffee was not available.

Despite his good intentions, Chen created a viewing nightmare. With no center aisle, more than 50 seats in most rows, and no intermission, Chen insured that every seat in the house had a partially obstructed view. Not even the most devout aficionados could sit still that long. Supposedly, Chen planned to use cast members to serve tea and pass out hot towels to the audience when they were not needed onstage. Afraid of litigious New Yorkers (and the precedence of the infamous McDonald's suit), Chen backed away from the idea. After realizing that neither LaGuardia Concert Hall nor his audience's disposition provided a good match for performing without an intermission, one would think that reason would require either changing the venue or adding an intermission. Chen, however, did neither. Overrun by passion for his dream, he lost touch with the reality of the production.

FOCUSING ON THE WEAKNESSES OF CHEN'S *PEONY* MAKES ONE FEEL UNGRATEFUL.

Until Cyril Birch translated Tang's masterpiece in 1980, a love that could bring life back to the dead was inaccessible to all but those who could read classical Chinese. Even though Birch gave the text a new life in translation, he could not help but to lament that he would never witness the characters he knew so well cross the stage:

"But we, who cannot hope to see or hear an actual performance of *The Peony Pavilion*, can only admire the literary skill with which he varies his pace while never failing to move his plot forward, to enliven it with comic relief, or to explore its significance in thoughtful lyrics."

Like his hero, Liu Mengmei, Chen overcame everyone's doubts and myriad governmental obstacles to resurrect the body of his love. Nervous that after three years in the grave, time was too long spent to retrieve the interned body of his beautiful Du Liniang, Liu balked several times at breaking her spirit tablet. Chen persisted in his call to rejoin the spirit and body of his *Peony* love. Like Du, *Peony* shone with overall effervescence and beauty in her return to the living world, but after 400 years in the shades who can blame her for a few stumbles on her first walk?