

19TH OCTOBER, 1940

QUESTORS IN CHINESE ROMANCE

IN the Western theatre, if the producer wishes to indicate to the audience that the scene is a certain room, it is usually necessary to represent it by scenery painted more or less realistically. If that room has a door, a door there must be which the actor can open and close, and which certainly should click realistically when pushed to. If the action required the presence on the stage of a horse, either the play will be altered, or the Drury-lane theatre taken and a horse duly provided. A carriage would be similarly dealt with. A garden wall would be represented brick by brick.

In the highly conventionalised traditional Chinese Theatre, however, none of these things is necessary. The scene is left entirely to the imagination of the audience: thus it can be changed at will, with no irksome delays to enable scenery to be man-handled. When a player steps over an imaginary threshold, it conveys to the audience that he is entering or leaving a room: if it is desired to indicate the opening or closing of a door, the action is mimed. The actor flourishes a whip, and lo! he is handsomely mounted on a spirited steed. Two flags with embroidered wheels indicate a carriage. A chair brought forward at the appropriate moment by one of the property men will represent a wall, or a mountain, or what you will. Moreover, the actors have no need to bother about properties, for the property men bring on and remove as required whatever may be needed.

It would seem that the Chinese convention should solve all the problems of the producer. But not those of the producer of a bedroom farce with its multiplicity of wrong doors, for it is a strict convention that the players always enter from the right and exit on the left.

But that does not matter, because the Chinese would not care about a bedroom farce. They prefer poetry.

Amateur dramatic companies frequently find elaborate scenery rather difficult and costly to manipulate, and the Chinese theatre's method was certainly most advantageous to the Questors when they opened their 1940-41 season with "The Western Chamber," a thirteenth century Chinese romance, at the Questors Theatre, Mattock-lane, Ealing, on Sunday afternoon.

Translated by S. I. Hsiung, author of "Lady Precious Stream," this classic will also be performed this afternoon and to-morrow afternoon.

THE whole play was dominated by three characters: Ying-Ying, a Chinese girl, whose part was taken by Mary Chanter; Hung Niang, her personal maid, played by Yvonne Angel, and Chang, the girl's lover, whose part was taken by the producer, Alfred Emmett.

Courting is certainly not what it was; that was one impression I gained. The same elaborate courtesy which has made the orientals the subject of humorous sketches is, in the case of a straight play, most impressive, and the Questors certainly know how to carry it off. Any slight discord in vocal intonation or rigidity in mannerisms would have spoilt the whole effect. But few—I cannot say none—occurred. A feature of the performance which, to my mind, rather spoilt the effect, was the Chinese music which accompanied the exit or entrance of a character. It just failed to convey the atmosphere aimed at, and it was slightly overdone.

The chief action had a monastery for its setting. There Madam Tsui (Peggy Cooper), her daughter Ying-Ying, and their maid Hung Niang, are staying after the death of Madam Tsui's husband. Also at the monastery is Chang, a young student, who falls in love "at first sight" with the daughter.

THEN Sun, the "Flying Tiger"

(Fred Greenfield), makes his appearance, looking, as he was meant to look, like a particularly villainous pantomime demon. With five thousand pagan warriors at his heels, he surrounds the monastery, and threatens its inmates with destruction unless Ying-Ying is handed over to him to be his bride. Madam Tsui offers her daughter's hand in marriage to the man who can make the pagans withdraw. Chang accepts this offer, and sends Hui Ming (John Turner) a boastful and pugnacious servant of the monastery, to summon aid from General Tu (Anthony Rickards).

The latter beats off the "Flying Tiger," after which Madam Tsui, rather in the manner of Pharaoh, relents of her promise immediately her particular "plague" has disappeared.

Then comes mutual sorrow and ill-feeling, and the lovers are brought further apart, until Hung Niang (who seems to have been allowed a good bit of latitude for a servant of her period) steps in, and becomes the medium through which the hero and heroine are brought together. All this happens without the knowledge of the mother, Madam Tsui, and the trend of the action all goes to show that, though customs may differ, human nature and human weaknesses have always been pretty well the same.

The Chinese, too, demand a happy ending, and in this case the couple are allowed to marry—there is no alternative.

OTHER parts were taken by L. E. Bayling (keeper of the monastery), J. Cowderoy (Chang's lute-bearer and soldier), T. Gordon (inn-keeper), Fred Greenfield (imperial messenger), E. Bishop, B. Turner, and T. Gordon (soldiers). Fred Robinson and B. Sharp were the property men.

Though I know but little of Chinese dress in the thirteenth century, the costumes, which were lent by Mrs. Simpson, were certainly most impressive.

Fred Robinson was stage manager, Michael Kelly in charge of the lighting, and Mildred Emmet was wardrobe mistress.

A good production, this, even without taking war difficulties into consideration.

P.H.

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refreshing, at a time when all London and suburban s are closed, to see an r dramatic company pre-a good play.

That is what the Questors are doing. They opened their 1940-41 season on Sunday afternoon with "The Western Chamber," and will put it on to-day and to-morrow as well. They are not allowing the many war difficulties, which need no elaboration, to lower their standards — and the Questors always aim high! A pity, though, that so many of the seats were unoccupied on Sunday, although what it lacked in numbers the audience did make amends for in enthusiasm.

The Questors obviously do not intend to let adverse conditions thwart them. It is unfortunate that some other local bodies, particularly our sports clubs, do not show similar determination. What are difficulties for, except that they should be overcome?

GAZETTEER.

THE QUESTORS IN CHINESE DRAMA

Sirens Blend With Strange Music

The production by the Questors in their theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, on Sunday of "The Western Chamber," a 13th century romance and one of China's literary classics, broke new ground both in the fact that it was the first time that this society has presented traditional Chinese drama, and also that it was the initial Sunday matinee its members had given of a major production.

Mr. S. I. Hsiung, who translated "The Western Chamber," and whose name is associated with "Lady Precious Stream," took a personal interest in the Questors' production, and he hopes to be present at either this afternoon's matinee or tomorrow's (the third and last).

To enjoy a play such as "The Yellow Jacket," "Lady Precious Stream" or "The Western Chamber," written in traditional Chinese theatrical convention, it is essential for a western audience to entirely divest itself of any preconceived ideas of what the stage should or should not provide. Imagination is called upon to work far more vigorously and continuously than in any production of the western stage. It has, indeed, largely to do the producer's and property manager's work for them. With imagination working at full pressure, both among the players and the audience, and supplemented by two property men dressed in blue who come into their own and get a recognition denied to property managers on the western stage, mechanical devices are done away with. The characters announce, for instance (keeping to the rigid Chinese rule coming on to the stage from their right and making exits from their left), their intentions, of making a call or bringing a letter, and that letter is promptly brought to them by one or other of the property men, who move about a few chairs, making them into thrones or whatever happens to be needed at that moment. A high step mimed by a player, the flourishing of a four-tasselled stick, the stepping within a couple of yellow flags on which a wheel has been painted denote respectively in the Chinese convention, stepping over a threshold, riding a steed, or driving in a carriage.

ALMOST BARE STAGE

Naturally, with imagination given such rein, there is practically no need for stage settings or decor, and the stage at the Questors' Theatre on Sunday was practically bare except for a chair or two, a table with a magnificently embroidered cloth of Chinese design, some incense sticks, banners and two handsome silk curtains which in the last scene of the second act denoted the entrance to the hero's quarters in a Buddhist monastery.

The cyclorama—a western addition to eastern poetic drama—was picturesquely used to indicate the atmosphere of the various scenes, being blood-red in a battle episode and registering all kinds of soft, fleecy cloud effects to tone with the romantic episodes.

An air-raid warning sounded during the performance, and synchronised with the recording of some authentic Chinese music from records lent by Mr. S. I. Hsiung, the translator of the play. The combined sound effect was certainly strange to western ears—more strange than beautiful.

Thanks to the kindness of Mrs. Simpson, the costumes worn by the players were genuine Chinese of the period represented, and they lent a magnificence to the production, the impressiveness of which, however, was due to its sheer, unshorn simplicity.

FINE ACTING

Chinese poetical drama of the kind of which "The Western Chamber" is a fine example, relies almost completely upon two factors. The first is the ability of each player to so act, even a subsidiary role, that his acting is an essential thing in the production, and the second is the ability of the audience to supply the necessary imagination. Both essentials were fulfilled in the Questors' production.

Mr. Alfred Emmet not only bore on his shoulders the burden of the production, but also played the chief male role of Chang, the Chinese bachelor student who woos above his station, but wins his bride and fulfils his ambition by attaining the position of prefect, and coming out third in the list of exigent Chinese examinations. Neither he nor any member of the cast hesitated for a moment for a word, which fact lent a peculiar smoothness to the production, and he brought to his role a suave, persuasive dignity and sincerity. Miss Mary Chanter's acting as his beloved, Ying Ying, daughter of a deceased prime minister of a Chinese province, was restrained and yet caught that curious mixture of vehement eastern passion and sentiment at war with a certain maidenly aristocratic reserve of a Juliet of that clime and period.

Miss Yvonne Angel is nothing if not vivacious, and in her role as Hung Niang, Ying Ying's confidential maid who enjoys—largely for her own entertainment—fostering a love affair between her young mistress and the student, she enlivened an over-sentimental atmosphere by animated comedy of voice, gesture and facial expression. This part has some similarity to that of Maria in "Twelfth Night," and Miss Angel's only fault was a tendency to be too modern.

Miss Peggy Cooper's haughty, aloof manner was well suited to the part of Madam Tsut, Ying Ying's scheming mother. Mr. Fred Greenfield as the scarlet-faced bandit chief, the Flying Tiger, and Mr. Anthony Rickards as Chang's elder brother, General Tu, of the recognised troops, each of equally terrifying appearance, played with spirit, and the other roles in the cast, all of which fell into their rightful places, were taken by J. Cowdery, T. Gordon, L. E. Bayling, E. Bishop, John Turner and B. Turner, Fred Robinson and Miss Barbara Sharp. Some of the roles were duplicated.

Mr. Fred Robinson was again responsible for the stage management. Mr. Michael Kelly looked after the lighting effects and Mrs. Mildred Emmet was wardrobe mistress.

At the close of the performance Mr. Emmet thanked all present for the interest they had shown in supporting the Questors' enterprise, and expressed his appreciation of the loyalty of the cast, who had attended rehearsals under very trying conditions.