

## FEATURE

# *The Peony Pavilion*—In Celebration of Youth, Love, and Life

By Catherine Li

If I were never to see another opera, whether Chinese or Western, I would be satisfied that I have seen *The Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu—a contemporary of William Shakespeare. Professor Pai Hsien-yung has successfully adapted this traditional Chinese Kun opera in his “Young Lover” Edition.

Pai, author of numerous books on literature and aesthetics, is Professor Emeritus of Literature at UC San Barbara. In recent years, Professor Pai has devoted heart and soul to producing and directing *The Peony Pavilion*. He has single handedly raised funds and handpicked the two main stars from hundreds of young performers. He also has found the finest teachers to transmit this national treasure. Because of him, *The Peony Pavilion* is perfected and preserved. Kun opera, including *The Peony Pavilion*, justifiably deserves being proclaimed as a “Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.”

The Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theater of Jiangsu presented the nine-hour performance on three days at the Barclay Theater on the U C Irvine campus. The music, song, dance, pantomime, acrobatics and costumes show cased against a minimal stage mesmerized me. This masterpiece portrays a pair of young lovers having the courage to defy morality, convention, and society, abandoning themselves

completely to the pursuit of passion and love.

In a grand garden under a flowering plum tree, Du Liniang, played by the talented Shen Fenying, has fallen asleep in nature’s arbor decked with flowers and permeated with the scent of spring. Her surrounding sets the stage for the dream scene that mirrors the natural state of her mind. She dreams of a young scholar who will later be Liu Mengmei, played by the equally gifted Yu Jiulin. Liu Mengmei sets fire to Du Liniang’s heart and soul so that only the gathering clouds and rain can extinguish her desires.

After the fallen flowers have gently awakened her, Du Liniang pines for the beloved in a dream and dies as a result. Upon her death she leaves a self-portrait behind. As a wandering spirit, she waits for the arrival of the beloved. After three long years, the lovers are finally



united, but one has already become a denizen of the shade while the other has remained in the world of the living. Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei's love story is so pure and intense that even death cannot keep them apart. Because of her love for Liu Mengmei, Du Liniang will herself to life again.

What makes this Kun Opera unique is its daring theme in the China of four hundred years ago when Neo-Confucianism determined the role of each person in relation to the family, clan, and state. The matchmaker, chosen by the families of the bride and groom, but not by the young, decides on their future spouse. The popularity of The Peony Pavilion over the centuries is a testimony that the Chinese people desire to control their own individual destinies.

The Peony Pavilion ends happily while conforming to the social norms of the time. The family and society have sanctioned and welcomed back the rebellious young lovers with opened arms. Du Liniang remains filial to her parents, and Liu Mengmei, placed first in the civil service examination, pays deference to her in-laws.

The Chinese literati favor Kun opera and use it as a platform to emote a spectrum of powerful sentiments including patriotism, filial duty, and love. At times when the literati find themselves unappreciated by the government and unable to use their talents, especially towards the end of the Ming (1368-1644) and beginning of the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, they sought to vent their frustration by devoting their talent to the arts.

Because the actors and actresses of The Peony Pavilion are so adept in their craft, their performance has transformed art into life. One of the most heart-wrenching scenes in this Kun Opera is found in Act II. This electrifies the stage when the Du family mourns for their daughter, Liniang. First, Fragrant Spring calls out to the spirit of her departed young mistress to return, and thus sets the stage for Madame Zhen, played by Chen Lingling, to sing a most evocative aria

of loss, with Du Bao, Liniang's father (played by Qu Binbin), echoing the same sentiment. In sonorous voices, Madame Zhen and Du Bao pour out their grief in an aria as she ponders about her daughter's uncared for grave.

*The earth grows cold and the sky darkens.*

*There is no place to shelter this old woman.*

*No kin is in sight; none to summon my soul.*

*Where in the world will this old one be?*

*My bowels are wrenched with grief.*

*Ever since Liniang died,*

*I've become only skin and bones.*

*My heart is pained by grief.*

*Vaguely I see you in my dreams,*

*To hear the melodious call of "mother."*

*My dear child Liniang,*

*How can you abandon your white-haired childless parent?*

Each simple word and controlled gesture of Fragrant Spring, Madame Zhen, and Du Bao directly cut to the quick the hearts of the audience. When the elderly mother cries out that there will be no one to summon her soul, even Heaven and Earth have no sympathy for the living. In traditional China, there is no greater tragedy than not having descendants to feed their ancestors with libations and incense smoke. Madame Zhen also adds that she can only hear the voice of Du Liniang in her dreams, which intensifies her loss and sense of separation. Because the performance of these characters is so brilliant that the sentiments expressed transcend language and culture. If I could not read the subtitles, tears would still have flowed from my eyes as my heart listened to the grieving on stage.

Performance by Yu Julin (Liu Mengmei) and Shen Fengyin (Du Liniang) have given life to the roles of the Scholar and Beauty because of their exceptional skills in narrating,

singing, and pantomiming. They both have a great command of their voices. When they are engaged in dialogue, their voices are like coming from fine musical instruments. At times, their voices are sweet and light like that of the dulcimer filled with tenderness and other times the vibrancy of the lute. Yu Jiulin and Shen Fengyin are also able to project a wide spectrum of emotions from longing, yearning, pining, and grieving to sexual awakening that ushers in joy, ecstasy, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

The virtuosity of Yu Jiulin and Shen Fengyin has no boundary. When they sing, they are able to meticulously sustain the tempo required by the plot to allow the narration and aria to evolve while other times quick and sudden to maximize aesthetic values. In Act II, Yu Jiulin has masterfully portrayed Liu Mengmei's forlornness with humor when he arrived at the capital as a stranger to take the civil service examination. This scene relies on his exceptional mime skill, with only a parasol to weld on a minimal stage setting.

And then, the exquisite performance of Shen Fengyin is second to none. In Act II, even as she trembles from fear before the judge in hell or languishes in her longing for Liu Mengmei, her flowing "water sleeves" complement her every delicate move and graceful gestures. As she walks in her quick mincing steps, she gives the appearance that she is floating in the air. Her voice has a spectacular expressive range and the clarity of a bell.

On the whole, being able to see the entire The Peony Pavilion on stage is a once-in-a-lifetime love affair. Even though Professor Pai condensed the original 55 scenes to a nine-hour performance for three days, the performance was much too brief because it was so delectable. I left the theater relishing the memory of the excitement of the gongs, the breathtaking acrobatics, the slapstick humor, the beauty of the arias, and the stunning costumes.

I yearn to see the performance once again and I do hope that Professor Pai and the Suzhou

Kunqu Opera Theater of Jiangsu will come through southern California another time.

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