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'Second Visit' Puts Modern Accent on Chinese Opera



Lawrence B. Johnson | October 1, 2007

ANN ARBOR, Mi. - If there's a moral remonstrance that crosses all boundaries of time and cultures, it's "I told you so." Typically followed by "But no, you wouldn't listen."

That's pretty much the awkward - and, we discover, desperate -- position a 16th century empress finds herself in as the curtain rises on the classical Chinese opera "The Second Visit to the Empress."

How this concentrated, colorful political drama plays out, in a production that opened the University Musical Society's new season Friday

night, is also about crossing lines of time and place. In a radical spin on "The Second Visit," choreographer-designer-director Shen Wei has reconfigured China's classical opera to give it the theatrical impact he believes is vital for modern audiences - even those in China.

It's still a fascinating, ear-stretching leap for anyone attuned to the conventions of Western opera. Yet it may be more accurate to say this production by the New York-based Shen Wei Dance Arts altogether redefines opera in any language as a free-form fusion of singing, stylized drama, instrumental accompaniment and, not least, dance.

Essentially, "The Second Visit to the Empress" involves three characters: the Empress Li, acting as regent for her infant son, and her faithful advisers, Duke Xu and General Yang. In the back story, Xu and Yang have warned the Empress that her father intends to usurp the throne.

The Empress dismisses their alarm and orders them away.

The "second visit" occurs after the coup, when the duke and the general return to the Empress, admonish her, accept her belated thanks and lead a successful overthrow of her dastardly father. Moral: Constant friends are a royal blessing.

What Shen Wei has done in this production is, first, to liberate the singers from the static postures of classical Chinese opera and allow them to move and physically interact; and, second, to create a completely new component of dance in a fluid, elemental style that incorporates both modernist gestures and martial arts.

Thus eye and ear take in, often all at once, meticulously preserved classical singing, gorgeous stylized costumes for the singers, dancers snaking about the stage in starkly simple attire and a dozen master musicians heightening these impressions on traditional Chinese instruments.

The charm quotient was huge, the juxtaposition of brightly robed singers and lyrically flowing dancers captivating. That said, the ear constantly drifted back to the virtuoso band in the pit. Over the opera's unbroken 70-minute course, the cultural leap felt like one long, exhilarating bound. You never came down until suddenly the redeemed Empress stepped forward and bowed, signaling the story's end. And perhaps a new beginning for Chinese opera.