Tang X, Birch C. The Peony Pavilion : Mudan Ting. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 2002.

Introduction: *Peony Pavilion* on Stage and in the Study

CATHERINE SWATEK

Nineteen ninety-nine marked 400 years since *Peony Pavilion* was first performed in the home of its author, and in that year three new productions of it reached audiences inside and outside of China. In March, an avant-garde interpretation by the American director Peter Sellars completed its international tour with two evening performances and a matinee in Berkeley, California. At 3¼ hours, this was the shortest of the new productions, concluding with the resurrection of Bridal Du, enacted using a water-filled perspex tomb that had doubled as her bed in earlier scenes of lovemaking. In July, Chen Shi-Zheng's interpretation of the complete play-killed by cultural authorities in Shanghai the year before but revived by Lincoln Center and a French co-sponsor-finally had its world premiere in New York, as part of Lincoln Center's "Festival 99." At 18 hours, this "Ming Ring" in six segments included every scene and aria, perhaps for the first time ever.[1] Finally, in October, a "classic version" *(jingdianban)* of the "complete" play had its first public performance in Beijing, as part of the festivities marking the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. For three evenings in succession, three pairs of actors took the lead parts, and in a pointed departure from Chen Shi-Zheng's concept, director Guo Xiaonan and his collaborators cut arias :ind scenes if they felt they prolonged the performance unnecessarily or detracted from its beauty.

Despite decades of benign neglect in China, it is no coincidence that *Peony Pavilion* attracted so much attention in one year. Guo Xiaonan's production, lavishly funded by the Beijing government, was clearly a response to Chen Shi-Zheng's, even though no mention was made of

him in the Chinese media. The silence was deafening, given that many contributors on this occasion had also written about Chen's production the year before, and given that the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe was involved in both productions. For those in the know, there were coded references to the Lincoln Center production in the coverage of the Beijing event. Virtually all of the critiques emphasized that Guo's was a "classic" version of *Peony Pavilion* that preserved the beauty of Tang Xianzu's original work while staging it in a contemporary style. While rehearsing his production in Shanghai the previous year, Chen Shi-Zheng had raised hackles when he announced that he was restoring many of the "dregs" *(zaopo)* that are regularly cut from performances of the play in China, because these dregs are the most intelligent parts of it and because "traditional drama goes too much after beauty and casts aside many things that are essential to life." Given this manifesto, insistent references to the beauty of Guo Xiaonan's production in Chinese coverage of it were clearly pointed in Chen's direction.

Chen's production was a critical response to Kun opera and its aesthetic. Sellars's was too, and not simply with its high-tech stage design, contemporary costumes, and Western-style makeup. Sellars feels that opera the world over is losing its relevance and its audience, and he made plain his disenchantment with the current state of Kun opera when he decided to work exclusively with actors based outside of China and collaborate with Chinese artists who now make their homes in North America. Hua Wenyi, former director of the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe, defected to the United States in 1989, and Tan Dun, a composer trained in China, now makes his home in New York. Hua told Sellars in 1992 that she could not reinvigorate her art in China, and after visiting several troupes there in 1997 he agreed that Kun opera was moribund. He rehearsed his production in New York, with funds raised from European and American backers, but held out hope that the show might eventually be performed in China and perhaps reawaken interest there in Kun opera.

That hope now seems utopian, given the controversies that erupted as *Peony Pavilion* became entangled in cultural politics at the highest levels. At the premiere of Sellars's show in Vienna, in May of 1998, the Chinese ambassador in attendance told him that his staging of the play was too sexually explicit ever to be performed in China, and this view was underscored by Liao Ben, Deputy Secretary-General of the Chinese Dramatists Association, at a symposium in Berkeley the following year. In the meantime, after two dress rehearsals in June of 1998, Chen Shi-Zheng's production was condemned as "feudal, pornographic and superstitious" and unfit for foreign audiences by authorities at the

Bureau of Culture in Shanghai. Beginning in April, there had been murmurs of disenchantment in the local media coverage, with some reporters who had attended the open rehearsals dismissing Chen's staging as a "hodgepodge" *(zahui)* that combined Kun opera with stilt-walking and puppetry, disco and break dancing (an exaggerated picture, as it happens). Chen's was an "export model" *(waixiangxing)* of Kun opera that in no way fairly represented Chinese classical opera. Despite these complaints, no one was prepared for the Bureau's refusal to issue visas to the actors just weeks before the world premiere in New York. Guo Xiaonan's production, rehearsed in secrecy and previewed by invitation only, was fulsomely praised in the Chinese media but little covered outside of China. Its run was the shortest, concluding after performances in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. As of 2001, only Chen Shi-Zheng's resurrected production is still touring.

The attention given the international productions has demonstrated *Peony Pavilion's* appeal to audiences on three continents, but the often heated criticism of them has also revealed how firmly Kun opera is wedded to its traditions. As one who is familiar with canonical interpretations of Tang's play, I have welcomed Sellars's and Chen's iconoclastic approaches to the task of staging it. Both directors have taken a fresh look at Tang Xianzu's original text and treated received interpretations of the play with skepticism. I have not been surprised that their interpretations met with stiff resistance, both from Kun opera aficionados and from cultural authorities who oversee artistic production in China, and will venture explanations of why this was almost inevitable. Some background about how *Peony Pavilion* has been performed during the past four centuries will be helpful.

The Tradition of Performing *Peony Pavilion*

Since the early 1600s, *Peony Pavilion* has been performed in a musical style known as *kunqu* (Kun opera, so named for its place of origin, the town of Kunshan near modem Suzhou). It is now believed that Tang Xianzu, who was a native of Linchuan, an out-of-the-way county seat in Jiangxi Province, did not write the text of *Peony Pavilion* for performance in the Kunshan style, but, as the popularity of the play rapidly spread, adaptations of it were made for that style. By the second decade of the seventeenth century, excerpts from the play were included in anthologies that catered to lovers of Kun opera, and thenceforth the play remained preeminent in the Kun opera repertoire, its unbroken tradition of performances well documented. This tradition faltered as Beijing opera supplanted Kun opera in the nineteenth ntury, but Kun

opera's prestige as the oldest classical style of opera still performed has been jealously guarded.

Kun opera is elite opera, favored by scholar-officials and wealthy merchants who enjoyed performances of it in their homes and gardens. Its music is soft and melodious, anchored by the horizontal bamboo flute rather than the two-stringed fiddle featured in Beijing opera. Lyrics to the syncopated tempos of its arias are sung using melisma, a technique whereby single syllables are prolonged over several bars of music. This renders the words largely incomprehensible (unless one already knows them), but *kunqu's* slow tempos facilitate the use of mime and dance as accompaniment, expressing the meaning of the lyrics in other ways. Kun opera combines song, dance, dialogue, and, to a lesser degree, acrobatics, and for most of its history the first two elements were most prized, because of the precision and beauty of their synchronization.

When word reached Shanghai of Lincoln Center's plan to stage all fifty-five scenes of the play, skepticism about the project was widespread. Senior actors in the Shanghai Troupe doubted that one actor could master the role of Bridal Du and have the stamina to perform it, especially when they learned that Qian Yi, the troupe's new young star, had been chosen for the part. After all, since the mid-eighteenth century no more than a dozen scenes from the play have remained in the repertoire of Kun opera, and these have been vehicles for actors specializing in a variety of roles. Moreover, only a half dozen of these scenes have featured the "boudoir *dan*" actor assigned the part of Bridal Du: both dream scenes ("The Interrupted Dream" and "Pursuing the Dream"), Bridal's death scene ("Keening"), her encounter with the underworld judge ("Infernal Judgment"), one scene of ghostly wooing of Liu Mengmei ("Union in the Shades"), and the grand finale ("Reunion at Court"). Even the most loyal fans of Kun opera wondered whether foreign audiences would sit through all fifty-five scenes.

Complete performances of *Peony Pavilion* have been so rare that Chen Shi-Zheng's claim to be the first ever to direct one was not easy to refute. A scholar from Fudan University, Jiang Jurong, set himself that task, and the results of his research were published in the June 1998 issue of *Shanghai Drama.* Jiang found scattered references, mostly in poems, to performances that followed Tang Xianzu's original text, and surmised that these were likely complete ones because of the amount of time involved (in one case, two days and two nights). Such references persist through the Kangxi era (1662-1722), tapering off after 1694. But Jiang's findings are based on inference, and the occasional mention of a "complete" performance very likely refers to one for which an

abridged script was used, as indeed has been the case for Guo's "complete" version performed in Beijing.

For most of its stage career, *Peony Pavilion* has been performed in the manner described by Professor Birch in his book on theater in the Ming dynasty-as highlights (*zhezixi*, "broken-off plays") performed either separately or in a sequence of three or four linked scenes (in the modern era, enough to make up an evening's entertainment).[2] Most *zhezixi* feature beautiful arias, witty dialogue, and lively (*re'nao*) action. In the late Ming and early Qing periods, people were familiar with the complete *chuanqi* plays from which *zhezixi* were taken, but with time the link between extract and *chuanqi* attenuated.[3] By the second golden age of Chinese opera during the reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736-95), few who enjoyed performances of *zhezixi* had read the complete mother play, and almost none of the actors who performed them were literate. Interpretations of the scenes onstage, though highly embellished, had less and less to do with the original playwright's design, and more and more to do with the intentions of the artists and the requirements of the occasion at which *zhezixi* were performed.

Examples of the "actors' takeover" of creative control abound in the case of *zhezixi* from *Peony Pavilion.* As Tang Xianzu conceived it, "The Schoolroom" (scene 7) marks a pivotal moment in Bridal's evolution from cloistered daughter to sexually awakened young woman, and the scene is carefully apportioned among three characters: Bridal, her maid Spring Fragrance, and the tutor Chen Zuiliang. The comic mischief of Spring Fragrance is counterpoint to Bridal's demurely respectful treatment of the tutor. All three characters sing, and the alternating exchanges between the two young women and the comically pedantic tutor work together to reveal Bridal's growing curiosity about the world beyond the schoolroom. In the complete play, "The Schoolroom" anticipates "The Interrupted Dream" (scene 10), in which Bridal encounters her lover for the first time in the family garden. But since the eighteenth century at least, as a *zhezixi* it has been a vehicle for the comedic talents of the "flower *dan"* actress who plays the maid and the *laosheng* actor who plays the tutor; Bridal is little more than a "living prop" (*huo daoju).* "Speed the Plough" (scene 8) features Bridal's father Du Bao, and depicts him on a visit to a village in his district where he presides over spring planting rituals. The scene is very *re'nao,* and as written comes close to burlesquing rituals that Tang Xianzu himself would have performed as a magistrate. It exemplifies his talent for divesting rituals of a good deal of their solemnity, but humor most certainly was not a part of performances at the Manchu court, where "Speed the Plough" was often performed for observances of the Qingming festival in the third

lunar month. This scene was also very popular in the area around Kunshan; handwritten copies of it often crop up in script collections kept by actors who performed at weddings and village celebrations. Similarly deflating uses of humor disappear from mid-Qing ***zhezixi*** for Bridal's death scene (scene 20). One preserved in a miscellany published in the 1830s interpolates both dialogue assigned to Bridal and to her mother, Madam Du, and elaborate stage instructions indicating that Bridal rises from her deathbed to perform numerous kowtows over her mother's anguished protests.

Historians of Kun opera have coined the term ***erdu chuangzao*** ("second-stage creation") to acknowledge actors' embellishments of ***chuanqi.*** Most are undismayed by the modifications introduced in ***zhezixi,*** and defend them as a necessary accommodation to the changing tastes of Qing dynasty audiences. The dominance of the actor has persisted in the modern period even with the advent of academically trained scriptwriters and directors, with whom they now collaborate. Descriptions of the 1999 Beijing production praised the second-stage creativity of Guo Xiaonan, scriptwriter Wang Renjie, and senior members of the Shanghai Troupe.[4]

The "Festival 99" Version, Directed by Chen Shi-Zheng

John Rockwell, whose idea it was to perform ***Peony Pavilion*** in a days-long format, originally thought of staging it in a manner that "possibly harkened back to Tang's time." To him this meant faith in textual completeness and in what can be revealed through "a creative reinterpretation of the past." Both ideas are unheard of in China, where respect for tradition is more important than returning in spirit to an authentic (but lost) past. Once hired to direct, Chen Shi-Zheng ran with Rockwell's concept, in a direction that put him on a collision course with Kun opera. In Shanghai, he pointed out in interviews that ***Peony Pavilion*** was not written for performance as a Kun opera but as a ***chuanqi*** opera, which is not at all the same thing. Kun opera is a particular ***style*** of ***chuanqi***-the most elegant and formalized style in Tang's day-and Chen had in mind a more expansive recreation of Ming theater, which would capture both the liveliness of early ***chuanqi*** and the social and cultural atmosphere of the time when it first became popular.

Chen's point, historically accurate, gave him more scope in realizing Rockwell's mandate. What resulted was a production that showcased the earthy humor of Tang's text and curtailed the stylized elegance favored in performances of Kun opera. In was a long and very bawdy scene sung by the sexually deformed Sister Stone ("Sorceress of the

Dao"); out were many elaborately choreographed movements in "The Interrupted Dream," long familiar to Kun opera's fans. Qian Yi performed her famous solo aria ("Shanpoyang") while seated, instead of maneuvering her body around a table using prescribed movements designed to suggest-delicately-the anguish of frustrated desire. For a ghostly tryst with her lover in "Disrupted Joy," she was seated on the lap of Wen Yuhang (as Liu Mengmei), a posture inconceivable in a traditional staging of the scene.

Chen's decision to use other kinds of performances in his production lent variety to the staging (part of his project to recreate Ming theatrical experiences for contemporary audiences), but elicited the "hodgepodge" label from his detractors, who were indignant at the claim (subsequently revoked) that his was an "authentic" version of *Peony Pavilion.* Stilt-walking, skip-rope, and other children's games contributed to the *re'nao* atmosphere in scene 8, and two pivotal scenes that feature Liu Mengmei with Bridal's portrait (24 and 26) were staged as *pingtan* (storytelling in Wu dialect to musical accompaniment). Puppeteers performed in some of the military scenes, and an elaborate funeral ceremony concluded the second segment. Realistic props and techniqlles were used, to the dismay of Kun opera purists. Prostitutes dumped real water from real wooden chamber pots into a pond that fronted the stage, and funeral mourners wore hemp robes and burned paper objects in braziers, including a troupe of opera actors fashioned of paper. These touches went over well in New York but not in Shanghai, where critics complained that Chen had undertaken a "confused artistic project."

With hindsight, it is easy to see why the combined visions of John Rockwell and Chen Shi-Zheng met with growing resistance in Shanghai. What proved decisive was the overwhelmingly negative response to the "dregs" that Chen resurrected from Tang's text. Himself trained in *huaguxi,* a form of Hunanese opera, Chen had taken on Kun opera's aesthetic dogma, which countenances common (su) touches only if they are performed elegantly and looks askance at theater that is improvisational and unscripted. With the authorities in Shanghai, it cut no ice that most of Chen's "dregs" (Sister Stone, the prostitutes, villagers at their games and much more) originated with Tang Xianzu; but. a review in New York's Chinese-language press, written after the show had had its successful run there in 1999, had this to say about their efforts to censor them:

> The artistic achievement of the complete *Peony Pavilion* ... has become caught up in nationalistic feelings of contemporary Chinese who