

03 OPTING FOR OPERA

On our second night in Beijing we were treated to a neighborhood performance based on the Chinese Opera. Now, I have been told by some people, mostly Myrtle, that “some people” do not like Chinese Opera, that they think it is screechy. Well, I don’t care what they think; I LOVE Chinese Opera. We went to a large warehouse-like building and entered through a back door.

The place was packed! I nudged Myrtle and made sure she saw how many people there were. Because



this was a performance for the locals who lived in this area, we had last minute seats near the back of the auditorium, so photographs were not good. But the acoustic system was excellent, so much so that several times Myrtle covered her ears whispering about, “That screeching! That screeching!”

We kept our jackets on because it was cold in that large building, but as soon as we had all filed into our row of seats and were sitting on the chairs, a server brought out hot tea and began pouring the tea into cups on the narrow table in front of us. We all watched in

awe as she poured the hot tea from a copper pot with a long spout. Not a drop spilled!

Two nights later we went to a real performance of Chinese Opera, this time in a large, modern auditorium and I truly fell in love! For those of you who don’t know much about Chinese Opera or maybe want to learn more, here is some information from our guide.

“Traditional Chinese Opera is a form of musical theater in China. It is very old, going back more than a thousand years. It had its greatest development during the Song Dynasty in the 1200s, reaching a maturity level that it retains today. The opera can include not only singing, like a western opera, but dancing, martial arts, and acrobatics, and have elaborate costumes and makeup, all of which are designed to help the audience identify with the roles being portrayed. The best performers study and practice for years to perfect the stylized gestures and exaggerated features, footwork, and body positions some of the operas require.

Today there are over 100 regional branches of Chinese opera. About 100 years ago, the Peking Opera gained in popularity, and today the Peking, or Beijing, Opera is known as the national theater of China. This Opera uses traditional Chinese string and percussion instruments to provide a background for the acting and to enhance the drama of the opera. Each character in the Chinese Opera follows strictly defined rules for makeup and costumes and acting. When you think about the fact that there are more than 1000 different productions in Beijing Opera, you can see why the best actors devote their lives to this art form. We will have a special treat tonight to have access to the actors’ dressing room annex and be able to watch them put on their elaborate makeup.”

This proved so interesting to all of us that I think some of our group, especially Myrtle, would have preferred to spend the evening watching these skilled artists put on their makeup masks all night and

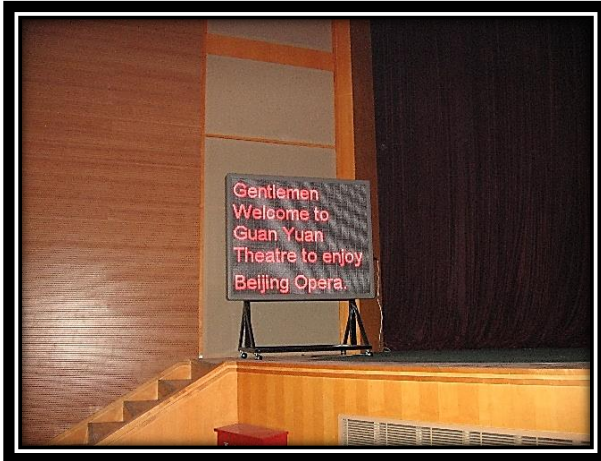
just skip the performance! It was, I admit, enthralling. Myrtle was nearly dancing on her toes. I knew she wanted to get right in there with them and paint her face, but I kept firm hold of her jacket. Later Myrtle could not stop talking about the actors who painted their faces so expertly. I was thinking that in the future we could save the cost of her ticket by letting her enjoy the painting of the faces only.





Our guide finally tore us all away from the makeup tables and escorted us to our seats. We had front row seats! I was ecstatic. Then Myrtle had to spot the sign on the stage that said, "Gentlemen, welcome to Guan Yuan Theatre to enjoy Beijing Opera." "Gentlemen!" She hissed. "Gentlemen! What about Ladies?! WHAT ABOUT US LADIES?!!! I feel like getting up and walking out of here right now in protest at this sexist discrimination!" My heart started to beat erratically as I grabbed her jacket sleeve and held on, praying, "Dear gods that be, please, please do not let Myrtle cause an international incident and get

us thrown into jail here! Please, please!” Fortunately, just as Myrtle was starting to really get her steam up, a horrendous gonging noise came from the stage and Myrtle sat right back down with an astonished plop. That at least gave me a chance to grab her sleeve with a tighter hold. Even more fortunately, as the actors came leaping and bounding onto the stage, Myrtle became absorbed identifying the faces she had watched being painted.



Now we could see some of the painted faces and masks on the actors and see them in their characters. I wished I knew the story behind the opera so that I could follow the action better. Nevertheless, the opera was for me absolutely enchanting and enthralling. Once when I pinched myself for my good fortune getting to experience this, I accidentally pinched Myrtle, and she, of course, promptly slapped me. But I was so in heaven I did not even mind.





We got back to the hotel from the opera about 9:15. On the way back to our room, Myrtle and I passed two young men changing a lightbulb in the hallway. I walked around their ladder and continued, then realized Myrtle was not following me. As I turned around to see where she was, she turned away from

the two young men, one of whom was diligently writing something in a tiny notebook. Myrtle said nothing, but my “What is Myrtle thinking now?” antennae started to vibrate, never a good sign.

However, all seemed normal in our room. I began rummaging in my suitcase for clothing I would wear tomorrow.

Suddenly the small radio on our nightstand turned on and Myrtle fiddled with the dial until she found some American music. Ever since she discovered this tiny radio in our room, she had taken control of it, but that was fine with me. I was usually busy making notes in my journal. But then Myrtle lugged her gallon of wine to the small table by our window and proceeded to get four glasses from our bathroom. “Four?” I thought. “Myrtle, have you invited someone for after theater drinks and not told me?” I asked in a huff. “I am tired and really not in the mood tonight.”

Myrtle only smiled. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Myrtle disappeared into the bathroom, presumably to fluff her hair or something like that. I answered the door and was struck momentarily dumb as I saw the two lightbulb workmen standing there. One of them held out a small piece of paper on which our cabin door number had been written and said, “You need new lightbulb, lady?”

Before I could answer, Myrtle waltzed out of the bathroom with her most endearing smile and, shoving me aside, ushered both men into our room, one by each arm, trilling “Oh, yes, dear comrade worker, but before you tend to our lightbulb, please be seated here and join me in a toast to your health. Old custom, you know, old custom. Impossible to do good work until we have toasted your health.”

She poured wine into each glass, distributed the glasses, raised hers, and sang out, “Gum Bey!” downing her wine. The flustered workers raised their glasses but looked at each other in what I can only call alarm before looking toward the door and slowly lowering their glasses, untouched. I wondered briefly if the penalty for drinking on the job in China would be castration. Or worse!

But Myrtle was unfazed. She grabbed the hand of one of the workmen, dragged him to his feet, and started to dance with him while the other one sat with his mouth hanging. Unfortunately, the tune currently playing was a rock and roll thing, and I knew that Myrtle prided herself on her expertise as a jitterbugger in high school. The young man seemed too dazed to think and did his best to accommodate Myrtle’s increasingly agile dance moves.

Suddenly before my eyes flashed a news headline: “American Imperialist Sex Addict Tries to Corrupt Innocent Mind of Chinese Worker Comrade. Down with the Imperialist Dogs!” Yikes!

I scrambled to the radio, fumbled for the off button, finally found it, and the room resonated to silence as Myrtle did one last neat between-the-legs slide, and I swear, dear shocked reader, she purposely came up short against that neat bum of his, that I had seen her furtively ogling.

I saved the day by grabbing both young men and manhandling them to the door, which I shut firmly and locked before turning to Myrtle in a huff, only to find that she had picked up that purse of hers and was preparing to haul off and hit me with it! Talk about ingratitude! I practically screamed at her, “Myrtle, you idiot! Do you want to cause an international incident of indecency? How the hell would I get you out of a Chinese jail for sex workers? You idiot!”

Well, I guess the incendiary nature of my outburst temporarily gagged Myrtle and throttled her arm. She gave a great huff, retired into the bathroom, locked the door, and did not come out for one hour and twenty minutes. Yes, I clocked her, because I had to go pee and could not go to sleep until I did so.

Now it was my turn to give a great huff as I stalked to the bathroom, slammed the door, and did my business. When I came out, she had cleared away the wine, probably by drinking it, I thought nastily. At any rate, that mattress soon had me in the land of dreams, so all was well. For the moment. Now I must confess, dear reader, that all the mattresses in China are as hard as boards. In fact, the first good night's sleep I had in that country was on the mattress onboard our Yangtze River cruise ship - heaven!

The next day we visited a Martial Arts School, where we watched young boys learning the very demanding movements and acrobatics of martial arts. This section of the school taught boys.



“This martial arts school is a private business,” said our guide. “After 1980 there could be private businesses. Private business owners are now very important to the economy of the country and are being encouraged. They now make up over 50% of the economy. There was no pension and no medical care in the beginning. Now it is required to have social welfare for all employees. Not all businesses are the same. Some have better benefits, some so-so. Parents in China love the martial arts because of the benefits to their children, who typically begin martial arts training at age 3 or 4. In this school there are 900 students ages 4-20. All students must pay, because it is a private business.”



“It is not an easy life as a martial arts student,” continued our guide. “The students must get up early and go to bed late. The day starts at 5:30 am with one hour of practice, then breakfast and a full day of school, then two hours of practice from 7 to 9 in the evening, and bed by 10:00 pm.”

Children live at the Martial Arts school and go home every two weeks. There are over 5000 Martial Arts students in China. 30% of them are girls. Tuition is \$2000 per year, plus food and board. There are scholarships for poor students who are very good.”

She continued, "But a martial arts education will help you get a job. Everybody who gets a university degree may still not get a job. About 20% of university graduates cannot find a job. A martial arts education is a big help to getting a job, so parents are willing to sacrifice to pay the money for martial arts school. It can also help with an identity card. In Beijing an Identity card is very important. For example, it can provide you free education for your children.

Teachers in China promote the idea of sharing. Sometimes that interferes with the need to be the best. Chinese parents push their children to get a good education and then to get married. Having no male child to carry on the family name is considered a source of shame for the family. The average age for marriage in China is 28-29. To have a baby in China is expensive, especially for childcare. Now the government is encouraging people to move to the suburbs. I think that is a good idea."

When we left the building, the pollution in the air was so bad that a few of our group started to cough, and Myrtle whispered, "Well, let's go to the suburbs right now! Maybe we could all breathe!" I wanted to say, "But what will you see in the suburbs besides grass and cows?" I thought about adding, "And snakes." But I kindly refrained.

To be continued . . .