

TEAHOUSE. By Lao She. Directed by Lin Zhaohua. Original artistic direction by Jiao Juyin. Beijing People's Art Theatre. Kennedy Center Festival of China 2005 (Eisenhower Theater), Washington, DC. 28 October 2005.

As a government institution, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts bears a unique responsibility towards artistic expression and international diplomacy. Host to the ambitious and renowned Stephen Sondheim Celebration in 2002 and the Tennessee Williams Explored Festival in 2004, the Center has established itself in recent years as the champion of American Theatre writ large and produced on a grand scale. But in an increasingly globalized world, the Kennedy Center also chooses not to maintain a strictly domestic focus. In October 2005, in partnership with the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China, the Center presented nearly nine hundred performers in a grand festival, four years in the making. The festival showcased ambassadors of myriad Chinese visual and performing arts traditions. Claimed by its organizers to be



Pu Cunxin (Master Chang), Liang Guanhua (Wang Lifa), and Yang Lixin (Qin Zhongyi) in Beijing People's Art Theatre's *Teahouse*. Photo courtesy of the Kennedy Center.

the largest celebration of Chinese performing arts in American history, the Festival of China included eight American premieres. Lao She's *Teahouse* was among the most noteworthy.

The Beijing People's Art Theatre's production of *Teahouse* heralded the American debut of the company and Lao's play. Perhaps even more significantly, the production marked the first time that *hua ju*, or modern Chinese spoken drama, was performed in the United States. In selecting *Teahouse* for the festival, the Beijing People's Art Theatre chose to remount what has been a cornerstone of its producing repertoire spanning the company's fifty-year history, a play that has remained popular since its premiere in 1958. The influence of the period in which Lao wrote is reflected in *Teahouse* through proclamations such as "Do Not Discuss Affairs of State" that adorn the theatre walls. Succumbing to the pressures of such implied persecution at the onset of the Cultural Revolution, Lao committed suicide in 1966.

Spanning half a century, the play chronicles the vast social and political changes endured by the ordinary citizens who frequent Beijing's Yu Tai Teahouse. From the fall of the Qing Dynasty after the Reform Movement of 1898 to the founding of the Republic and ensuing civil war, to the harsh policies of Chiang Kai-shek following the War of Resistance against Japan, the play feels epic in scope even as daily affairs are conducted within the gradually aging walls of the teahouse. Manager Wang Lifa tries to adapt his hospitality to the turbulence of the changing times, but ultimately they prove too much to bear and, at the play's end, with a ceremonial toss of funeral papers, he deliberately picks up a sash and exits the stage.



Beijing People's Art Theatre's *Teahouse*. Photo courtesy of the Kennedy Center.

Teahouse is known and studied in China in much the same way as *Death of a Salesman* is in the United States (not coincidentally, Arthur Miller directed a production of his play at the Beijing People's Art Theatre in 1983). The Kennedy Center foregrounded this esteemed component of the Chinese dramatic canon, in part to mark the centenary of the birth of its original director, Jiao Juyin, one of the four founders of the Beijing People's Art Theatre and a highly influential director, theorist, and translator. Jiao's contribution to the Chinese theatre is most deeply embedded in his commitment to a nationalized poetic realism, a form that merged traditional Chinese drama with Western performance traditions. His 1958 production of *Teahouse*, an exemplary model of this blending, has been hailed as a masterpiece.

Painstakingly recreated from Jiao's work by director Lin Zhaohua, the production at the Kennedy Center featured several of the most prominent stage and screen actors working in China today, including Liang Guanhua as Manager Wang Lifa, Pu Cunxin as Master Chang, a regular visitor, Yang Lixin as Qin Zhongyi, owner of the premises, and He Bing as Pock-Mark Liu senior and junior, professional pimps with a family tradition. Such generational continuation contributed to the historical echoes within the fine ensemble across the three acts: other company members portrayed bully fathers and their sons, who, as adults, beat up student dissenters. The set design, recreated from the original production, reinforced and informed the play's epic historical scope by creating the detailed intimacy of the shop, which grew progressively modern after each intermission. Shafts of light through various windows contributed to the smoky atmosphere, distinguishing the inner happenings of the shop from the visible and constant activity of the world outside.

Despite the stunning aesthetics and moving performances, language proved to be a barrier in the production at the Kennedy Center; English surtitles ran high above the Eisenhower stage, providing both help and hindrance to the non-Mandarin speaker. Audience members who did not require the assistance of surtitles (more than half of the 1,100-seat house) routinely responded to verbal quips or cultural meanings not captured by the projected translation. Additionally, the surtitles would often—though not consistently—appear well before a line was actually spoken, so that it was difficult to discern a pattern in their projection in relation to the spoken text. Causing further confusion, the projections occasionally adopted two colors to indicate the lines of different characters, but those colors were not consistent from slide to slide.

Teahouse marked the last major production in the Festival of China at the Kennedy Center. Having barely caught their breath, the Center's organizers then showcased the arts of Japan during spring 2006. Nevertheless, the sometimes precarious nature of the conflation of art and diplomacy seems evident in the seasons ahead. Perhaps taking on a less politically charged endeavor at a time of heightened international tension, the next major festival at the Kennedy Center will take place in 2007, a six-month celebration entitled *Shakespeare in Washington*.

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