

'Tea' melds two cultures in a fragile but fine brew

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Though Opera Company of Philadelphia's current presentation of *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* will naturally attract a cosmopolitan, inquisitive audience, the most enjoyable approach to the eye-and-ear-filling production at the Academy of Music is to leave your questioning nature in the lobby.

The fragile but singular experience offered by the opera - from the large magical cube that fills the stage to the exotic sound effects drawn from bowls of water - could easily be broken by asking "Why?"

As a theatrical hybrid, with an ancient Asian story presented in a Euro-American medium, *Tea* freely partakes of elements from each of these cultures, and without great rigor - the playful lack of which is part of the charm. Composer Tan Dun, one of the most successful of his generation even before winning an Oscar for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, has so much of that that his ovation at Friday's opening (which he also conducted) was the biggest of all.

The opera's ninth-century plot, revolving around the proposed marriage of a Japanese prince and a Chinese princess - plus a book about tea that may contain the secrets of the universe - isn't the most emotionally involving scenario. Yet *Tea* still does whatever is necessary to create a hot or entrancing moment from the beginning, when mysterious figures come down the theater aisle holding abstract, lighted objects as onstage monks chant in an ethereal drone that can also seem like a foreboding growl.

To ask what it means is to create a cerebral distance between yourself and the piece. Would you ask such questions of the Mummies? Would the answers get you anywhere? In fact, I prefer this opera in more inscrutable form - as I first found it, on a DVD of the original production, which wasn't even staged in an opera house but on platforms and runways in a concert hall, with no pretense of being representational theater.

The OCP production that originated in Santa Fe is more visually familiar, often resembling Puccini's *Turandot* and with plenty of visual riches. In addition to a revolving red cube that opens up to reveal stairways and even more strange, intriguing people, there are costumes that include fantastical strands in varying shades of red, suggesting an abstract flame.

Such a visual approach, plus physically animated direction from Amon Miyamoto, encourages expectations of a viscerally gripping plot, as opposed to a more contemplative

attitude of enjoying whatever visual or musical object comes your way. Thus, the piece feels diluted. Tan Dun may be encouraging this direction: He tends to revise his works constantly to reflect his artistic evolution, one that - from the looks of his subsequent opera, *The First Emperor* - isn't afraid to embrace the Italian verismo style of *Tosca*.

As it is, *Tea* has a wonderfully distinctive musical voice, unafraid of extended spare moments consisting only of sound created by water or paper. Cunningly knitted together with a haunting, six-note scale, it has plenty of more compellingly dense moments aided by percussion and a fine ear for orchestral sonority. The only aspect that bears revision is the sometimes uncomfortable vocal lines.

Among the excellent cast, Kelly Kaduce (as Chinese Princess Lan) and Haijing Fu (a Japanese monk) found the sense behind the vocal contours, though mezzo-soprano Nancy Maulsby (in several roles) lacked a good vocal fit until the third act, and tenor Roger Honeywell (the Prince) was in such splendid voice you wanted more lyricism and less dramatic outcry.

Ultimately, though, one marvels that such a new, forward-looking piece is filling seats at the sizable Academy of Music - a repudiation of the belief that Philadelphians want only their warhorses.

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