Paper Shadows

Wayson Choy

AS A CHILD Wayson Choy was often taken by his mother into the magical world of Vancouver's Chinese theatre, with its tapestry of exotic sounds, vivid colour, and heartbreaking drama. It was an art whose radical removal from the quotidian could inspire joy; an art that was spellbinding in the true sense of the term: one was deliriously bound by the sights and sounds until the end of the drama set one free.

THE YELLOW BACKDROP CURTAIN of the Sing Kew Theatre shimmered in a sudden blaze of light. Speaking formal Cantonese, a plump man in a drab suit stood erect on stage and pleaded with the packed house to buy the new 1942 issues of the Republic of Free China and Dominion of Canada war bonds. I licked my fish- shaped caramel all-day sucker to the rhythm of his talking.

"Ally victory over our common enemies!" he said suddenly in English for the benefit of some white officials in the audience, then translated the statement into Chinese, raising his fingers in a Churchillian V. Fifth Aunty told me there was always someone who was appeasing these visiting officials during the opening ceremonies. They were often invited by Chinatown's politicians to stay a few minutes to witness the community's loyalty to the Crown.

Vancouver's Chinatown crowd politely applauded. Pinkish Chinese gold and mutton-coloured jade bracelets jangled on the slender wrists of Mother's companions. I grew restless at the speech-making and climbed onto Mother's lap.

My four-year-old mind wanted cartoons, like the Bugs Bunny ones I saw with *Dai Gung, Great Uncle,* who for the first time, last week, had taken me to the Lux movie house on Hastings Street. (Bugs Bunny was all I got to see; Mother told me I was too excitable and had to be taken out of the theatre, pants wet.) Finally, the man read aloud the names of all the performers, stiffly bowed and left the stage.

"Eeeih-yah! Gum dawyan!, "Mother said, in her Sze Yup dialect. *"So many people!"* Her lady friends on either side clucked their tongues in agreement. Mother reached over my shoulder and wiped my mouth of candy residue. One of the ladies ambushed my sticky fingers with her handkerchief.

As the front-of-house double doors opened to accommodate a last rush of ticket- holders, a draught of night air swept through the auditorium, bringing noxious chemical smells from the False Creek refineries a block away. Some Great Northern Railway trains coupled with an abrupt *BANG,* causing the three-storey Shanghai Alley building to vibrate. Most of the audience continued to chat, unconcerned; the only people disturbed by the noises and smells of *Tohng Yahn Gaai, China-People Street,* were tourists.

Mother held me tightly on her lap and leaned back against a stiff wooden seat to let a young couple bump by us. The chattering audience began pointing to the rectangle of light and the billowing back curtain; people sighed with expectation, shook off their drenched raincoats, and sat down.

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A foghorn bellowed once, twice, and the doors of the Sing Kew slammed shut. Stubborn latecomers were now directed through the side entry. The opera was to begin. The houselights dimmed. I wiggled forward onto Mother's boney knees. The brightly lit yellow curtains made me suddenly squint-eyed.

To the right of the stage—a stage bare except for a plain brown carpet; a small, rectangular table covered with a red cloth; and two plain wooden chairs—an eight- man orchestra began to play. The crowd applauded.

The rising notes of a dulcimer stilled the audience; the pliant notes of the two- stringed *hu chin* and the violin dispensed quivering half melodies. Cymbals shivered; gongs and drumbeats throbbed; a pair of woodblocks clacked.

My all-day sucker slipped out of my hand. All at once, I felt my heart pounding to a rhythm outside of myself. I was thunderstruck. I clenched my four-year-old legs, tightened my candy-stained fists: I wanted to pee.

"Hi-lah!" Mother said to me in Toisanese. *"Hi-lah, look!"*

Balanced on the edge of her knees, feverishly swallowing the pungent air, I pushed forward, stretched my neck and *hi-lahz*d between the big heads and shoulders in front of us.

The door-sized side curtain parted. A burst of colour struck my eyes. In sequinned costumes of forest green and gold, jolting cobalt blue and fiery red, living myths swayed onto the stage, their swords slashing the air, their open ornate fans snapping.

Mother whispered into my ear who each was as, one by one, the performers made a few stylized movements to introduce their character, briefly sang their histories, and danced away before my amazed eyes: that's the *Hsiao-sheng,* the *Scholar-Prince;* there, the Princess with pretty eyes; now the grand King with his servants; last, with orchestral roars, the fierce South Wind General, his soldiers swirling behind him, tumbling like madmen. I could tumble, too. I could even stand at attention, like a soldier, arms stiffly by my side. Some of the older boys had taught me that. But these soldiers were different from the ones I saw walking on the streets of Vancouver.

Mesmerized by the tumbling warriors, I didn't care about the growing dampness on my pant leg, but Mother made a clucking noise to signal her disgust and lifted me off her knees. I stood beside her on the box provided for children, my knees bending and straightening as if I myself were majestically stomping about the stage.

A maternal hand pressed against the buttoned-up fly of my woollen pants.

"You just went ten minutes ago!"

Mother's Chinese words were pitched high above the clamorous music.

"I should chop you to death!"

"Ngoh m'pee-pee!" I said, afraid she would snatch me up and take me away from the magic. *"I notpee-pee!"*

"Stand still!" Mother's lipstick-sweet breath tickled my ear, her dialect as lush as the whining strings of the orchestra. "Look. Look at the warriors."

I stood on my tiptoes and lifted my head to peer between the adults in front of me. The strangers felt my fingers urgently pushing against them and, used to children in the theatre, shifted their shoulders to let me see better.

In my excitement, I took big breaths and caught in my nose the exhaled puffs of the men's Export or Bull Durham, the women's Black Cat or Sweet Caporal. The tobacco smell was seasoned by the aromas of salt-sweet savoury dumplings and roasted red or black melon seeds. Whenever hunger pangs hit me, I nudged Mother, or her lady friends on either side of us, and the smoky air was made sweeter by yellow-eyed egg tarts lifted up from B.C. Royal Cafe pastry boxes.

On the stage, poised at opposite ends, painted faces fierce in blood red and cobalt blue, the King and General made threatening gestures towards each other's kingdoms: fists shook; swords waved menacingly. The King uttered stylized shrieks that melded with the majestic singing of the bold young Prince. With hypnotic force, the General sang counterpoint. When the Prince left the stage, the King and the General broke into soliloquies of talk-patter, then dipped and darted at each other. With a clash of cymbals and drums, they both stormed away.

The audience roared their approval.

A Princess dashed onto the stage, waving her long white sleeves. Her eyebrows made an exaggerated arch above her crimson cheeks, and, I thought, she looked like Mother. She began to sing in shrill veering rhythm. I impatiently sucked my thumb and held my breath, my fish-shaped sucker now forgotten in the darkness at my feet.

"She's in love," Mother said.

The Princess sang on and on. For ever.

"Doesn't she stop?" I asked.

"Stand still," Mother said.

"She just keeps singing."

*"Hmmo cho! Be quiet!"*Mother gently tapped my head to get my attention. "She's supposed to sing. She's happy. Sit here."

I climbed back on to Mother's lap. I might have closed my eyes then; I might even have napped. Eventually her aria concluded and I sat up, sleepily rubbing my eyes. The prolonged applause was comforting: everyone else was just as relieved as I was that the lady had stopped singing. The man in front of us was even shouting *"Hou yeh, hou yeh! Excellent, excellent!"* Others cried out *"Ho-ho, bo-ho! Bravo, bravo!"*

The lovesick Princess bowed twice. I thought she was looking very sorry that she had wailed so long. One more bow and she scurried off stage with her maidservant. Everyone clapped to see them leave.

Next, the sound of drums stirred my interest. The King was returning from hunting, Mother explained. His elaborate headdress, made of long, exotic feathers, fluttered elegantly in the air, like antennae. His servants carried carcasses of deer and fowl across the stage. The royal court followed, their sequinned gowns and mirrored robes throwing coins of light into the audience.

IT WAS LATE SPRING, 1942, and the Sing Kew Theatre, a warehouse at 544 Shanghai Alley, played host nightly to a clamorous Chinatown crowd. For years, Mother went regularly with her friends to the Sing Kew, the Royal on Hastings, or the Yun Dong (Oriental) Theatre on Columbia Street; she thought nothing of taking me, even when I was only a few months old. Other mothers had their children with them, too, and newborns nursed indifferently at breasts wet with milk.

Tonight's fundraiser had been advertised for weeks, and featured all the Canton and Hong Kong professional touring actors stranded in North America by the war in China. Vancouver devotees also performed in these operas, talented men and women recruited from three clubs: the Sing Kew Dramatic Society, the Ching Won Society and the Jin Wah Sing Troupe.

Agile young men would volunteer to be soldiers, and lithe Lim Mark Yee, one of the stars, would coach them in the acrobatic art of sword- and spear-dancing. Even some of Mother's friends played bit parts, though she herself was too shy to volunteer. The theatre men were handsome, the women beautiful; aside from being shy, Mother never felt she was suitable.

Usually, the Sing Kew admitted toddlers and children free; adults paid from twenty-five cents to a dollar-fifty, depending on what time they entered the smoky theatre and which stars were singing that evening (one female star was said to earn as much as three hundred dollars a week, a small fortune). Every adult knew the opera stories by heart, so between shifts at work—or rounds of mah-jong or fan- tan—opera devotees could stop by for their favourite arias. Those who walked in after nine o'clock paid much less—an appealing option, given that a typical performance began at seven and often lasted until midnight, long enough to test the endurance of the most dedicated fan.

Before the Chinatown crowds, Tam Bing Yeun played the clown; Kwei Ming Yeong and Sui Kwung Lung performed as warriors, lovers or kings; Gee Ding Heung and the lovely Mah Dang Soh ... they all sang to ovations. (At eighty-two, Mother's younger friend, Betty Lee, could still recall for me the performances of the most famous stars, the handsome heroics of Kwei Ming Yeong and Gee Ding Heung, the exquisite singing of tiny Mah Dang Soh.)

Some nights, white people, such as city inspectors or Chinatown-friendly politicians, would be given free seating. They never stayed beyond an hour. With her lady friends, Mother always stayed until midnight.

From the beginning, I was enchanted. I fell in love with the dramatic colours, and the clowning, for I believed the whole opera was a clown show: didn't clowns paint their faces and jump about?

"Look, look," Mother said, pointing at the stage. "Buddha is laughing at Monkey."

I looked, only dimly aware that other eyes followed my every move. On either side of us, well-to-do lady friends rattled their new gold-coin bracelets from Birks, turned their amused heads to see how my eyes widened, how I kicked into the air— the same kick Buddha gave to naughty Monkey. When Buddha laughed, I laughed. When Monkey rubbed his bum in regret, I rubbed my bum in sympathy. The comic hijinks bewitched me.

At first, when the actors vaulted violently about the stage, and the orchestra produced an explosion of drumming and ringing gongs, I clung to Mother and peeked at the menacing antics through her enfolding arms, and used my fingers to plug my ears against the actors' yowling.

"First time at Sing Kew," Fifth Aunty told me years later, "you bunched up like a jack-in-the-box. But you keep looking."

As the evening performances and matinees paraded by me, these same ferocious faces quickly grew into familiar kings and warriors, into matchmaking clowns and an aberrant Monkey-King; I began to see—aided by Mother's simple narrations— that actual *continuing* stories were being played out.

One of the operas told the story of the Monkey-King who defied Buddha's warning not to eat the Peaches of Long Life. His adventures were often told to me by my Chinatown aunties and uncles.

"See the Monkey-King grab the Peaches of Long Life," Mother said, and I saw all of it, as if the stage were a living book.

As the orchestra at one side of the stage raised a clamour, my body rocked with a sensual pleasure, my fear for Monkey's safety flaming my cheeks. Monkey pushed against his long staff and pole-vaulted over Buddha's humble, rag-dressed buffoon. Clown was sent by Buddha to test the Monkey-King, to see if he would keep his promise to be a good monkey and not steal the forbidden peaches. I sat up. Monkey and Clown began to stalk each other, just like cousin Donald and I did when we played Catch You! on my birthday, in front of Aunty Freda's house.

Clown dove at Monkey and snatched away Monkey's long pole. With it, the round-faced fool poked and pointed at the ripe sacred fruit that hung from a branch way above their heads. The orchestra was silent, except for the woodblocks—and my heart—*knock-knocking* in unison. Would the Monkey-King be tempted?

Monkey shook his head, thinking hard. He stopped, looked out at the audience, skipped—winked at *me*—then suddenly hopped up like a spring onto the startled clown's shoulders.

Perched there like a tipsy bird, Monkey reached up, as if to spread his wings and fly. Instead, he came crashing down, a juicy peach clutched in each paw. Buddha's clown went tumbling backwards, raising puffs of dust from the stage carpet. Monkey, chortling and triumphant, ran off.

"Naughty Monkey!" Mother said. *"Hai m'hai ah!"*

"Silly Monkey!" I said. *"Hai! Yes!" AnA* Mother laughed. I laughed, too. Buddha's faithful servant could never have fooled me!

I very quickly caught on to the many characters' ritual gestures. Whenever a great king stroked his long black beard and pounded his chest, I knew there was trouble. Mother curled her fingers to my ear and whispered the story to me.

"That's the bad King," she said, pitting her Toisanese against the thundering drums and the squeal of strings. "He's jealous of the young scholar who loves the princess."

The Student-Prince ambled onto the stage, unaware that the jealous King was hiding behind trees. The handsome Prince, looking like my father, touched his forehead, then patted his heart, a heart clearly struck by love. Then he sang.

"The Prince sings too much," I complained. But Mother just held me tightly, rocking. By this point I had acquired a furious dislike of arias.

Still, I was left with some defences against the tedium. If tortured with an over- long aria, I could shut my ears with my palms, fight sleepiness and fervently hum, or even sing, my own songs. (Mother said I could do that, "if not too loud.")

I whisper-sang songs Aunty Freda played for me on her phonograph, songs like "Old MacDonald Had a Farm, EEE EYE, EEE-EYE, OHHH!" Sometimes I heard Mother sing, *oohh-ahhh, oohh-ahh-laah,* and I vowed to teach her the real words.

When the drums began, and the cymbals and gongs—*chang, chang, cbang*—I stopped singing, and lifted my head and opened my eyes, my senses on alert.

If I turned my head in any direction, I could observe men, women and children eating and drinking. Whenever there was a lull at the Sing Kew—that is, when a third-level star was attempting to sing, or a local talent was apprenticing on stage—out came thermos cups of steaming tea. I loved the life that blossomed all over the auditorium, as if it were a busy village square. Those who were skilful enough used their front teeth to crack open tiny melon seeds, scattering the *quai gee* shells at their feet. Vendors offered small bags of dried apricots, dumplings and salted plums, and children ran up and down the aisles. Old men sometimes bowed their heads and spat neatly into round brass spittoons placed along the aisles.

A chattering kind of freedom filled the space, which Chinatown citizens treated more like an open-air teahouse than a formal theatre. In the traditional Canton and old village way, the Sing Kew was a place to "be home," as in back home in Old China—a place to pass the time, to meet friends, to gossip, and now and again to focus on the stage.

GUARDED BY TWO LOYAL SERVANTS, the Gentlewoman, played by Mah Dang Soh, stood ready to sing a challenging aria.

"Oh, those opera love stories just like *Wuthering Heights,"* one of Mother's oldest friends, Betty Lee, recently told me. The opera may have been *The Beauty on the Lake,* or the popular *Lay Toy Woo, The Romance at the Bridge.*

The star tilted her proud, confident head to one side. The audience stirred. I was mesmerized by the lengths of pure white silk cascading from the embroidered sleeves of her emerald-green dress. Her elegant hands rose like the wings of a swan, and the silk "water sleeves" swept backwards. She seemed to be brushing tears from her eyes. Mother told me the lady lived in exile, and was aching to see again her long-lost family, just like all of Chinatown was longing for their own families in faraway China.

"She's going to sing of her village," Chulip Sim told me in a more formal Chinese dialect. *"Hm'mo cho-lah. You be quiet now. "*

"Kay-dee. Stand up, "Mother said. "You be her guard."

I stood up, ramrod-stiff like a soldier, at attention.

With long fingers now resting against her cheek, the actress began to pierce the air with her falsetto voice, and the audience—suddenly—responded with silence. We children knew we were not to run about, but to tiptoe, and not to utter even a whisper.

Listening to the sing-song evocation of Old China, the lyrics conjuring up images of a genteel country life and lost family, of the Gentlewoman's dream to be in her village home again, our

elders and our parents sat transfixed; then, after a defiant vibrating note, which escaped wildly from her throat, and after a final sweep of her water sleeves, the words she sang turned into a call to arms—*Oh, no, never give up hope!*—and the actress stood frozen in a heroic pose. Brushing aside their own tears, the audience gave her a thunderous ovation.

"It's so Chinese to long for home," the elders said to each other. Others said, "Oh, for the children to be still Chinese and go back to China!"

Her headdress shimmering with gemstones and pearls, the star bowed to the shouting audience. I bowed back.

IT WAS MANY YEARS before I understood that, although Mother always wore her bracelet of gold and her jade pendant, my parents were not as well off as many of their friends. I never thought of my parents as a working-class, no-citizenship family, despite the fact that they were each working long hours and earning only minimum wage. Whatever daily struggles my parents faced, the Cantonese opera at night bestowed upon me such a wealth of high drama, of myth, that I lacked for nothing in the ordinary world. The booming drums thrilled me. Mother half-shouted in my ear, *"Huang-Dai loy-lah! The great King comes!"* and gods and royalty sang before me.

Sometimes the thundering sounds and the imagined action were so beautiful that I nearly stopped breathing. I wanted to become what I saw before me: the General, the warriors, and the frightened guard who led the way to the prison.

"Here come South-Wind General's one hundred warriors and horses!" Mother's talk-story words blew into my ear, her Toisanese breathless. The plot was like *King Lear.* A good princess, not unlike the faithful Cordelia, was to be rescued.

"Hi-lah! The Princess can see their dust rising from the valley!" Mother held my hand and pointed to the action. *"Hi-lah! Hi-lah! See! See!* The General and his soldiers will rescue her!"

Two tasselled riding crops wielded by an emerald-costumed warrior guided invisible horses across the stage. In my mind's eye, I could see the steeds—their tall, sloped-back bodies, their crested manes and proud tails shaking in the valley wind, more splendid than any horses I saw in cowboy movies. The General came behind, shook his head at the herd and galloped forward on his splendid charger. He dismounted, raising one leg, then the other. Behind his jewelled headdress, two outstretched peacock plumes quivered in the air: the horses, the General knew, could climb no further. With an angry tilt of his head, South Wind General dismissed the horsemen: he and his footsoldiers would climb the steep slopes of the mountain—a chair and a table—left unguarded by the false King. Sound and fury thundered from the stage orchestra as they climbed, and the ordinary world vanished.

"See, see!"-—I grabbed Mother's wrist— *"All the soldiers are climbing up!"*

I saw them, in their hundreds, just as Mother told me, though only six men in gold-braided maroon costumes stormed onto the stage. The front soldier scooted forward and swung a pole topped with long, scarlet pennants. The Sing Kew audience saw a whole regiment before them, every man climbing upwards. In minutes, two actors, arms linked, stood precariously atop a single chair, itself balanced on a pyramid of two wooden benches, the longer bottom bench sitting on two chairs. The two actors mimed reaching down to haul the South Wind General skyward. The

four footsoldiers, each representing a garrison at least, moved their arms in unison as they scaled higher and higher into the glittering light of the mountain sun.

At last, they reached the summit. The two warriors somersaulted into the air and the chairs and two benches were quickly removed. The General, stroking his long beard, now stood on the table draped with a slate-grey cloth embroidered to look like clouds and rocks—the mountain's pinnacle. Teetering dangerously, he looked far below him, surveying the treacherous slopes he had conquered. He stepped back, and his feathered headdress shivered in the mountain winds.

I lifted my head higher to see more, to hear more. If I had first supposed the theatre was a strange dream, thought the tales unfamiliar, there came a moment when I no longer felt separated from the stage. Suddenly, nothing about the opera was foreign to me: I belonged. I could not make out the words spoken or sung on stage, but my mind could trace the stories like a magician tracing fire in the air.

The beautiful Princess was saved from the wicked King. The audience shouted their approval. But Mother told me she now had to pass a test to prove she was the real princess.

"She's going to perform a trick," Mother said.

The beautiful lady was offered a gold cup from an ebony tray held by a soldier. The soldier trembled with expectation: a stream of wine was poured until the cup was full. He carefully lowered the tray to the level of the royal lady's knees. Would the Princess know what to do? The only sound was the steady tap of a woodblock.

The beautiful lady turned away from the tray and slowly bent over backwards. Her spine arched, and her head dipped lower and lower, until, using only her teeth, she lifted the gold vessel off the tray. Still backward bent, she slowly tilted her head and tipped the wine down her throat. If she was the true princess, not a drop would be spilled. The audience held its breath; the woodblock beat a rhythm that matched her careful swallowing. Mother stopped me from talking.

The actress bent her head lower and lower, until she was almost doubled-over backwards. She unclenched her teeth, and the cup clicked back onto the tray, almost tipping over. The audience gasped. The servant lifted the tray. The General looked into the gold goblet. After a beat, he triumphantly turned the cup upside down to show the audience that every drop had vanished. The General now knew that she was the long-lost Princess he had loved when he was a young scholar. At last, they were reunited.

Mother and her lady friends wept and broke into applause. Now the General took the Princess by the hand and sang, his voice rousing and deep. Then he let her go, then grabbed his gilded belt, as if in anguish, and wept.

"Why is he crying?" I asked Mother. "Has he a tummy ache?"

"He's very happy," she said. "After all their struggles, the South Wind General is singing that they will now be blessed with good fortune. His tummy doesn't hurt. He cries for happy."

Unfortunately, he also sang for happy—sang and sang; then the Princess cried, tearing at her long hair and spinning about.

"She's happy, too," Mother told me. "She cry for happy."

Mother cried, too. Everyone was crying for happy.

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It would be many years before I finally understood why every one of those melodramatic operas ended in happiness.

"They cry for happy," Mother had told me. But Mother lied. It was easier for her to deceive me, easier to weep in peace than to explain to a small child the dire outcome of the romantic tragedy on stage.

In fact, the beautiful Princess had just been told her poor father, the real King, believing her dead, had gone mad; and her lover, in despair, had committed suicide.

"They cry," Mother said, "they happy."

I remember sensing *something* was amiss; not knowing any better, I grew to dread happy endings. To this very day, if ever I wish for anything, I never wish for happiness.

"No, no, no, *no*," Fifth Aunty protested when I told her my memory is saturated with weeping. "You got it all wrong, Sonny. In those days, Chinatown so damp. So many hankies because everyone has so many colds. Eyes watery. Bad flu! Always sniffing. Polite to use hankies, not sleeves!"

What I did not know for sure until I was almost seven was that Mother had oversimplified and recast all those opera stories; that many of these epic dramas ended tragically. Twists of fate, not luck, condemned heroines to suicide; drunken heroes were murdered by watchful villains.

I knew only Mother's versions of these stories, and so came to believe that the mythic forces of good eventually won out over evil; Luck always conquered Bad Fortune. Crossing my fingers, I told myself in a dozen different ways, "Good luck will be my life."

Whenever I worry about whether my good fortune will last, I think of those drowsy nights at the warehouse theatre on old Shanghai Alley. I hear again the encircling tales of my mother, her Toisanese rising above a cloud of sleep, each narrated episode a happy one. I never saw the same opera everyone else did.

I now understand that my perceptions in life grew out of the fables told to me by my mother. Her whispered narratives constructed within me a permanent barrier against pessimism, perhaps even against adversity.

If I turn my head at a certain angle, I can still see Mother crying, her perfumed hankie above me, her face streaked with tears. And, in some other sphere, I see Mother laughing like the Buddha, her spirit unyielding, her mythic lies flying between us like bright pennants.

Wayson Choy, novelist, memoirist, short-story writer (b at Vancouver 20 Apr 1939). Raised in Vancouver's Chinatown by both his adoptive parents and his extended community, Wayson Choy was an only child whose father, a cook for the Canadian Pacific Ocean Steamship Line, was often away at sea. Choy attended the University of British Columbia (UBC) in the late 1950s to study creative writing under the tutelage of Earle Birney. He began teaching English at Toronto's Humber College in 1967, where he was also a faculty member of the Humber School of Writers.

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