

OPERA FROM CHINA



WITH the arrival of the Peking Opera Company next month, New Zealanders will have their first glimpse of the classic Chinese theatre. Here MARGARET GARLAND describes how it has developed in the thousand or more years of its history.

IN the West theatrical art is divided into three forms—legitimate drama, ballet and opera. In China all three are combined in one production which we call Chinese opera.

In the very old days in China dancers did not sing and singers did not dance but later song and dance were combined to tell a story. Performances were given in the open air on a square raised platform with pillars at the four corners supporting a roof. At the back of the stage there was a partition with entrances for the actors. Later play-houses were built on much the same plan, and only in this century have Western style stages been adopted with wings and a curtain. Chinese drama in its present form has been traced back to the Sung dynasty (960-1279), but some authorities believe that it dates from the T'ang dynasty (618-907). The properties used in this drama are simple and the stage is practically bare. A table and two chairs are the usual stage set, and they can represent a number of things. An embroidered curtain hung behind the chairs represents a bed. If an actor mounts the chair or table it can represent a mountain or a wall or a roof. Means of transport are always shown symbolically, the man holding a tasselled whip is riding a horse, a carriage is shown by two silk banners with wheels embroidered on them, a boat is indicated by the boatman rowing or punting. A supernatural being carries a horsehair flywhisk, a feast is indicated by a wine cup.

Owing to the almost complete absence of sets and properties common to our stage, Chinese opera is infinitely flexible, and there is no limit to the setting of the scene. Actors can ride, climb mountains, ford streams, cross bridges, enter a temple, be buried in a tomb or cast into prison, and the initiated audience knows exactly what they are about. A General reviews a whole army, represented on the stage by ten men, and the cavalry and infantry are clearly recognisable, for the horsemen carry whips. When the General dismounts, a groom leads his horse away or stands holding it by the bridle: sometimes the animal is restive, rearing and shying, and the groom calms it or is dragged off stage as the horse bolts.

This flexibility is added to by the classification of opera characters into certain definite stereotypes—the poor peasant, the young or old servant, the old lady, the young beauty, the upright statesman, the prime minister, the

prince, the emperor, the popular hero, the animal-king, and so on. Mime, voice and costume proclaims each character, and we know as soon as they appear on the stage the part they are sure to take in the story. The characters are thus impersonal and symbolical.

The four main roles are the male and female lead (always young and beautiful, and sumptuously dressed), the important officials and generals, and the clown. While there is a strong feeling of the Commedia dell'Arte about Chinese opera, there is really nothing comparable in the Western theatre. The mixture of mime, dancing, recitative, singing and acrobatics with fantastically elaborate costume is unique. The drama is essentially operatic, but there are long stretches of spoken dialogue intended to break the tension and rest the singer, and indeed it would be humanly impossible to sing in the Chinese manner without many rests, in an opera lasting anything up to four hours. The music is not like any other music in China, much of which is as soft and subtle as the theatre music is rough, loud and cacophonous.

The orchestra gives out the time or rhythm to which the action fits. Timing of gesture is exquisitely precise; every flick of the wrist, every turn of the head, or even of the eyes, as well as every entrance or exit, is accompanied by the beat of a drum, clash of a cymbal or rattle of bones, which in China are called "wooden-fish." It is impossible to imagine Peking opera without its noisy accompaniments, which seems to heighten the whole scheme and certainly quickens the pulse. The instruments are different in different sorts of play. In "civilian" plays they are a small four-stringed guitar (moon guitar), a three-stringer guitar, a bamboo flute with eight holes, a clarinet, and a "balloon guitar" with four strings used for solos. The sharp, very loud and sweet two-stringed violin is the leading orchestral instrument, along with a lower-toned Southern Chinese violin and a single skin drum.

In "military" plays a barrel-shaped drum is added, and a large and small gong generally beaten for entrances and exits or to punctuate something in particular, brass cymbals, castanets which beat time throughout the play, and "clanging bells"—cup-shaped brass instruments said to be recently introduced by the actor Mie Lan-fang.

Children start training for the Peking opera almost as soon as they can walk, and in the new Peking Opera School they enter at eleven years old and their training will last ten years. For "local opera," that is to say, any opera other than Peking, five years' training is considered long enough, and musicians train for eight years. The actor in Peking opera must be able to sing and dance, he must be, in many cases, a trained acrobat, and his acting technique is superb. The discipline is very rigid and each actor must follow definite, well-known rules and conventions pertaining to the part he is trained for, otherwise he gets taunted and jeered at by the highly critical audience. His genius is judged by the delicacy and poise with which he swerves from these rules without actually breaking them. He can introduce light and shade, wit or ardour, and it is by this that a fine actor is distinguished rather than by the mere excellence of his drill. In a word his performance all depends on style.

The hands are extremely important and infinitely expressive. The hero's hands indicate his strength, courage and youthful virility, a woman's show fragile femininity, the thumb is always hidden and the hands painted white with pink fingertips and palms. Facial expression is remarkably subtle, but also conventional. There are definite ways of smiling, of showing surprise, anger or craftiness, according to the role. The hero's smile of confidence is especially and remarkably beautiful—always appearing to be quite spontaneous. The heroine's smile at the sight of her lover, which she modestly hides from him with a sleeve, is always a delight.

Whatever an actor is doing, his manner of walking is of first importance.

he does not walk through a courtyard in the same way as he walks across a room. Women glide about the stage not unlike a ballerina with tiny imperceptible steps. Men stride about to show their masculinity, or they adopt the slow, dignified stooped gait of the courtier or scholar. A general has his special way of walking, striking an attitude with every pace; advancing with deliberate caution or rushing along with smooth steps holding his arm stiffly at right angles to his sides with wrists flexed upwards and hands clenched.

Generals are popular and essential characters in military operas, and require very special training indeed. On stage the general's face is heavily painted in a fantastic design done in black and white, red, yellow, or blue—each colour and pattern standing for certain moral qualities. Black is honest but uncouth; red, sacred, loyal or imperial; white is treacherous and cunning, and so on. He wears magnificent costumes heavily embroidered in gold and silver to look like armour and has splendid banners stuck into his coat at the shoulders. The headdress is most elaborate and very large, always surmounted with pom-poms on wire, which tremble and shake at the warrior's fiery noises and before he lets out his roar and snarl of rage. He lifts his feet high and wide apart to show his steadfastness and courage, sometimes holding the skirt of his elaborate costume out in one hand, and sometimes his long beard, which he then flings aside in a superb gesture of determination and verve. To magnify his physique, already increased by the enormous stiff garments and three-inch soles to his boots, instead of sitting down, the general leans against cushions piled on the chair, legs outspread and elbows pushed out at an angle. On entering the stage he struts up to the footlights showing the soles of his boots as he advances, than having introduced himself he twirls about, whirling a supple leg and hurling his heavy gleaming weapon high in the air and catching it again with no apparent effort.

The part of a general, "A Big Painted Face," as he is called, may be the most spectacular, but every part has its own individual conventional form of behaviour, of gesture and poise, and there are a number of acting conventions. An aside is bawled at the audience, but the sleeve raised between the actor and the rest of the stage indicates that he is not heard by others about him. Meditation is indicated by flickering the fingers about the forehead, grief by touching the eyes with the edge of a sleeve, rage by violent trembling, anguish by whirling the head round and round in a kneeling position (a feat that seldom fails to get a clap from the audience), and so on. Most of these gestures are easy to read, but some are not so obvious, thus jumping off a chair means committing suicide by throwing oneself down a well, and turning the back on the audience means invisibility or hiding.

The dramas are almost all of them very old and the costume belongs to a period at least 500 and probably 1000 years ago. While action in military plays is always violent and continuous, in civil opera it may be entirely absent. The plays are not great literature, for this theatre did not originate in fine dramatic writing, but in dancing and singing and until very recently it was not thought very highly of by intellectuals as an art form. We read that "ideas were expressed and rhythms of souls, in co-rhythmical action and sound. The de-

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