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Musical and other impressions, elusive yet  
unfading, from Beijing 2014.

REVIEW no 30/2014,  
by GEORGE LEOTSAKOS.

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AS A DEPUTY secretary general of the Union of Greek Theatre and Music Critics I attended on my own expenses the 27<sup>th</sup> conference of the International Association of Theatre Critics, which took place in Beijing, between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2014. From China originated my lifelong passion for the Far East, thanks to an exhibition of traditional Chinese painting at the Zappeion Hall in Athens, in 1954 I think, when I was 19 years old. After all these years I have forgotten who had organized it. At that time China was twice as inaccessible to Greek citizens: Greece would grant them not a passport for any communist country, while in China, which for years was left out from the...United Nations., the presence of any Greek would be rather undesirable, since he was citizen of a capitalist country. Thus my passion for the Far East was almost totally devoted to my lifelong beloved Japan, in so many ways **different** from China, in older times known to the West as the *Heavenly Empire*. With the Chinese world I became familiar (autumn 1972) only through Singapore: until 2014 I had never the opportunity of visiting what Chinese themselves call in English *The Mainland*.

A nearly 12-hour long trip from Athens, via Istanbul with the excellent Turkish Airlines (*Türk Hava Yolları*), a 9½ hours non-stop night flight from the *Kemal Atatürk* airport to Peking, or Beijing as it is nowadays called. I would unhesitatingly call *dazzling*, both the dimensions and the elegant modern architecture of the excellently organized Beijing airport, with its huge, transparent glass roof, reminiscent of the heavenly dome, and its unworldly quietness, reminiscent of a western cathedral, in spite of thousands of persons roaming about. What finally I saw from Beijing made me characterize it as the largest city I ever saw: in 2013 its population numbered 21.150.000 souls! A considerable number of remnants from the traditional Chinese architecture, with the grey, tube-shaped tiles, harmonically coexisted with modern buildings, with an average height of 10-20 storeys. These buildings sometimes remind the viewer discreetly yet eloquently, of their remote yet discernible links with the architectural past. From our eyes passed impressively large lakes and rivers watering vast parks but mainly huge avenues, mostly motorways or expressways, quite often with as many as 5-6 traffic lanes on each side, i.e. 6 on the right and 6 on the left, and with elevated walkways, exclusively for pedestrians. All of them, as I guessed, were decorated with endless rows of trees and alleys. No matter how big, the trees appeared relatively small, if compared with the width of the avenues, which, as it appeared to me, it would perhaps match only with the Californian *sequoia*, the giant of the earthly flora. Needless to say, there is a dense subway network, the number of private cars becomes quite often the cause of traffic jammings (I had a personal experience from one of them), yet what mostly impresses a foreign visitor, is an unbelievable cleanliness. I cannot imagine a single Chinese throwing on earth even the smallest candy wrapper, and everywhere you can see obviously municipal agents, using wooden pickers to pick up cigarette butts.

Yet the language barrier represents the greatest problem - indeed insuperable - which a foreigner is called to solve. It is almost impossible to roam about by himself: more of 95% of

the inscriptions in shops, as well as on the packaging of the simplest goods, such as dairy products (indeed delicious, with a huge variety of flavours from exotic fruits) are in chinese ideogrammes, some of them so difficult to read because they consist of 20 or 30 brush strokes. In an extremely limited number of products there is an english name, printed with very small letters. The same happens with buildings with the exception of some banks.

If you happen to be on a moving car, it is impossible to understand what products are sold by any shop. I wondered how Chinese can read a great number of “rolling” red inscriptions with swiftly moving ideogrammes. Equally undecipherable are bus destinations, except for a usually three digit number, i.e. 305, which remains equally mysterious to any foreigner. Even to the plates of all kind of vehicles, which invariably use a combination of latin alphabet letters and “arab” numbers, the decipherable digits are always preceded by a chinese ideogramme. The mostly spoken language on the whole planet, a language both monosyllabic and “tonal” (the meaning of a phoneme depends on the raising or lowering of the voice), is characterized by the overgrowth of its written form (it is said that a 17<sup>th</sup> century chinese encyclopedia includes some 55.000 ideogrammes), dramatically opposed to the monosyllabic poverty of the spoken one.

Anyway in one of the apparently more central avenues (please, do not ask me for names!) there strolled vast numbers of people, especially younger persons, boys and girls very often of an exquisite beauty, whose clothing tended to cultivate the impression that they belonged to an *upper middle class*. Extremely polite, always smiling, they seemed most willing to communicate with us, not only in order to offer their assistance. However language remained an unsurmountable barrier. It goes without saying that there exists a number of Chinese, very well versed in English language, yet they must be so much sought after that must occupy positions much higher and well paid than, say, the *receptionistes* of the lavishly constructed, equipped and decorated chinese hotels—we stayed in two of

them, the *Hu Wan*, outside Beijing and *Kuan Ming* in Beijing. Last but not least, Beijing is the only city among those I have visited in many travels during my lifetime, which I left without obtaining its city plan: any discussion of the subject, perhaps accompanied by pantomime, appeared to be so time consuming that this wish of mine was sacrificed for the sake of other, more urgent, priorities...

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SUBJECT OF THE 27<sup>th</sup> IATC conference: “*A New World: The Profession of Criticism in the Internet Era*”. Besides their being published on a special website, the texts of a great number among dozens of contributions claiming to be the object of a study in depth, were distributed in bilingual translations, i.e. in chinese and english. So far I had not the time to study them carefully.

Organizer of the Conference was the *Central Academy of Drama of the People's Republic of China* (existing since 10<sup>th</sup> April 1938, official opening December 1949), which incorporates a total of 10 departments or faculties: 1) Acting. 2) Directing. 3) Stage Design. 4) Dramatic Literature 5) Musical Theatre. 6) Peking Opera 7) Western Opera. 8) Dance Drama. 9) Theatre Management 10) Film and TV Arts.

The conference took place in one of the two huge campuses of the Academy, which consists of numberless vast and elegantly decorated buildings: for three days we shared with the students their overrich *menu* consisting of dozens of very tasty chinese dishes, obviously representing the unknown to the West so-to-speak “everyday” chinese cooking. The conference programme included three spectacles, characteristically two of them musical: 1) An evening of the so-called inaccurately *Peking Opera* (personally I prefer the correct chinese term *Jīngjù*, in simplified chinese written 京剧; see below). 2) Western opera (Donizetti: *Don Pasquale*) at the recently built Beijing Opera (now in the western sense of the term!) and 3) A staging of Tchekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard* in chinese, which, unfortunately I failed to attend.

I consider a gross mistake to call the “Peking Opera” by this name which evokes to non-Chinese, completely different cultural items. Can you imagine, for instance, the Japanese *Noh* or *Kabuki* called “Japanese Opera” or the *Kabuki* called *Edo Opera* ? (Edo was the ancient name for Tokyo). I think that every sensible person will completely disregard the fact that the 1953 *Oxford’s Dictionary* edition first “consecrated” the term. It is about time to not only to make known but to impose internationally the term *Jīngjù*: People’s Republic of China is long ago a world power; therefore a certain degree of familiarization with the country’s language, history, and over 6000-years-old civilization is strongly recommended.

According to the *Wikipedia* as well as data provided to us by our hosts, the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1790 represents the “birthday” of the *Jīngjù*. The date coincided with the 79<sup>th</sup> birthday of emperor Qianlong (1711-1799; reigned as from 11<sup>th</sup> October 1735). On September 25, 1790, the so called “4 major theatre companies” from Anhui province (Eastern China) performed in Peking plays from an older theatrical genre, called *Huìjù*. Yet traditional Chinese theatre must be much older than *Jīngjù*. Is it possible even to imagine the non-existence of a fairly developed theatrical art during the period of the brilliant Tang Chinese dynasty (618-906)?

Let this question be answered by persons more competent than my humbleness. Personally, I can only report that in 2008, when the Athens Festival had invited the Kun Chinese *Jīngjù* (not opera! enough with it!) Company, I attended the last evening of a theatrical play staged in three consecutive days. It was entitled *The Pavilion with the Peonies*, and was written during the older Ming dynasty (1368-1644) by an author called Shian-tzu (1550-1616; I am not sure if I reproduce correctly his name from the apparently erroneous Greek transliteration). The work had been “revised” (whatever that meant) by our contemporary Pai Sen-yun or...Kenneth Pai. It would be unwise to associate this “revision” with the fact that emperor Qianlong had burned or “corrected” thousands of books, whose texts included unfavourable or even neutral comments about

his own dynasty (and last chinese dynasty) the Qing (1644-1912).

“Revolutionary” by 16<sup>th</sup> century chinese standards, *The Pavilion with the Peonies*, had a suspenseful plot, full of unexpected turns, dealing with the marriage of two young lovers. The play was described as “progressive” by 16<sup>th</sup> century standards, for the following reason: the only way to arrange a marriage at that time was by the parents of the couple, through matchmaking. The future couple were the last to be informed about their destiny! The presentation of *The Pavilion with the Peonies*, in Athens was met with ill luck due to two factors: 1) the clumsily written programme notes in Greek, completely failed to adequately inform about *Jīngjù* a totally ignorant public and 2) the greek overtitles, written in a polysyllabic language were running too slowly to catch up with the chinese monosyllabic text of the play!

On the contrary, in spite of the fact that no overtitles were used, the programme, presented by first and second year students of the *Jīngjù* Academy department at its open-air theatre, not only proved to be of the highest artistic quality, but moreover was received by the audience with feelings of enthusiasm and elation.

But first of all let us see what exactly *Jīngjù* is: it is the traditional chinese theatre, combining, allow me to say, in an exquisitely unbreakable unity, instrumental music, mostly accompanying a remarkable variety of singing styles, rhythmical (?) declamation, pantomime, dance, acrobatics sometimes reminding the western spectator the so called chinese “war arts”, costumes with dazzling colours and decoration and an artful make-up. I can very well imagine that all these elements may communicate between themselves through interrelated codes, but I am not 100% sure about this. The understanding of such codes, if extant, seems to me essential for a correct familiarization with the secrets of an all-too-fascinating *genre* who must have attained its greatest popularity under the Qing dynasty and especially the reign of the strong-willed Dowager Empress Tzu-hsi (1835-1908). It is said that the *Jīngjù* repertoire

consists of some 1400 plays and that recently was enriched with texts based on contemporary subjects!

The programme which we attended opened with an extensive "orchestral" overture. According to the distributed pink-coloured leaflet, it was followed by one more purely instrumental number, entitled *Deep Night* and 10 more numbers. Part I. 1. *The Panther*. 2. *The Matchmaker*. 3. *The Throne*. 6. *Fairies scattering Flowers*. 7. *Eight Hammers*. Part II. 8. *Farewell to my Concubine*. 9. *Stealing the Token* and 10. *Fire Attack*.

Apart from percussion instruments, both idiophones and membranophones, the instrumental ensemble consisted of 5 *er hu*, i.e. two-stringed chinese bowed instruments, comparable to the violin, 3 three-stringed plucked instruments of the lute family, the *san hsien* (the term means exactly "three strings") and two *yueh chyn*, four-stringed chinese "guitars" with an all-round shallow soundboard. Beating the rhythm, a drummer using twin sticks, seemed to act more or less as a "conductor" of the ensemble. They performed a piece which although based essentially on the pentatonic anhemitonic scale, it fascinated the listener with a variety of tempi in 2/4 or 4/4 rhythms, as well as sparse heterophonic passages.

We had to wait for the beginning of the *stricto sensu* show in order to deeply realize how music was interdependent not only with the text, either sung or declamated, but also with movement, acrobatics, choreography and a dazzlingly imaginative variety of contrasting colours and embroidered designs on the costumes. It was indeed an astounding "counterpoint", so to say, of the optical element with the aural. Though we could not follow the plots, very soon we discovered that we needed not to bother about that. We had the impression that the various scenes were separated from one another by 7 or 8 "dancers", clad in exquisitely blue-coloured, formfitting costumes: rushing forward from the backstage, they were splitting into two semi-circles, left and right. Each "dancer" waved a big flag painted with concentric squares consecutively coloured red, blue, orange and green, all centered around a small white one, painted with one or two red ideogrammes? We are not quite

sure about this last detail. The "dancers" appeared 24 or 25 times, suggesting that the 10 numbers of the whole programme consisted of 24 or 25 scenes. We could endlessly watch this enchanting spectacle which only in itself was worth the trip!

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OUR NEXT THEATRICAL experience consisted of the real, so-to-speak, Beijing Opera, constructed in connection with the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the exact opposite of the shameful 2004 Athens Olympiad, whose frightening expenses the Greek taxpayer will indefinitely continue to pay with his own blood. The Chinese Opera was inaugurated on December 22, 2007 with a concert. Do not look at the Internet for information about the Peking or the Beijing Opera, because you will unexpectedly land on the article about... *Jīngjù* !!! You should rather search in *Wikipedia* for the "*National Centre of Performing Arts (China)*" You will immediately be connected with photos of the miracle (indeed an eyes' delight) I first saw on Saturday, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2014 at the end of a rather demanding day. The programme of the conference, informed us about a visit at the *National Centre of Performing Arts* to be followed by an opera, Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*. Consequently I was expecting a visit to some administrative or university-like premises, to be followed by the opera, conjecturally somewhere in the vicinity. After a two-hour traffic jamming (it was already dark!) our bus left us in the middle of a magical landscape, reminiscent of the *Thousand and One Nights* : at the beginning of a vast avenue impeccably paved with slabs and surrounding a gigantic circular lake, on whose middle "floated" what to me appeared as the outside of a heavenly dome, all studded with tiny shimmering, star-like lights. Only later I read that the avenue surrounding this architectural miracle was named Chang-An, obviously after the fabulous capital of the T'ang dynasty. The lake with the dome was surrounded by the barely discernible black silhouettes of buildings suggesting traditional chinese architecture, spectacularly lighted with rows of white electrical bulbs. One can scarcely imagine a more enchanting hymen of Yesterday with Today and To Morrow, of History with the Present and the



Future. I tended to think that these far-off buildings were the Tien-an-men square, the People's Palace and the "Forbidden City", which lack of time, personal problems of motility, etc. prevented me from visiting. Was I right or wrong about my guessings? Unfortunately I cannot assure you.

Any way, the recently constructed Opera, lies west of the Tien-an-men, the People's Palace and the "Forbidden City". The impressive building is not exactly hemispheric, and for this reason Chinese call it *Gigantic Egg*: it has a length of 212 metres from east to west and 144 from the north to the south. It was designed by the famous French architect Paul Andrieu (b. 1938), who combined in an ingenious way his inspiration with the surrounding historical landscape. The interior of the building has the same fairy tale-like atmosphere. It consists of three halls with a total capacity of 5.452: 1) The Opera Hall, for opera and ballet. Capacity: 2416. 2) The Music Hall, with a capacity of 2014, other than the apparently older *Beijing Concert Hall* which was erected at a small distance to the west. 3) The Theatre Hall, with a capacity of 1046, for prose theatre and *Jīngjù*.

At the first of these halls, whose height reminds one of a western cathedral, we saw the immortal *Don Pasquale* [opera buffa, 3 acts, libretto by the composer and Giovanni Ruffini, world première: Paris, Théâtre-Italien, 3 Jan. 1841]. According to the *Prologue* (in chinese and english) in the printed programme, signed by Mr. Chen Ping, Chairman of the NCPA (initials of the words *National Centre [of] Performing Arts*) *Don Pasquale* was the last of the three most famous italian *opera buffa* to be staged at Beijing, since *L' Elisir d' amore*, also by Donizetti, and Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* were presented respectively in 2010 and 2011. It is exceptionally remarkable that for only 4 evenings with *Don Pasquale* two casts were provided: one predominantly Italian and one exclusively chinese. All these suggest a very wise artistic administration, with long-term perspectives, aiming at the education of both singers and public. The fact that a hall with a capacity of 2.416, appeared completely full, in a city with a population of 21.150.000, obviously

suggests very little, even if the work appeared on the stage for only 4 evenings.

The Italian director Pier Francesco Maestrini, «moved» historically an opera buffa, ostensibly influenced by the Italian *commedia dell' arte*, to the USA of the 1930s, even venturing to present on stage an expensive car of this period. Unremittingly opposed to the unjustifiable and quite often, *helas!* aesthetically disgusting “modernizations” of plays and operas, we witness the international public to become gradually accustomed to such “mild” transformations which, apparently, even the Chinese Great Wall failed to discourage. (*Helas*, we should not disregard the fact that the charming great granddaughters of Richard Wagner transformed Beyreuth into an asylum for psychopath and talentless self-proclaimed “directors”). What if in Donizetti the libretto wants Norina with hair so black as to be envied by ebony? Maestrini transformed her to an aggressively blond Jean Harlow rather than Marilyn Monroe. The role was sung by the Russian soprano Ekaterina Bakanova, that together with chinese tenor Shi Yijie (Ernesto), brilliantly successful in Pesaro, and baritone Filippo Polinelli, (a well intentioned *dottore Malatesta*, the opera’s Figaro, with a rather protruding moustache) formed an irresistible trio, combining an elegantly controlled vocal virtuosity, with rare acting capacities: thus they raised to unexpected heights an elegant performance, rarely encountered these days on european opera stages. Finally, the kilogrammes of Bruno Pratico’s weight, nearly twice as many as the years of his age (*b. Aosta, 16.5.1958*), are effortlessly associable with his vocal dimness, rather premature for a 56-years old bass. Imaginatively yet conscientiously following the instructions of the director, the set design of Gao Guangjian, pertinently illuminated by Pascale Merat, was carefully planned with a refined taste, in spite of Maestrini’s anachronisms. It provided an ideal frame for the costumes of Alberto Spiazzi. Last but not least: the conductor Daniele Callegari and choirmaster Matteo Salvatini, guiding two exclusively chinese ensembles (orchestra and chorus respectively), endowed with exceptionally high technical skills, sound

qualities and musical aptitudes, almost transformed a brilliant score bringing forth details which some of their most famous colleagues contemptuously disregard. Nonetheless, our decades-long aural experience would rather prefer a 100% Chinese *Don Pasquale*: the Chinese that may read the English version of the present text certainly ignore the invaluable offering to Greek musical life of their compatriot from Singapore, conductor Choo Hoey nowadays retired at the age of 82.

It is true that due to my problems of motility, I failed to become acquainted with the historical China, even to the extent that our limited time permitted. I believe however that I became fairly familiar with China of the present day and of the future, so as to face benevolently and optimistically the increase of its power and influence. And I close my text with wholehearted thanks to our generous hosts whose patience some of us unwillingly taxed, and especially to Mrs Zhu Ning, their head and the charming young ladies of the Central Academy of Drama who assisted me in a most affectionate way, as if they were my granddaughters.

(Written in English by the author),

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