

IS 'BEIJING/PEKING OPERA' OPERA?

The so-called Beijing/Peking Opera in the West is actually named '*Jingju*' in China, literally meaning 'capital drama', which reveals the birth history of the genre.

Jingju was formed in the 19th-century in Beijing, the capital of the Qing Empire. Taking the advantage of not being the oldest theatre in China, *Jingju* selected, borrowed, absorbed and rearranged all the good features and the repertoire of the pre-existing theatrical genres (including the well-known *Kunju*), which had travelled to Beijing, the most prosperous city in the country, performing for the court, officials, locals including literati, the rich, the poor, and the merchants who had come to the capital from all over China for business. We need to remember both these theatres and audiences spoke different dialects. The first generation of *Jingju* performers were all from other theatres; they worked together, boldly and ingeniously, and created a new theatre on the stage, using an artificial stage language based on differing dialects. As a child of mixed blood, *Jingju* appeared as a 'rebel', competing with those long-established theatres. It not only stronger than its 'regional ancestors', but also looked and sounded fresh yet familiar for audiences, both locals and those from different regions.

Gradually *Jingju* came to be the representative of the traditional/indigenous Chinese theatre, which consists of over 300 different regional theatres. Like all its 'siblings', *Jingju* is based on



music. The story moves within the realm of music while even the acrobatic display expresses the rhythm accentuated by the music. Yet, it is different from opera in the Western sense; *jingju* performers never stand still singing. Instead, an actor is expected to demonstrate the four basic skills of singing, speaking, dance-acting and combat, though each individual has his/her own speciality. Owing to the unprecedented richness of its background, *jingju* strikes audiences with the poetic wholeness of its performance art, arising from an astonishing unity of music, gesture, movement, eyes, language, rhythm and the control (both bodily and mentally). *Jingju*'s performer must be a 'total actor' rather than merely a singer or a dancer.

Jingju is highly stylised.

Conventionalization is the key to understanding the complexity of its performance system. The term refers to the way that every aspect of the genre - singing, speaking, dance-acting, combat, costuming, make-up and prop - has to follow certain modes, patterns or rules. However, the stylisation expresses a kind of realistic notation and rendering, demanding audiences' active involvement. Imagination is thus crucial while sitting in the auditorium.

For example, one of the double bills, *The Crossroad Inn*, presented by the China National Peking Opera Company tells a story of misunderstanding between two heroic bandits and shows their series of fighting in a dark room. It would be very interesting for us to work out how the room changes from being lit by a candle to the pitch darkness, and, although the stage remains dazzling bright, how actors make us understand that they are in the dark, without being able to see each other yet each attempting to kill the other. Stylisation is largely actual conditions of action and place. It would also be great fun to distinguish how the actor makes 'blowing out the light' into a dance-like movement, and how, on this empty stage with merely a table and a chair, the actors help us see the location - inside or outside the room. The *Jingju* proverb says: "The actor carries the scene on his body." Precision is thus essential: the imagined 'door' has to be in the same position with the same height and width. If we were to discover that the door 'moved' or in a different 'size', we could say this was not a satisfactory performance!

Precision and accuracy play a far more important role in *Jingju* than merely offering us the location, because they are the key to the cooperation between actors in acrobatics, martial arts, dance and singing, and between performers and orchestra.

Numerous conventions are employed by *Jingju*, and we now understand why an actor needs 8 - 10 years of arduous training. Through the rigorous drills, the four basic skills of singing, speaking, dance-acting and combat are synthesised into a single, organically whole mode of dynamic performance. Yet, conventions, if on their own, are not theatre; an acrobat or a gymnast can play the same trick and may do better. In *Jingju* conventions are the medium used by actors to express the characters' feelings in given circumstances, to tell the story and, ultimately, to create the theatre. Hence we enjoy the fast-moving combat in *The Crossroad Inn*, the funny yet splendid display of martial arts between the two eponymous characters of the Monkey (acted by a martial clown role) and the Leopard (by a warrior role wearing a special facial pattern), and the long rising and falling musical sentences that express rhythm, poetry and energy in the arias between the Xuanzong Emperor and his sweetheart. Doubtless to say that the scale of music and singing are foreign to most Western ears - does it matter? No, because we feel the emotions and the personalities of the characters and their relationship behind these superficial body and vocal expressions.

Indeed *Jingju* demands certain modes, patterns or rules; yet, through these fixed conventions, every individual actor expresses their own understanding or interpretation of the character, the situation and the play. In this way, *Jingju* is similar to classical operas. We go to see again and again Verdi's *La traviata*, *Rigoletto* or Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and others, as we are looking for different presentations of the same opera by different conductors, singers and directors.

Through individual actors, *Jingju* conventions are enriched, the traditional repertoire continue with re-imagination, and brand-new plays are created.

Let's enjoy the show!



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