

REHAN IN CHINESE EYES.

AN ORIENTAL CRITICISM.

Shakespeare and the
American Stage Discussed by
Fon-Chong-Mai.

The Chinese Actor Attends Daly's and Writes for the Herald His Impressions of Shakespearian Drama.

—THINKS NO RECONCILEMENT POSSIBLE.—

Fon-Chong Mai, the Chinese female impersonator, now playing at the Choy-Ting-Quoy Theatre, was at Daly's Theatre on Wednesday last to witness the presentation of "The Merchant of Venice," with Miss Ada Rehan as Portia. He was accompanied by two of his colleagues—Lee-Son, the tragedian; Mo-Quoy, comedian—and by Luke Ling, manager of his theatre. The Chinese star was there for the purpose of seeing a great English play for the first time, and its interpretation by a great actress of a school so different from his own.

Fon-Chong-Mai comes of a family of great actors, who have adorned the profession for centuries. He has a repertoire which includes all the great religious plays of the Mandarin dialect, some of them filling scores of volumes, and has a prodigious memory. He is a man of the keenest perception from an Oriental point of view, highly educated in his native arts and sciences. His impressions of Shakespeare and of Miss Ada Rehan, in the role of Portia, show that nothing escaped him, and that the traditions of the Chinese stage did not hamper him in his judgment of the play and its interpreter. The following observations were secured from the celestial Thespian through an interpreter in an interview, committed to paper by a Herald representative, and reinterpreted to the actor for emendation, and for his signature of approval. Those who were present at the performance and noted the intensity with which the Chinese actor viewed Miss Rehan from his box will find an unusual interest in his observations.

It will be noted that the Chinese actor, while intensely appreciative, insists on applying Chinese standards, and sees no reconciliation between his stage and ours. The article is at least a criticism of our stage from a new point of view.

BY FON-CHONG-MAI.

TO-DAY is Tsho-Tung. It is a national holiday of the Change of Seasons. Throughout my country there may be found feasting and song and praise. It is the Chinese Thanksgiving. The grand mandarins of the several provinces will have their house parties.

From the courts, too, that surround the temples of the Confucians and the Taoists alike, there will come the far calling "kin-kin, kin-kin" of the temple gong. Thousands will hear it, and in holiday attire will gather there to witness other bands of players, who have erected their stage near the altars of the gods, where both the mortal and immortal may witness. It is a great day for the theatre in China—the last of the four season holidays—a time of feasting and good-fellowship.

"Four Sticks Before Fo."

But, though I am here on the other side of the great globe, I, too, have been celebrating—indeed, as few of my people have ever had the honor. I have seen a play by your foremost dramatist, and interpreted by a great genius. It is a red letter day of my life; and, as the proverb goes, "I burn four sticks before Fo in grateful thanks."

Give you my impressions of Miss Ada Rehan as Portia in the "Merchant of Venice?"

I fear I know not where to begin; and, once begun, I fear I shall never end. It was the first time I had ever seen a foreign drama, and I did not need to be told that it was one of the best, given by the best people. With the curtain down on the first act I said to myself:—"Here is the best that the world can give. Better than this is only in the realm of the gods." The effect upon me was instant and cumulative; and when I left the theatre I walked as in a dream.

I might preface my observations by saying frankly that the most striking features of the play were simplicity, naturalness and sincerity. But how vain does that sound to you till you know that I mean that it is the very antithesis of our own dramas which are not simple, but complex; which are not natural, but artificial, and, alas! not always sincere. This is the true Chinese manner of the actor. He appears; he gives his name, his history, his business; he proceeds to the end of it, and away again. Bear with me while I do likewise, since I, too, like the Chinese drama, have no scenery nor other aid to bear out my meaning.

The Chinese Drama.

I am a humble one of the Brethren of the Pear Orchard. In other words, I am an actor. For three hundred years my people have been actors before me and I still wear many of their costumes.

I must confess that as the plays still cling to the ancient lines, so does society in a measure still regard the actor in China.

We have excelled, though always upon traditional lines. As in the Sung and Q'uen dynasties the stage had no scenery, so have we none now. As the cultivation of a second voice—a far reaching falsetto for the "pear orchard" exhibitions—was necessary then, tradition compels us to retain that method. As complexity of plot, mountains of incidents and volumes of talk, extending over a period often of a full month, was the fashion then, so is it now, for the Chinese reveres the archaic and abhors the new. Particularly is this true of anything that bears a religious significance; and the stage in China is as in ages past, closely allied to the temple.

Now to return, when I say that the most salient points of the presentation of the Shakespearian masterpiece by Miss Rehan and her admirable support were simplicity, naturalness and sincerity, you understand me better.

I mean that it is the reverse of our

own method, as your manners and customs are all the reverse of ours, and I am continually embarrassed by seeing people do things literally backward. The Chinese drama still clings to the dear tradition that complexity and bombast are an evidence of great power, while simplicity is the perfection of yours; that only the supernatural inspires great thoughts, while you believe that the natural is supreme; that sincerity is the badge of fools and the glory of dead men read in books, while you lay bare every thought and sentiment, as if concealment, with us a virtue, with you were a crime, and your fidelity to truth challenges like a god. This is very beautiful—it is sublime; but it is not Chinese.

Was Shakespeare a Chinaman?

Let me say right here that there is nothing new to me in the incidents of "The Merchant of Venice."

You say that Shakespeare is a universal spirit. I am convinced that in his throes of inspiration his spirit must have flown half way round the world and walked with our own Sin-Fafah and She-King and Lao-Tsze, for scarcely an incident or proverb in the play but has a Chinese parallel. The exchange of rings and Bassanio's broken pledge to his wife I recall in three plays in my own repertoire, and the episode of the three caskets is found in another of my favorites called "Ching-Won-Boh-Ow," wherein there are three boxes, one incrustated with gems, a second wreathed with garlands and the third covered with dust and sprinkled with human blood. Instead of the portrait in the latter lies a single white rose from the hair of the princess, and he who chooses it pledges forthwith to go through any hardship and even to kill to vouchsafe the happiness and preserve the honor of her whom his voice has made a fair partner for life.

Miss Rehan's Voice.

But if the test of a great play is the ability to hold the observer, even though he be a stranger to the language, "The Merchant of Venice," as interpreted by Miss Rehan, is supreme.

Therein lay the charming actress' power in my eyes—the ease with which she possessed me with the spirit of the drama and held me with it spellbound for two hours, even though I was a stranger to the letter. Her first words had a peculiar effect upon me, like that of the music of some celestial instrument, far reaching as the temple gong at midnight, yet rich, mellow and of inexpressible sweetness. I never knew before what roll and rhythm and fire there is in the cadences of your language, and that voice was a revelation.

It was all the more amazing when upon meeting Miss Rehan afterward behind the scenes, where Mr. Daly accorded myself and others of my support the honor of a presentation, I discovered that this supernatural voice was really the natural—that it was not, as with us, a second voice brought to perfection for stage uses only, and never used save on these occasions.

It was so spontaneous, so unforced. It was like Miss Rehan's acting, wherein she never rose so high but one felt that she could still go higher; never so sublime but that great reservations of power lay behind it. It was all so perfectly easy that it was easily perfect. And so joyous! She exhaled happiness, even in the dread trial scene. It was then that I mused with Kea-Paou in the folk legend, "With a smile like that may not a woman overthrow a city, and with another a kingdom."

After seeing Miss Rehan in the last act never again will I believe your national costume inert. That superb gown of royal splendor, worn with such distinction and charm, challenges our rarest creations of many hues, mellowed in tone with age, and embroidered with gold and silver in designs of the Imperial dragon, flowers and birds. Music, which plays a large part in our great

dramas, seems to have been ignored by your great master. I expected to hear Miss Rehan sing alternately between her fine phrases, but I listened in vain. Even upon her entrance there was not the sound of trumpet or cymbals, which with us is supposed to have the power of waking the gods to the presence of the heroine.

But the little music there was inspired me, though I was surprised to see the musicians use notes. Foreigners seem to think that we are an unmusical people, but it is far from the truth. There is something beside music in the blare of trumpets and the roll of snake-skin drums. There is passion, fire and often exquisite sweetness.

But your rarest music to me was the rolling, quivering modulations of your voices during the most solemn passages of your master, and Miss Rehan's recitations fell upon me as did the song of the great Shun, the father of Chinese music, on the soul of Confucius, which so inspired him that, as the legend goes, he fasted for three years in solemn contemplation of its supernatural charm.

I long for the time when the Chinese actor shall be regarded with the same generosity by his people that your play folk are here. For ages policemen, actors and slaves have been classed together in general obloquy by the high and mighty.

Only the actor has risen above this plane and shown himself a possible power for virtue and enlightenment in the world. The policeman and the slave remain.

I must confess that the trial scene disappointed me somewhat. The idea that Portia could be there undisguised in the presence of her husband and of learned judges and neither her personality nor sex discovered appeared to me a grievous fault, for which only consummate beauty of scene and the admirable acting of Shylock atoned. My great successes have been in female impersonation, and I was naturally intensely interested in Miss Rehan's impersonation of a man—the learned Balthazar, whose edict frees Antonio and condemns the Jew. I expected to see Miss Rehan in mask and otherwise in complete disguise, as I was myself when taking a female part.

Where Chinese Is Better Than English.

After all that had gone before was so consistent and plausible, I could not forget the utter impossibility of a wife, in no other disguise than a man's gown, cajoling a precious ring from her husband. This appeared to me carrying stage license too far; but our codes are different.

We rely so entirely on costume and mask, while you utterly ignore the use of the latter, that I merely speak of the episode as a query. Could Shakespeare have meant that Portia should go quite undis-

guised into court, or is this a part where much is left to the imagination? If the latter, then it is the only instance where anything was left to the audience to imagine.

With us all is left to the imagination save costume and voice. A stride across the stage suffices for a hundred mile journey if the actor there but throws aside a garment and says, "Behold! I am now in Ho-Nan, having travelled all the way on foot!" The new locality is imagined.

With you it is placed before you in the twinkling of an eye during a dark interval, when queer, dwarfish objects are seen running hither and thither over the stage. Then comes the lights again, and lo! the garden is a palace interior, or the latter transformed into a court of justice. It is magical; but to adopt such methods on our stage would necessitate the reconstruction of all our plays—which would be like tampering with your own Holy Scriptures—or the writing of new dramas which no one would ever go to see.

And therein lies the great gulf which separates the drama of the Celestial Empire from that of the Western world. You look at life as it is, interpreting it again. We regard it through the penumbra of tradition. Your hearts are in present, your eyes on the future. Our reverence is for the past, and the present is all-sufficient in this reverence.

You observe we are both right. Your plays on our temple court stages would be irrelevant and even sacrilegious; our plays on your stage vain and ineffectual. I have learned nothing from the noble work of Miss Rehan and her strong support that I can incorporate into my own presentations, any more than a great swordsman could learn anything needful to him in his profession by witnessing a sharpshooter. We represent different worlds, times and manners.

Our paths lie in eternal parallel; they will never converge. I am inexpressibly happy, however, and broader of view for having seen Miss Rehan in "The Merchant of Venice," and I vow that I shall never again say with our ancient lawgiver, She-King, "Woman! that thou wert not born a male is owing to thy wickedness in a previous state of existence."

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