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Mei Lan-fang (top) in The Interrupted Dream, adapted from the Ming play Peony Pavilion. In the early days of the Peking opera, many artists were first schooled in the southern kun-ch'ü dramatic form.

Mei Lan-fang in America

Nearly 45 years ago, Mei Lan-fang, the great female impersonator of Chinese opera, made his first trip to the Western world. He and his company opened on Feb. 16, 1930 at the Forty-ninth Street Theatre on New York's Broadway, in a program comprising five selections from his vast repertoire. These included "The Suspected Slipper" (汾河灣), "The End of the 'Tiger' General" (刺虎) and "The King's Parting with His Favorite" (霸王別姬). The following morning the New York Times published an article by its drama critic, who then signed himself "J. Brooks Atkinson", calling it "a task to mock the midnight hour" to describe a classical stage Chinese performance to Occidentals who have never seen one. The following are excerpts from this review, written under pressure of time, and from a more studied article by Mr. Atkinson which appeared the following Sunday.

THE DRAMA OF PEKING, whence Mr. Mei and his actors come, has almost no point of similarity to the drama with which we are familiar; and the barrier of language is as nothing by comparison with the barrier of a completely exotic art. It is stylized, conventionalized and as old as the hills. It is, in fact, an arrested form of classical drama with virtually no striving after illusion and hardly a suggestion of realism. But it is beautiful as an old Chinese vase or tapestry. If you can purge yourself of the sophomoric illusion that it is funny, merely because it is different, you can begin to appreciate something of exquisite loveliness in pantomime and costume, and you may feel yourself vaguely in contact, not with the sensation of the moment, but with the strange ripeness of centuries. Perhaps you may even have a few bitter moments of reflecting that although our own theatrical form is enormously vivid it is rigid, and never lives so freely in terms of the imagination as this one does. . . .

(Mr. Mei's) pantomime throughout is soft and gentle in the plasticity of its gesturing. . . . The chief impression is one of grace and beauty, stateliness and sobriety, of unalloyed imagination, and of living antiquity. Obviously, the theatre of Mei Lan-fang does not mirror the thought of contemporary China. But it is not difficult to believe that it reflects something of the soul of the Chinese nation. . . .

NO MATTER HOW little you understand it, you recognize it as the quintessence of pantomime, the ultimate in grace and style and a token of far-off, ancient, abstractly beautiful things. Mr. Mei's acting is as limpid as a forest pool. . . . It is the apotheosis of theatre, completely artificial. Centuries of conventionalization have resolved the acting into a passionless exhibition of skill and training. What Chinese artists strive to do with the pellucidity of line in their prints Mei Lan-fang endeavors to create with the line of his acting. . . .

—BROOKS ATKINSON