



ArtSmarts

2002-2003 Wells Fargo School Matinee Series

VOICE OF THE DRAGON Once Upon a Time in Chinese America

February 14, 2003 11:00 am
Jackson Hall, Mondavi Center

Dear Teachers:

We hope you will find this teacher's guide helpful in preparing your students for the Voice of the Dragon matinee. The guide provides information on the show, a play synopsis, historical background, and explanations of performance elements. Also included in the guide is a review of theatre conventions and audience protocol.

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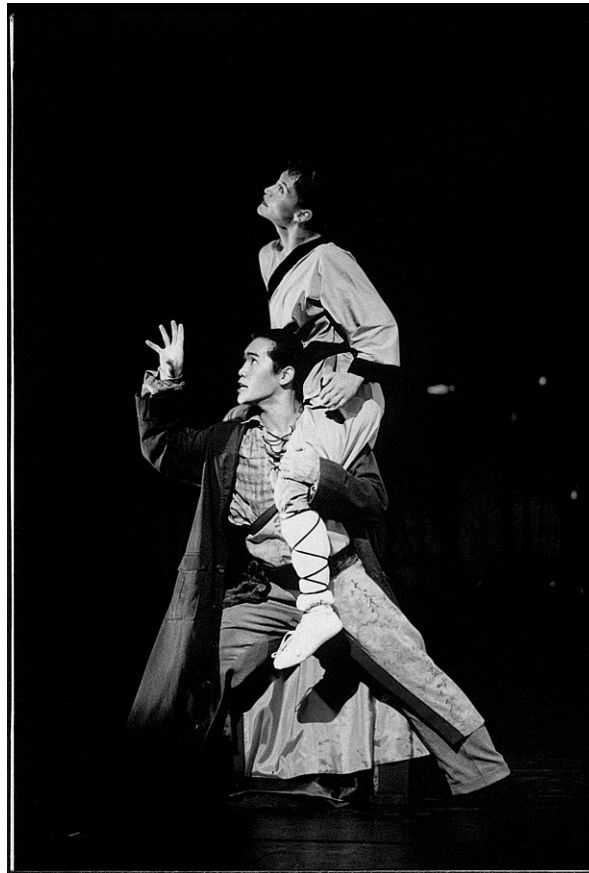


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A Legend Recreated

Kung Fu becomes a multi-cultural dance experience in Voice of the Dragon.

Combining martial arts, capoeira, hip-hop, and an eclectic musical score, it's a saga based on the Shaolin Temple of 17th-century China and a renegade monk who allies herself with Manchu invaders to destroy the temple. Voice of the Dragon is also an allegory about the bitterness of betrayal and opportunism and the strength of loyalty and integrity. It is the latest work from composer, artistic director, writer, and conductor, Fred Ho.



Story Synopsis

The narrator, a time-traveling host, appears and magically creates the orchestra and characters, introducing us to the history of the Shaolin Temple. As the story unfolds, a baby girl, Gar Man Jang, is brought to the Shaolin Temple, abandoned by her father. The monks of the temple adopt the orphaned child. As she grows, the monks educate Gar Man in the mystical martial arts of the Shaolin. She learns quickly and receives her black belt – a high level of achievement in the martial arts – earlier than most other students.

Though Gar Man's skill is advancing rapidly in the temple, she grows impatient with the time-honored traditions of the Shaolin way. Her pride and ambition begin to take command of her personality. As punishment for her vanity, the elders of the temple order her to perform the menial duty of cleaning the monastery floor, a humbling task usually left to novices. Insulted, but too afraid to defy her elders, Gar Man begins to clean. But she is careless and breaks an ancient lamp. The sound of the crash causes an uproar in the temple. Gar Man is harshly reprimanded by the elders for this carelessness and then left alone to clean up the mess. Gar Man's soul explodes with rage.

Meantime, Eunuch Chow Mae Ngai, a sly member of the Manchu imperial court is on a mission to infiltrate the Shaolin Temple and steal its secrets. Choe Mae Ngai disguises himself as a common beggar and sets himself outside the temple in hopes of finding a way in. He accosts Gar Man as she is sneaking out of the temple in the dead of night. He promises her riches and power if she will divulge the secrets of

the Shaolin Way and plot with him to attack the temple. Gar Man, still seething from her disgrace, agrees.

The monks of the Shaolin Temple awake amid a massacre led by Gar Man and Chow Mae Ngai. A brutal battle ensues as the temple is burned to the ground and its treasures ravished. Five disciples manage to escape the slaughter and flee toward the safety of the marshes while Gar Man goes in search of the temple's secret scrolls.

Exhausted from their escape, the five disciples collapse under a peach tree far from their demolished temple. They vow loyalty to the Shaolin Way and agree to split up for safety and reunite years later to take revenge upon the traitor Gar Man Jang.

While the temple burns above her, Gar Man Jang discovers the vault of the Shaolin Secret Scrolls. Reading them is forbidden for any but the highest elders of Shaolin. (The Shaolin martial arts tradition is taught through an oral tradition, teacher to student.) Gar Man commits the ultimate betrayal and reads all the scrolls. The awesome power of this martial knowledge is too much for any human to handle at once and Gar Man undergoes a terrifying transformation. Her soul is turned inside out and she becomes a beast focused on killing the five who escaped her madness.

Ten years later, the five disciples reunite as they vowed under the peach tree. They learn that Gar Man has stolen the knowledge and power of the scrolls. Knowing that she has as much or more martial knowledge than they do, they set about creating a new tradition. Inspired by the lower classes, the five disciples invent a

new form of martial arts they call Drunken Fist. They use this new form in a final battle against the beast Gar Man.

After the defeat of Gar Man Jang, the five disciples rebuild the temple and harmony is restored. But as the lights dim, the narrator reminds the audience that this story of loyalty and betrayal has been repeated throughout every century. As long as there is ambition without the honor and respect of tradition, this story will continue to be told.

History of the Legendary Shaolin Temple

Toward the end of the 5th century A.D., an Indian Buddhist monk by the name of Ba Tuo traveled through China teaching Buddhism. His great wisdom and kindness came to the ears of the emperor who summoned Ba Tuo to come to him.

Ba Tuo was offered riches, a place in the palace, and encouraged to continue his teachings. Ba Tao kindly declined this offer but asked for a piece of land far away from any civilized place in the province of Henan. There, he was given a large piece of land and resources to build a monastery in a forested area under the mountain peak, Shao, from which the temple derives its name, Shaolin.

Although the first Shaolin Temple was in the center of China, Shaolin was more than just a physical place of Buddhism. It was pivotal in events and history.

The Introduction of the Martial Arts

In about 539 A.D., a holy man named Budhidharma (Ta Mo in Chinese) left his monastery in Southern India to spread the Buddhist faith to China, later called Ch'an Buddhism. After traveling hundreds of miles to reach Northern China and crossing the Himalayan mountains, he crossed the Yangtze River and headed north to Loyang, the capital of Henan Province. In a neighboring forest, he saw the Shaolin Temple, which was now famous for scholarly translations of Buddhist scripture into Chinese. When Ta Mo, as he was now called, was finally allowed entrance into Shaolin, he saw that the monks were weak and could not perform the

rigorous meditations they should be practicing. While meditating, they often fell asleep or were very restless and were not achieving inner calm or peace. He concluded that the monks were simply not fit to meditate.

So he started working on a solution: a philosophy of exercise that required intense concentration, hard work, and perfection. Ta Mo later devised some self-defense movements based on his knowledge of Indian fighting systems.

Many of the Shaolin priests were retired soldiers and generals, thus Ta Mo's teachings were refined by these martial art masters and slowly developed into Shaolin Temple boxing. Since bandits frequently attacked the temple, the Shaolin monks also hired kung fu masters to teach them to better defend themselves.

Shaolin monks became very apt at kung fu and in deterring bandits. The temple thus became renowned for its martial arts prowess and fighting ability.

The Shaolin Temple Helps Defend Chinese Dynasties

Throughout the centuries, the fighting monks assisted Chinese dynasties against warriors bent upon overthrowing the status-quo. As bonds between the temple and imperial China developed, regular interchange and training between high-ranking soldiers and graduate Shaolin warrior monks saw further development of Shaolin kung fu. Masters of martial arts were drawn to the Shaolin Temple, which in turn brought it a continual flow of new skills and abilities.

China's Golden Age

The time of the Ming Dynasty, 1368 A.D. to 1644 A.D., was a golden age in China's arts and science history. During this period, the Shaolin Temple also grew and prospered, becoming the center for teaching, philosophy, and martial arts. The wisest of monks would gain entrance to Shaolin and share their knowledge in return for Shaolin knowledge and shelter.

Around the 17th century, invaders from Manchuria, a region in northeast China, led by the Ching family ended China's golden era and the reign of the Ming dynasties. They brutally took control of China and systematically eradicated all resistance. Shaolin was strong, but finally in 1647, through betrayal of an insider and Ching loyal troops, the Shaolin Temple was destroyed.

Rebuilding and Final Collapse

About the beginning of 1800, the Shaolin Temple was rebuilt. As with previous times, Shaolin influence, power and kung fu mastery were feared, which probably led to yet another burning of Shaolin in 1927. Beginning in about 1940, as a result of the cultural revolution in China, which didn't allow religion or martial arts, Shaolin teachings were attacked. That was the final death of Shaolin.

(For further reading, go to www.shaolin.com)

Some Elements of Voice of the Dragon

Allegory: A story in which characters and events symbolize some deeper underlying meaning.

Capoeira (pronounced cop-o-air-a): A folk dance popular in the Brazilian northeast. Capoeira was originally a deadly sport in which the participants with blades strapped to their ankles, swung their legs high in attack, somersaulted, and passed within a hairsbreadth of their opponent's knees, head, groin, or stomach. Flexibility and rapidity of movement were more important than muscular strength. In the modern dance, the same quick, graceful movements are employed; usually two men face each other, emulating the blows and parries of "the fight."

(source: Encyclopedia Britannica)

Choreography: An art invented about 200 years ago to delineate the figures and steps of dances.

Hip-hop: Hip-hop is a cultural movement, which originated in the mostly African American, economically depressed South Bronx section of New York City in the late 1970s. It attained widespread popularity in the 1980s and 90s. It's also the backing music for rap, the musical style incorporating rhythmic and/or rhyming speech that became the movement's most lasting and influential art form.

(source: Encyclopedia Britannica)

Kung Fu: A martial art form of exercise with a spiritual dimension stemming from concentration and self-discipline; an unarmed mode of personal combat often equated with karate or tae kwon do.

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Martial Arts: Any of several Oriental arts of combat or self-defense, such as karate, kung fu, judo, or tae kwon do.

THINK ABOUT IT!

Talking with your teacher, friends, and family about a performance after attending is part of the experience. You can now compare ideas, ask questions and find out how to learn even more. Here are some questions to think about:

1. How would you describe Voice of the Dragon to a friend?
2. What did you like best about Voice of the Dragon and why? Was it what you had expected?
3. How was Voice of the Dragon an allegory?
4. Can you tie the story portrayed in Voice of the Dragon to China's history?
5. In what ways were the martial arts key to the performance? To the story?
6. What lessons about loyalty, ambition, and betrayal did you learn from Voice of the Dragon?
7. Although Voice of the Dragon is based on Chinese legend, were there western influences in the performance? What were they?

ATTENDING THE THEATER

What is expected of student audiences at the matinee:

- Enter the auditorium quietly and take seats immediately (*note that all matinees now have reserved seating*);
- Show courtesy to the artist and other guests at all times;
- Demonstrate appreciation for the artist's work by applauding at the appropriate times;
- Refrain from making unnecessary noise or movements;
- Please eat lunch before or after the performance to avoid disruption;
- Relate any information acquired from the pre-matinee discussion to the new information gained from the matinee;
- Please do not use flash photography.

What you can expect of your experience in a performing arts theater:

A theater is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, the excitement level goes up! Theaters are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience: whispering, rustling of papers, speaking and moving about, can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these upset everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance.

The performers on stage show respect for their art form and for the audience by doing their very best work. The audience shows respect for the performers by watching attentively. Applause is the best way for audience members to share their enthusiasm and to show their appreciation for the performers. Applaud at the end of a performance! Sometimes the audience will clap during a performance, as after a featured solo. Audience members may feel like laughing if the action on stage is funny, crying if the action is sad, or sighing if something is seen or heard that is beautiful. Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form and the culture(s) of the people in the audience. While the audience at a dance performance will sit quietly, other types of performance invite audience participation.

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