

HERE'S a story for you. A beautiful blonde homecoming queen falls in love with a short Japanese businessman. After they live together for a while, he goes back to Japan, promising to return for her.

She has his child. Her family and friends try to persuade her to marry a young heir to the Kennedy fortune, but she refuses. Several years later, the Japanese businessman returns, with a Japanese wife. The homecoming queen kills herself in despair. That's the tale of Madame Butterfly with a slight twist, as told by the Chinese Opera performer Song Liling in David Henry Hwang's play "M. Butterfly." Song's tale epitomizes the way Hwang looks at race and gender stereotypes in his drama.

Michael Mayer, who is directing the play for the Hangar Theatre, notes that it is based on a true story about a French diplomat whose Chinese mistress of many years turned out to be a spy. But the story is an old one.

"It's very complicated," says Mayer, "the fabric of this play is so ingeniously written." The story behind "Madame Butterfly" began in the 19th century, when a French author wrote a book about a French serviceman who married a 15-year-old girl in Nagasaki. The story was adapted for an American magazine where David Belasco saw it and turned it into a play. Then Puccini saw the play and turned it into an opera.

"Now that opera is seen through the eyes of a Chinese American, David Henry Hwang, telling a story about a French diplomat and a Peking Opera performer," says Mayer. "Structurally it reflects how Hwang is deconstructing the Madame Butterfly story." The play includes scenes from the Puccini opera and scenes from the Peking Opera.

The latter requires the skills of an acrobat and mime as well as a

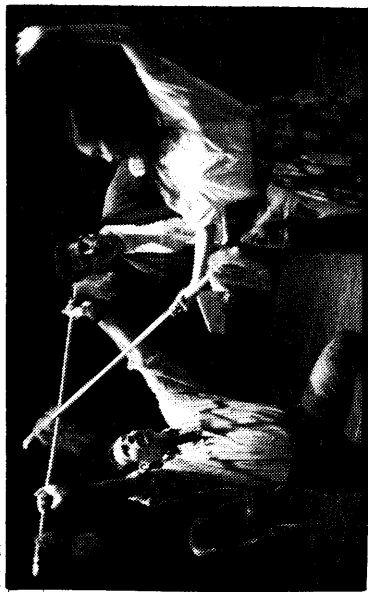


photo by DEDE HATCH

Rehearsing the moves in 'M. Butterfly.'

M. Butterfly

- **WHAT:** drama based on spy story, Peking Opera and Puccini
- **WHERE:** at the Hangar Theatre
- **WHEN:** August 12-22, benefit performance for Suicide Prevention Aug. 16, reception 8:15 p.m.
- **TICKETS:** \$13-\$15
- **INFO:** 273-4497 or 1-800-724-0999

singer. Mayer wanted to find someone to teach Peking Opera techniques to his actors. "The Peking Opera was in New York, and I rushed over," says Mayer. "There were no tickets, so I snuck in. They tried to throw me out, but I was a man with a mission."

He talked with the director, who suggested Mayer call Kuang Yu Fong. Fong studied the Peking Opera at Chinese Cultural University, and taught there before coming to the United States nine years ago. She teaches workshops in Chinese theatre and has toured with such groups as the Bread and Puppet Theatre and the Ninth Street Theatre.

At a workshop for the Hangar's Next Generation students, Fong teaches them how to spin a heavy tasseled stick around their bodies in the athletic style the Opera is famous for. Last year was the 201st anniversary of the Peking Opera, she tells the students. "It started when all the Opera troupes gathered in Peking for the birthday of the emperor. They all learned



KUANG-YU FONG

from one another, and four troupes stayed in Peking performing in the new style."

"What's astonishing is how much strength and effort it takes to do something soft and subtle," says Mayer.

"Strength is the key," says Fong. "For Peking Opera performers training is more important than rehearsal, because everyone knows the routine very well. We don't have a director because everyone learns their own stuff and puts it

together."

Each performer learns a particular role — Fong's specialty is the young woman. "When I learn, I'm not allowed to change anything, because it's tradition," Fong says. Fong will create the Peking Opera scene, coach M. R. Lomotan who plays Song, and assist at rehearsals.

Mayer wants the whole production to reflect the sensibility of the Peking Opera, with minimal props. "It's a transformational use of

space," he says. "The actors and their bodies and the way they are costumed indicates the scenes."

"I'm interested in mixing the East and West much more naturally, so the line between won't be so sharp," says Fong. She notes that Song Liling creates a fantasy relationship with the French diplomat Gallimard (played by Jim Abele). We discuss the stereotypes of the Asian woman, which Song creates for Gallimard, and the stereotypes of Asians in general, which this play calls into question.

"If this play is about the creation of an ideal woman, it's also about the creation of an ideal man," adds Mayer. "Gallimard changes as a result of this relationship — the more Eastern Song becomes, the more Western Gallimard becomes." It's important that Song not be a simple villain.

"Song then becomes the sneaky Oriental, and that's not the point," says Mayer. "The big question is how do we critique the whole gender and political issue without just reinscribing the roles we play? That's the challenge to us. If the audience walks away saying how could Gallimard not have known what Song was after all those years, we haven't done our job. We all need to be implicated in that."

NOTE: For those of you who know "M. Butterfly," we realize we've left out an important plot twist or two. That's so those of you who don't know the play will have more fun. □

Peking Opera skills translated for Ithaca in 'M. Butterfly'

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