WORDS WITHOUT MUSIC

Renditions No. 2, a Special Fiction Issue, appeared to be a “tough act to follow”. Certainly not with another special issue, this time devoted entirely to drama. The narrative tradition reached back further among the Chinese people and yielded a richer source of literary materials for the translator than anything emanating from the stage. Where the classic Chinese novel evolved in many cases from the storyteller’s art, drama by definition is all oral. The Yuan and Ming periods handed down to us bodies of dramatic literature as readable as they must have been effective theatre. Yet others of what passed as stage entertainment through the millennia have vanished into thin air for want of recording or, if recorded, could probably no more be considered literature than the scenarios and libretti of the Peking opera.

Another notable thing is that traditional Chinese theatre, again down to and including the Peking opera, was nothing if not musical. Songs and arias made the play, and these are reduced to mere words in translation, the fanciful tune-names meaningless to all but a handful of musicologists. Still, we have managed to assemble here a complete Yuan play, a couple of one-acters, and snippets from all the important dramatic forms—the tsa chü (雜劇), the ch’uan ch’î (眞奇), the ching hsi (京戲) and the modern-day, non-musical hua chü (話劇). All, that is, except the “model revolutionary theatrical works” (革命樣本戲) that have been the prescribed fare in mainland China since the Cultural Revolution. This is not because the yang-pan hsi is considered unimportant. Anything that represents the sole source of dramatic entertainment for hundreds of millions over a period of time must have a far-reaching social significance. But for now it is not within our ken, and we trust that ample opportunities exist elsewhere for the Western playgoer to sample this new theatre, in print and perhaps even from an aisle seat.

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Special appreciation must be recorded for two distinguished translators who started from the ends of the earth and now both reside in California: Prof. Yao Hsin-nung, himself a prominent dramatist; and Prof. Cyril Birch, whose anthologies of Chinese literature have given us excellent English versions of a number of famous plays.

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Two younger scholars—Joseph S. M. Lau and Daniel S. P. Yang—have given generously to enrich the contents of this issue, not only with their own contributions but also in the form of helpful leads and advice. Prof. Lau translated the sprightly comedy “Oppression” and has made available to us his insightful studies on the playwrights, Ting Hsi-lin and Ts’ao Yu. Prof. Yang has taken us behind the scenes of his unique experiment staging Chinese operas in English. His production notes on Black Dragon Residence (烏龍院), the first Chinese play to have been performed at the Kennedy Centre in Washington, D.C., represent valuable firsthand documentation on the art of translating drama, not just language-to-language in linear fashion, but from stage to stage, involving dialogue and singing and mime, in what might be called “total theatre”.

Enough said. Let the curtain go up!

—G. K.