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ABT: Gillian Murphy as Aurora.



The Red Detachment of Women: Zhou Zhaohui with corps (top), Lu Di and Zhang Jian (bottom).
(Photos: Stephanie Berger, Lincoln Center Festival)

China Is Near

Eva Shan Chou

For Lincoln Center Festival 2015, the National Ballet of China offered a short week's season: *The Peony Pavilion* (2008) in three performances and *The Red Detachment of Women* (1964) in two performances. The choice of two ballets that contrast in every way save for their excellent dancers was intended, as the Chinese press noted, to display the country's creativity in fusing Chinese topics and Western ballet technique and to show this creativity to be both current and long-standing.

The two-act ballet *Peony Pavilion*, by company choreographer Fei Bo, is based on Tang Xianzu's famous, late sixteenth-century, *kunqu* drama. Excerpts had been performed in City Center's 2014 Fall for Dance series (the lovers' pas de deux from the second act and two crowd scenes: a scene in Hades and the finale marriage procession) with the same principals who danced it on opening night of the full ballet's first U. S. performance.

In his drama, Tang Xianzu takes that favorite trope of classical Chinese tales, the scholar-and-beauty love story, and gives it a twist: their love is consummated *before* they meet, in a near-waking dream Liniang has, into which her stirrings of desires draw him. She then dies of love, and getting together again becomes their problem.

The ballet, libretto by Li Liuyi, gives form to Liniang's restless feelings by expanding a Red Flower role in the drama into an alter ego, Flower Goddess Liniang, costumed in brilliant red. In the opening scene (after a prelude of near sleep), the two versions of Liniang dance their solos at the same time, the red figure behind the white, and, like Odette and Odile together, skillfully use similar arm and body movements (there are relatively few steps) to express innocently yearning (Zhu Yan) and sexual charge (Zhang Jian, whose amazing

arched foot is the first part of her we see).

There are wonderful moments. The lover, danced by Ma Xiaodong on opening night, was especially good in the lyrical parts of his solo (a *renversé* and an arabesque rising to demi-pointe) as he searched for her and in the lovers' act 2 pas de deux. He had also danced it at City Center, but is much better set off here, perhaps because the stage is larger.

The first lovers' duet has interesting contrasts between prowling on the ground and impressive, thrown lifts. Both the male and female corps display their beautiful training.

But basically there is too much going on. There is a second alter ego, a *kunqu* Liniang whose sung lyrics are provided in the program. Even so, her role wasn't clear to me until she shed her dark blue brocade gown for red near the end of act 1.

Act 1 has a simple and basically effective set design: a low, square platform, raised up by ropes at its corners (the pavilion), its clean lines reminiscent of the work of contemporary Japanese architect Tadao Ando. The platform both constricts and gives opportunities for the choreography. It is used to raise the *kunqu* singer, then it slopes one way, only to later rise and slope the other way, which is distracting.

Every piece of action, especially in act 2, has a different setting, some of them set in dim stage lighting with dark costumes. (*Red Detachment* also had numerous sets, some also so very darkly lit you could hardly appreciate the splashy production values.)

In *Peony Pavilion* the corps de ballet has a great many dances, some with unclear roles in the narrative. The dancers never wear the same costume or perform the same role twice. However, the costumes, by Emi Wada, are gorgeous and beautifully made: they never got in the way of the dancers' movements or line.

There are a great many dance styles: for the first corps dance, white dress and *Swan Lake* arms and running patterns; for parts of the procession in the finale, Martha Graham contractions; and much else in between. A shoe fetish motif runs through the first act, so there



is much dancing for only one toe shoe. There is a scene with comic farmers. Why? Large quantities of confetti fall as the curtain descends.

Finally, the music includes excerpts from Debussy, Ravel, Respighi, and more.

Red Detachment of Women, last seen at BAM in 2005, is almost the opposite. The music is simple, with lots of repeats. The story is a straightforward one of class struggle and the Red Army's revolutionary heroism, played out by unambiguous figures: a girl escapes a cruel landowner and learns to be a disciplined revolutionary soldier; a political commissar is martyred; the struggle continues.

Made in 1964 and modified in the next years under perilous political conditions, *Red* held a near monopoly during the Cultural Revolution and



The Peony Pavilion: Yu Xuejiao and corps (top), Yu Xuejiao, Zhu Yan, and Zhang Jian (bottom). (Photos: Stephanie Berger, LCF)

then was brought back to the repertory in 1992, some fifteen years later. By its fortieth anniversary, and now with its fiftieth one last year, it has returned to the center of the domestic performance roster and is always scheduled for the New Year's festivities attended by government officials.

To this reviewer, the most remarkable thing about the Lincoln Center presentation of *The Red Detachment of Women* was how little it differed from the 1970 Cultural Revolution film (available on DVD and on YouTube), save for the vastly higher level of dancing (although Xue Jinghua, who danced the heroine in the film, was first-rate). With the exception of minor changes, overall no attempt has been made to use the company's superb, current technique to deepen the characters, to give more variety to the soloist roles such as the female company commander and the strongman Lao Si, or to complicate the ensemble dances (male and female soldiers, farmers, fishermen, Li mountain people, etc.).

The steps remain simple for everyone and thinly spread throughout the evening, with the exception of the heroine, who dances most of the time she is onstage. The female lead's steps are also few, but as in 1970, they are replete with dramatic grands jetés, sautés, and arabesques, seemingly easily tossed off by Zhang Jian on opening night and Lu Na at the second performance, both of whom also danced the principal female roles in *Peony* on opening night.

In the role of the Party Commissar hero, Zhou Zhaohui and Li Ke were constrained by their choreography to mainly striking heroic poses. The positive is that the final visual is also unchanged – a *Flames of Paris* tableau of the entire company advancing en face onto the audience, large flag waving strongly in the

middle with “The Internationale” followed by the national anthem (a military song) – a rousing action moment on which to bring down the curtain.

Audience reactions also shed interesting light on *The Red Detachment of Women*. The curtain after the intermission rises on a scene of women soldiers seated cross-legged on the ground listening to a lecture by the male hero. The first night, the response was spontaneous laughter from parts of the audience, people who likely did not know the ballet beforehand. This is in fact a famous moment (search online for *Red Detachment of Women* and “images”). In the Broadway revival of a musical, however, the staging of it probably would have been updated. Was it an active decision to leave the scene as it was?

Another response came from audience members who clearly knew the ballet well. Especially at the second performance, many clapped in rhythm to familiar musical motifs. Others sang along with the chorus in the orchestra pit. Famous, inspirational poses (again, search the web) prompted bursts of applause. *The Red Detachment of Women* was able to elicit such responses *because* it has been left unchanged. A viewer who tries only to judge its artistry will find instead an artifact still deeply embedded in its period.

Both *Peony* and *Red Detachment* were created under expectations from many quarters in China for authentic homegrown ballets. There had once been a time here when the great American novel was a common preoccupation of both writers and critics, and then faded. Similarly, perhaps now is the time for the chimeral goal that ballet must be both Chinese and Western to pass into the same Elysian Fields where the idea of the great American novel now resides.