

Capturing an Epic Opera

Novelization distills 20 hours of 'Peony Pavilion' to a single reading

By Annabelle Kerins

STAFF WRITER

IT TAKES 20 hours (and \$210) to get the full grandeur of Tang Xianzu's "The Peony Pavilion," which winds up performances at the Lincoln Center Festival this weekend. Xiaoping Yen, an associate professor of composition and literature at the City University of New York's LaGuardia campus, has put this epic opera of a young woman's love into the form of a novel, and it only took his 15-year-old daughter, Mimi, three hours to read it all. "I liked it a lot," she said.

Actually the Herricks High School student was part of the writing process, Yen said. During the year it took him to complete, she read each draft, he said, to ensure the opera, made controversial last year when a bureaucrat in China refused to allow the production to travel to the festival, would be accessible to all.

Yen's novelization (Homa & Sekey Books, \$16.95) reorganizes the opera into an unfolding narrative for an audience that, unlike many operagoers who generally know the ending, will not know what's going to happen. Instead of footnotes, he has chosen some of the layer upon layer of meanings and interpolated them into the plot. Neither Yen's rendering nor Cyril Birch's 1980 translation of the opera can give its full impact, which weaves together comic and tragic elements against the music's tender allure as the opera works its way to a happy ending.

According to Newsday's Justin Davidson, "acrobats did handsprings, elaborate paper puppets went up in flames, stilt-walkers break-danced, actors donned luxuriously embroidered silks and sported headdresses with teetering profusions, flags whirled, mustaches twirled, riotously painted warriors brandished fearsome blades, caged birds twittered and a family or ducks plashed amiably in a pond." And that glorious chaos is set to an audience chatting, eating, drinking and moving in and out.

But Davidson, in his July 12 review,



Newsday Photo / Bill Davis

Author Xiaoping Yen at home with his wife, Mae Zhang, and daughters, Clara and Mimi.

may have made the case for Yen's book. "I had the overpowering sense that any understanding I, an unreconstructed Westerner, could possibly glean for these performances would remain inescapably superficial." It is hard for Westerners to grasp the rhythms of the East, an opera of 20 hours or a novel — Murasaki Shikibu's "Tale of Genji" — that sprawls over more than 1,500 pages in translation.

Although "Peony" is more than 400 years old, it is barely middle age in terms of Eastern literature, said Yen, who arrived in this country from Shanghai June 28, 1989, about three weeks after Tiananmen Square. Opera goes back 1,000 years in China (and Japan's erotic "Genji," generally considered the first novel, was written as long ago). Naturally, the opera has been in and out of favor with the various emperors who ruled China, and naturally it ran afoul of the Cultural Revolution, which banned all opera but eight "modern" works all written, naturally, by Jiang

Quing, the dragon behind the Cultural Revolution and wife of Communist leader Mao Zedong.

With this Lincoln Center production, "Peony" may enter the Western canon. There are talks about videotaping its Paris performance in the fall, and, taken an episode at a time, it may even play Bellport someday. Yen believes the opera, though it has some R-rated moments, is more than suitable for families. And he's taking his wife, Mae Zhang, a nurse at North Shore University Hospital, and Mimi to see this latest version. And even taking the New Hyde Park couple's 2-year-old, Clara. ■

The book is available at Lincoln Center, at Borders in the World Trade Center and Kips Bay, online from Amazon.com (special order from Borders.com) or from the publisher, 800-431-1579.

Performances in Chinese with super-titles are at 4 and 8:30 p.m. tomorrow; 2 and 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at LaGuardia Concert Hall, 65th Street at Amsterdam Avenue, \$55 an episode or all six for \$210 (212-721-6500).