

ACTF CRITIQUE of THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

produced by Otterbein College Theatre

Dr. Mary A. Donahoe, Adjudicator

The preshow experience for audience members contributed greatly to the overall realization of the production. The program (with a quote from Chinese Tao philosophy), the Chinese preshow music, and the purposeful empty stage created a mysterious and exotic atmosphere which was very appealing to both grownups and children in the audience.

The opening of the show was spectacular with the "empty" and dark stage being filled with light, color, shape and life. This sense of spectacle, magic and special effects continued throughout the production, especially in the transformation from the Street of the Weavers scene to the Emperor's Palace scene which was skillfully accomplished by stage crew members dressed in black (evoking the art of the Japanese Bunraku puppet masters who manipulate their puppets in full view of the audience). Another special effect was the "ruby" door in the Emperor's palace that magically opened to music. Set designer Madeleine Sobota was not only clever in her design of "magical" props that transformed before your eyes into something else, but she also created a sense of the exotic with the watercolor trees and huge Chinese art screen at the back of the stage.

The lighting design by Seth Reinick was also highly effective at establishing mood and atmosphere--especially in its use of the reds and pinks in creating the bright palette of Oriental art.

The extraordinary costumes and makeup for The Emperor's New Clothes were designed by student costume designer Amy Kaufmann. They not only fit the play's overall vision of reality of a "faraway and exotic locale somewhere in the Far East," but they served the further purpose of identifying character types (emperor, weaver, servant, etc.), marking their social status (rich, poor) and of revealing the inner qualities of these characters (good, evil, foolish, etc.) In addition, they were aesthetically beautiful and carefully detailed creations which were inspired by the costumer's research into Chinese opera and Asian theatre.

The musical direction by Jennifer Bell was extremely effective in its emphasis on carefully chosen sounds and music for specific moments in the play. The percussive instruments of Chinese music were used to great effect, and the original music composed for this production was Oriental sounding but Westernized enough to be comfortable to our ears.

Stage manager (Krisdee Bires) called the show sharply so that the action moved swiftly, giving an energy and lightness to the show. She is to be commended for her artistic understanding of the pacing of the show.

The cast members did an excellent job of defining their individual character types and playing them with commitment and relish. Some examples:

--The two comedic characters Zar and Zan (Amy McAlexander & Lindsay Metcalfe) worked well together, especially in the highly comic moments such as the "ruby" door routine.

--The Emperor (Christopher Dean) was played as a "fop" type, vain and foolish, with a somewhat exaggerated Molierian movement style. This made him appear ridiculous and evoked much laughter from the youthful audience.

--The Empress (Amber Mellott) was played more realistically so that her sincere character contrasted noticeably with the other inauthentic types in the palace. Ms. Mellott was especially successful in comedic timing and in finding much variety in repetitive sections of the play.

--The General (Theodore Patrick Sima) was played as a "braggart" warrior who was rather "stupid" at times--signaled by both his exaggerated costuming, his lumbering walk and the actor's ability to portray his confusion.

--The evil councilor Han (Nikki Hersh) was played with restraint rather than exaggeratedly which made her malice even more effective. One note is that this actress could have used her lower register to more effect when threatening the other characters.

These and other comic characters in the show were acted with a great deal of energy. The ensemble of weavers and quartet worked well together-- examples are the song and ritual performed at the opening of Act III and the opening choreography of the quartet. However, there were ensemble moments in the telling of the story when they needed to listen to each other on stage and respond in the moment to the unfolding events.

Generally, two notes were observed: 1) There was also a lack of the use of "nonverbals" by most characters except for the Emperor who used them to great effect, and 2) A few times the actors rushed through a comic or climatic moment so that it was not sufficiently framed which resulted in some missed opportunities. An example is when Han admits that she cannot see the "stuff"--the reaction was rushed over and therefore, the moment was lost on the young audience.

The actors' success is a credit to both their work and the fine directing and coaching they received by Director Christina Kirk. The director's staging and movement patterns were creative and had much variety. The overall concept of filling an empty space with the urgency of a story gave the whole production

a feeling of unity and purpose. The pace was brisk in keeping with the demands of comedy, and the comic bits were carefully timed to get the most out of audience response. The acting was believable within the storybook frame of the show, and the overall commitment by the ensemble gave the entire play a feeling of joyfulness.

Otterbein College's production of The Emperor's New Clothes was an enjoyable evening at the theatre. The entire production team is to be congratulated for a successful production.