



of an opulent temple.

Backstage air-conditioning is provided by gaps between the sheeting walls, and so a stroll around the structure allowed a view of the stage technology including such preparations as making up, preparing quick changes and laying out props.

Scenery is a series of backcloths rolled on battens by pulleys lashed to the timed framework. When a scene change is imminent the stage manager appears in view, hands on lines, watching the actors for his cue. We see him yet we do not *see* him. For, since he is in street clothes and not wearing make-up, our disbelief is suspended. This convention allows a creative approach to masking: large holes are possible in the downstage wings — for the prompter on one side and the musicians on the other. And there is, naturally, no need to black out for the furniture changes because we cannot see the prop men. Within the realism of the painted backcloths, simple objects like tables and chairs, banners and scarves, may be used symbolically to depict mountains, rivers and streams.

The costumes make exotic use of sequins, embroidery and colour. Yet their exuberance does not distract from the faces of the actors who wear a formalised make-up whose style combines clarity of line with subtle grading of skin tones. A constant feature of make-up is the “T” formed by thick white on forehead and nose. Eyes are heavily outlined in black, reinforcing the upwardly slanting sweep that we associate with an oriental countenance. The details of the make-up vary with the traditions of each historical strain of wayang performance, but there are some reasonably consistent characteristics. Pale plain make-up can indicate princes or scholars. Villainy is rather darker. A predominantly red face denotes courage while black and white indicate honest and dishonesty respectively — something of a reversal of western tradition. Green for ghostly and brown for stubborn, while gods and spirits may be gilded.

Lighting and sound technology are simple. The lights are on and they flood.

Anything as sophisticated as a lens would be a stylistic error. The microphone hangs centre and the loudspeakers are basic public address.

The acting style is broad yet controlled, and the vocalisation is high pitched. The plots, often based on legend, tend to revolve around corruption and revenge. There is always a moral with good and justice triumphant at the end. I did not get much further with the plot than the difference between the goodies and the baddies. But apparently there is such a wide range of dialects amongst wayang companies that even many locals do not fare much better in understanding the text. Nor can the stranger expect to follow the finer nuances of gesture. But there was more than enough to sustain and excite me for the single hour that

remained before my onward flight.

‘Opera’ is a rather narrow description for the width of music theatre techniques included in a wayang production. There is declaimed speech in addition to songs, and all movement is precisely choreographed whether formalised gesture or a dazzling display of acrobatic skills. But a wayang is truly operatic in that the performance timing is rigorously controlled by the orchestra. Gongs bang and cymbals crash while, to a western ear, drums seem to punctuate rather than beat a rhythm. And the intonation of the strings sounds distinctly precarious. I was fortunate that my wayang had a traditional orchestra: the saxophone and the electric guitar are infiltrating.

While I watched, the most attentive audience were the children leaning on the stage, chins on hands, attentive and involved. Their wondrous eyes were shared by a handful of great grandparents. The middle generations were concentrating on feasting at their dining tables with an abandon and chatter that would have drowned the performance — if the performers had lacked their microphonic advantage. But the night was young and, with several hours of performance still to go, there was ample time for the wayang to become an after dinner entertainment.

Like most theatre forms, Singapore Street Opera has for many years been declared to be dying, unable to survive the threat of the newer more technological media. Certainly, the permanent theatres of China Town are no more. But, apart from the formal efforts of the Ministry of Culture and the Tourist Promotion Board to sustain the wayang traditions, the community’s patronage system looks set to continue to support performances. Long may there be hungry ghosts to be appeased.

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