

A rare, supernatural delight

Robert Everett-Green, The Globe and Mail

The Palace of the Cinnabar Phoenix

The emperor's boat, a long, low skiff in the shape of a yellow dragon, glided slowly across the sheltered lake. The setting sun had almost gathered up its long train of reddish-yellow light, yet the emperor's retainer still held a parasol over his lord.

Dragon's legs turned the groaning paddle wheel, and the boat reached shore near an intricate two-level summer house. As the party disembarked, a group of life-sized puppets paid their respects to the emperor, himself a puppet.

Very few people do theatre the way R. Murray Schafer does, with God as co-designer of stage and lighting. The risks are high with such a fickle collaborator, but when it all works, the effect is beyond description.

The first performance of Schafer's music-theatre piece *The Palace of the Cinnabar Phoenix*, on Thursday, occurred on and around a secluded private lake, made smooth as glass by the stillness of the evening. That calm gave a unique resonance to the voices, which rang out over the water and echoed softly back from the trees.

The Palace of the Cinnabar Phoenix is the eighth part of Schafer's 12-part *Patria* cycle, which he has been developing, as composer and producer, for the past 30 years. He's had amazing success at getting these ambitious, mostly outdoor works before the public: 18 productions of the first 11 parts, and a new realization of the concluding epilogue every summer since 1988.

Patria 8 is the comedy of the cycle, in the Shakespearean sense as well as the more colloquial one. There's a lot of magic, a lot of laughs and a conclusion that happily resolves all conflicts.

The piece is set in ninth-century China. A discord between two nations has resulted in the sinking of a great palace into a foaming lake ruled by dragons.

The current emperor, Wei Lu, is making his annual pilgrimage to the spot. He and his court discuss the tragedy and ways of restoring the lost harmony of the realm, while his son runs after courtesans.

Except for a master of ceremonies (In-Surp Choi) and a mysterious Blue Man (bass Joel Katz), all the principals were puppets, manipulated by members of Puppetmongers Theatre. The puppets' voices were provided by singers standing to one side of the small orchestra on the set's lower level.

The work's most profound moments came at the end, as the sound of an invisible choir (La Jeunesse Choir) drifting over from the opposite shore and the sunken palace rose out of the foaming lake. It really did, and don't ask me how.

The theme of lost harmony and restoration runs throughout Schafer's work, even beyond the Patria cycle. He's an environmental artist, whose concern about our society's rough dominance over the natural world is one of the prime reasons he has so often put his work in the landscape. Much of the ironic charm of this puppet opera stems from its use of man-made figures to celebrate the order and beauty of nature. The drama that they present reveals and deepens the actual presence of the woods and lake.

Schafer's music enfolded a number of Chinese elements into his own lyrical-modernist style. The composition of the chamber orchestra reflected the mix: erhu and violin, accordion and pipa, Chinese gong and clarinet. The vocal lines, which were sung in English, were accompanied very sparsely, which made it easy to hear every word. The most florid lines, such as the Zerbinetta-like roulades given to soprano Jane Archibald, were largely vocalizations without text.

At times, particularly in the first half-hour, it seemed as though there was almost nothing going on in the music.

But as the magical and scenic aspects of the show grew stronger, it became clear that Schafer the theatre-maker had wisely counselled Schafer the composer to keep his craft simple. The dialogue between the emperor and his court censor at the start of Act II was a model of eloquent simplicity.

Jerrard and Diana Smith's superb designs for this work are intricately done and yet extremely direct in the way they register on the eye and the amused mind. The carpenters, sculptors and other personnel involved with this production have made almost every physical detail a thing of beauty (I don't include the Blue Man's costume, which looked as though it belongs to a different piece).

The singers, who also included tenor Eric Shaw and baritone Greg Dahl, were well cast and quite effective at portraying several characters apiece through vocal means alone. Conductor Alex Pauk held the first-rate chamber orchestra to a lean and transparent sound throughout the show, which also incorporated music Schafer has written for other purposes, such as a chunk of String Quartet No. 6.

Robert Desrosiers' direction was so apt it seemed almost like no direction at all, just the natural unfolding of a supernatural tale. His choreography for the Torquoise Courtesan, and for a naked philosopher puppet, showed the same sharp sensual wit we've seen in so many of his excellent dance works. Chris Clifford's terrific lighting designs worked best when their source was unknown, which was at least half the time.

God's little joke on this production was to let the opening-night temperature sink till the chattering of the audience's teeth was almost part of the sound design. But a slight chill was a small price to pay for an evening of such rare magic. The Palace of the Cinnabar Phoenix will be broadcast on CBC Radio Two's Two New Hours early in 2002.

The following is from the Star:

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William Littler, COLUMNIST

PONTYPOOL, ONT. - Let's see now: from Highway 401 we head north up Highway 115/35, continue about five kilometres further north up Highway 35, and then turn west on to Waite Rd., following its hill and dale course until we reach Number 196, site of Wolverton Hills, deep in the Oak Ridges Moraine.

Follow those instructions tonight, arrive by 7:30 and, weather permitting, you will find yourself transported back to T'ang Dynasty (618-907 AD) China, confronting a red-and-yellow, lantern-lit pavilion nestled beside a two-hectare lake inhabited by dragons.

As voices echo across the lake (40 of them, belonging to La Jeunesse Choir of Coburg), a dragon boat should appear from the distance, transporting Emperor Wei Lu to his perch on the highest level of the pavilion, from which he will gaze across the water, lamenting the loss of the Cinnabar Phoenix and the palace once inhabited by this god-sent bird.

As the evening darkens, you will meet the emperor's skirt-chasing son, arguing philosophers, a visiting alchemist and a blue man sprouting twigs, not to mention four figures on a stage across the lake, performing Taoist Tai Chi to the recorded strains of R. Murray Schafer's Sixth String Quartet.

You will even, when silver and gold rings are finally thrown into the lake, to the delight of the illuminated dragons (shades of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*), experience the reappearance of the magical bird and his palace, which rises from the bubbling surface of the water like the legendary city of Ys in Lalo's opera.

No, I haven't been sipping rice wine to excess. All this takes place in *The Palace Of The Cinnabar Phoenix*, the eighth part of Schafer's 10-part (plus prologue and epilogue) *Patria Cycle*, the most wildly imaginative and physically ambitious series of music theatre works in the history of the Canadian stage.

Did I say stage?

Like most of the works in the cycle, *The Palace Of The Cinnabar Phoenix* takes place in the great outdoors, using site-specific improvised facilities. In this case Imperial Chinese in style, highlighted by the aforementioned pavilion and dragon boat, which was designed by Jerrard Smith.

Premiered Thursday night and scheduled to be given the last performance of its initial run tonight, *Patria Eight*, as *Palace* is otherwise known, is the lightest in tone and most musically accessible of all the works in this cycle.

Schafer has written his score in an almost kitschy quasi-Chinese style, full of pentatonic tunes and accompanied by a 12-member orchestra (nestled on the lower level of the pavilion) combining traditional Chinese and Western instruments and directed by Alex Pauk.

The scoring is transparent, brightened by twangy Chinese cymbal crashes and a liberal use of the plucked pipa (Liu Fang) and bowed erhu (George Gao), and the solo voices often have sinuously beautiful melodies to sing.

Oh, yes, save for the Blue Man (the sonorously deep-voiced Joel Katz), the owners of these voices (Jane Archibald, Eleanor James, Eric Shaw and Gregory Dahl) all sing from the side of the orchestra.

The actual characters they represent are portrayed by Bunraku-like, near life-sized puppets, manipulated by the clever hands of David and Ann Powell's Puppetmongers Theatre.

The use of puppets gives the work a stylized, otherworldly quality appropriate to what purports to be a mythological tale of long ago and far away.

As is often the case with the Patria works, Schafer's text could use some editing and dramatic focusing. Even with the noted choreographer Robert Desrosiers as director, the structure seems loose, the rhetoric at times long-winded.

All the same, there is theatrical magic to be found in The Palace Of The Cinnabar Phoenix.

Just one word of warning: If you happen to meet a large bear on the way in tonight, be sure to skin him.

You'll probably need the extra coat.

The review by John Becker for OperaCanada magazine:

The convergence of art and nature is a characteristic unique to the major works of R. Murray Schafer. Very fortunately, nature provided a lovely, clear autumn evening for the third of four performances in the world premiere of the most splendid and good-humoured of the twelve works of Schafer's Patria Cycle, Part Eight: The Palace of the Cinnabar Phoenix.

The audience sat on the shores of a tiny lake in the Oak Ridges Moraine, near the village of Pontypool. Much happened on and under the water. La Jeunesse Choir sang from behind the dark forest on the far shore. A Tai Chi quartet performed on a raft. Characters came and went on an elaborate, glowing dragon boat. There were dragons and waterbirds, animated by synchronized swimmers, and in the climax a palace rose from beneath brightly-lit, bubbling water. Schafer's design team, Jerrard and Diana Smith, were very deserving of the standing ovation which they received.

The events of the play, which is set in the T'ang Dynasty of seventh century China, were mainly enacted on a pagoda-like stage at the water's edge. The 12-piece orchestra, conducted by Alex Pauk, included the virtuoso pipa and guzheng of Liu Fang and George Gao's piercingly expressive erhu. Musicians and four of the five principal singers were situated on the ground under and in front of the pagoda, creating soundscapes to be borne on the wind in the trees.

Only one of the five principals appeared on the stage. Joel Katz, as the Blue Man, came into the action from across the water, his resonant bass echoing. The other characters were performed by an ensemble of very compelling and oddly expressive puppets, masterfully controlled by the Puppetmongers company. These nearly life-sized creations were given voices by soloists Jane Archibald, soprano, Eleanor James, mezzo, Eric Shaw, tenor, and Gregory Dahl, baritone. All four were impressive in their individual abilities and united in the dramatic essence of the work. The evening's vocal highlight was the poignant aria of the alchemist's daughter, sung by James. The use of an untrained voice, theology student In-Surp Choi, was quite charming and presented another side to Choi's thoroughly entertaining performance as Master of Ceremonies.

The Palace of the Cinnabar Phoenix is a music drama musing on the philosophy of balance, the Taoist theory of yin and yang. Schafer succeeds in placing it harmoniously in Canada's beautiful natural environment, and even more remarkably, he infuses it with his own sometimes mischievous but always benign sense of humour. It is his best work to date. The premiere performances began two days after the Sept. 11 bombing of America, so for most of us, audiences and performers alike, it was our first experience of a live performance after that tragedy, and was the generous balm to a wounded spirit that we all so deeply needed.

