China, Zaju, and Beijing Opera: Crash Course Theater #25

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=yzAdZDK4XKA
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/yzAdZDK4XKA

Hey there!

I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today our coverage of elaborate stage makeup and costuming continues as we cover Beijing Opera— Very nice Slim! I like all this effort you've been putting in lately.

Though the Yin and Yang is a little on the nose. As Yorick is demonstrating, today we're heading to China to explore the origins of Chinese performance and enjoy some Beijing opera—a music theater style with its origins in classical Chinese drama that went through a bumpy patch during the Cultural Revolution, but is still performed today. It has gods and demons, strict color coding, and about a million different ways to use a chair.

Let's go! INTRO Performance in China starts early. How early?

Well wouldja look at that: we don't know. But the very earliest performances seem to have been associated with religious ritual: songs and dances petitioning the gods for fertility, for a good harvest, success in war—the usual. Later on, when Daoism gets going, wu priests–a kind of shaman or WIZARD; yeah, that's right my nerds, WIZARDs–would stage elaborate seances, and some of these get co-opted as court performances where priests zhuzh up the ritual with jokes and special effects.

Those priests. Such hams. Religion and theater remain intertwined, and by the eighth century BCE, certain temples become famous for their performers.

During the Han Dynasty, which begins in 206 BCE, performance becomes more widespread and more secular. Performers practice disciplines like tightrope-walking, pole-climbing, sword-swallowing, fire-eating, and occasionally slightly less dangerous stuff like juggling. There's also mime, but probably not lewd mime, unfortunately.

Around this time, shadow plays also begin appearing in China. Things cool down for a few centuries after the Han lose power, because war does that to a performance culture. But then it's 600 CE, and the Sui Dynasty is ascendant.

The emperor Yang-Ti loves performance so much that he actually opens his own training school and hosts a festival featuring ten of thousands of performers. Take that, minimalism! During the Tang Dynasty, performers start to combine music, dance, and acrobatics in innovative ways, and the Emperor Xuanzong opens the Pear Garden, another training School supposed to help further that innovation.

Also apparently a way for him to recruit for his personal harem. Now maybe you're getting the idea that theater in China was a performance tradition rather than a literary one, and that idea is correct. But around 1000 CE, a lot of poetry starts to develop, and then the novel comes to China.

Novels are a huge hit, and storytellers start going around to tea houses, reciting portions of them while audiences drink tea and eat pumpkin seeds. Performances like this are narrative rather than dialogic or mimetic, meaning they aren't really acted out. But it's a start!

As the Song Dynasty continues, people actually start writing plays, which usually begin with a spoken prologue and then continue with a mix of dialogue and song. We have fragments of about one hundred and fifty of these plays. Several actors become famous during this time, and they're known by nicknames like "Orange Peel" and "Dimples." [[YORICK DROPS IN.]] What do you think my nickname would be, Yorick? [[WORD BUBBLE: "BALD SPOT."]] Very funny. But then, in the late thirteenth century, the invading hordes come, and maybe you're thinking, Ugh! Invading hordes!? This is why we can't have nice things! But if there's one thing we know here on Crash Course, Mongols are the exception! When the Mongols invade China, forming the Yuan Dynasty, it pretty much ushers in a golden age of literature. Why? Well, one theory goes that since the Mongols preferred to handle stuff in-house, lots of highly educated bureaucrats suddenly were out of work. So to fill the time, they wrote stuff. Hey - I'll take it! I would have settled for wizards! Drama of the period drew from history, legend, and those newfangled novel things. Characters emerged from all classes and types, and plays often ranged over months or years. And maybe you're thinking, Hey, this sounds a little like Elizabethan drama. And you're right—it does. Nice catch! But unlike Elizabethan drama, every play conveyed a strong moral message, usually emphasizing family and duty. Some of these plays might also have offered subtle critiques of the political situation, where good characters suffer through all sorts of terrible trials, like you know, being conquered by invading hordes, before winning out in the end. Two distinct styles of drama developed. One in the north, called zaju, and one in the south, called chuan-qi. Zaju dramas were four acts long, except for the most famous one, the twenty-act "Romance of the Western Chamber," which… got away with it by claiming it was in five parts. These four acts contained ten to twenty songs, and those songs were selected from five hundred pre-existing melodies and accompanied by gong, drum, clapper, flute, and lute. But here's where it gets tricky: only the protagonist sings, and each of the four acts demands its own vocal timbre and rhyme scheme. These dramas were performed by companies of both male and female actors, some of whom were also probably prostitutes. We have one hundred and seventy zaju plays, including a couple you may have heard of: "The Orphan of Zhao," which is still performed, and "The Circle of Chalk," which Bertolt Brecht borrowed for "The Caucasian Chalk Circle." Meanwhile, down south, chuan-qi plays are developing. Chuan-qi plays have fifty acts—well, thirty to fifty. But still. They don't have a fixed rhyme scheme per act. Which is a good thing, because can you imagine changing the rhyme schemes FIFTY TIMES? Unlike zaju songs, which were written for a seven-note musical scale, chuan-qi plays are written for a pentatonic scale. The main accompaniment was the bamboo flute. The most famous chuan-qi play is "The Peony Pavilion," a fifty five-act play about a girl who falls in love with a man she's only seen in her dreams. She dies, but the real man comes to her grave and somehow resurrects her. Chuan-qi plays are lively and eventful, but eventually they got so long and so elaborate, and the language becomes so formal, that they can't be performed anymore. Let's fast-forward a few centuries to the origin story of Jingxi or Beijing opera. By this time, all kinds of different theatrical styles were practiced around the country, though none predominated in the way the zaju and chuangi had. In 1790, a bunch of different troupes came to Beijing to celebrate the eightieth birthday of Emperor Qian Long. They liked it there. They liked each other. Eventually, they combined their regional forms into one awesome new style that was even more powerful, jingxi. Sorta like The Avengers of Classical Chinese Theater. Which is a film franchise I'd definitely watch. Officially, there are two kinds of stories in Beijing opera: civil and military. But there's a lot of overlap. Like the earlier dramas, the stories borrow from history, legend, and other works of literature, and they all end happily. The scripts aren't really set texts, but more like bullet points. Great actors are encouraged to make each role their own, and the focus is on acting, singing, and dancing rather than the literary elements. Instead of presenting a full story from start to finish, most evenings consisted of just the high points with enough narrative and acrobatic interludes to help it all hang together. The stories are elaborate, but the physical staging is minimal. Theaters usually consisted of a raised, roofed platform with a two-foot high wall extending around three of the sides and the only set pieces are a table and two chairs. But that table and

chairs are versatile. Depending upon the way they're arranged, they can represent a wall, a bridge, a tree, a door, a hill, a banquet, a court, whatever you need! There are all kinds of symbolic and codified set and prop elements in Beijing opera. A silver banner represents water; black silk suggests a storm. A whip means you're riding horseback; black gauze means you're having a dream; a couple of yellow silk flags mean you're in a chariot. A bunch of stagehands run around manipulating all of these chairs and banners, but an audience learns not to see them. As Yorick here has indicated, Beijing Opera depends on extravagant makeup and costuming. For a closer look, let's go to the Thought

Bubble: Chinese opera characters are divided into four types: sheng (men), dan (women), jing (painted face roles), and chou (clowns). But that's not all. There are seven types of sheng roles, and six types of dan roles. Until the twentieth century, dan roles were played by men in tiny, awkward shoes, and when women took over, they had to learn from the men how to play them. Jing characters, with all the makeup, are gods, demons, courtiers, and thieves. And Chou are clowns who are expected to improvise jokes. Each role had its own pitch and rhythm, and kind of like Sanskrit theater and kabuki theater, each had a bunch movements associated with characters and moods. There are twenty ways just to point at something! But a lot of the character work is done by costume and makeup. There are three hundred types of dress associated with Beijing opera, including forty six headdresses, forty seven dresses, six types of girdle, and six types of shoe. That actually seems like a pretty low number for shoes, TBH. These costumes are color-coded. Red costumes are for brides and loyal characters; yellow for royal ones; white for old ones and people in mourning. Makeup was color-coded, too. Most sheng and dan characters started with a white base, made with flour, that offset darkened brows, reddened lips, and eyes outlined in red. There are more than two hundred and fifty types of makeup, and the most complex designs are for the jing characters. Jing faces are pattern-coded and color-coded. Only good characters wear mustaches, and the more white around the eyes, the worse the character. A lot of black, good guy; a lot of purple, outlaw. Lots of green: YOUSE A DEMON. Thanks, Thought Bubble. [[[Yorick flies back in covered in green makeup.]]] YOUSE A DEMON! Beijing opera flourishes for about one hundred and fifty years, and then communism happens. Communist leaders go through the repertory, tweaking some plays, removing others, and opera stumbles on until the Cultural Revolution, when pretty much all of it is seen as anti-communist and is replaced with new Mao-friendly works like "The White-Haired Girl," an opera about a peasant girl who is raped and abducted by a landlord. She escapes, her hair turns white, and then she and her former fiancé are reunited. Like good communists, they redistribute the landlord's farms. An equally distributed happy ending! Come see us next time for English Sentimentality, which is like normal sentimentality, but English. That's right, it's romanticism. Until then… curtain!