WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Orphan of Zhao

New Adaptation by James Fenton
Directed by Carey Perloff
A Coproduction with La Jolla Playhouse

The Geary Theater
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**COVER**  *Wind Among Trees on Riverbank* (1363), by Ni Zan

**OPPOSITE** An early sketch of the set’s bamboo scaffolding, by set designer Daniel Ostling
Overview of The Orphan of Zhao

The millennia-old legend of the Orphan of the Zhao clan was first dramatized by Ji Junxiang in the thirteenth century. A translation by the Jesuit missionary Father Joseph Henri Prémare, L’orphelin de la maison de Tchao, introduced the story to the Western world around 1735. Using many versions of the play that followed as his source material, James Fenton adapted the story in 2012 for the Royal Shakespeare Company, where it played in the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon from November 2012 to March 2013.

Creative Team of The Orphan of Zhao

Original Music .............................................................. Byron Au Yong
Movement Director....................................................... Stephen Buescher
Fight Director ............................................................... Jonathan Rider
Set Design ................................................................. Daniel Ostling
Costume Design ........................................................... Linda Cho
Lighting Design ........................................................... Lap Chi Chu
Sound Design .............................................................. Jake Rodriguez
Dramaturg ..................................................................... Michael Paller

Characters and Cast of The Orphan of Zhao

The Ballad Singer, The Emperor .................................. Paolo Montalban
Tu’an Gu (A minister and head of the Palace Guard) ...... Stan Egi
Demon Mastiff .............................................................. Brian Rivera
Zhao Dun (A minister, married to the Princess) .......... Nick Gabriel
Wei Jiang (A general and counselor) ......................... Orville Mendoza
Gongsun Chujiu (A counselor) ................................... Sab Shimono
The Princess (The Emperor’s daughter) ..................... Marie-France Arcilla
Chu Ni (An assassin), Ti Miming (Zhao Dun’s servant) Philip Estrera
The Princess’s Maid ........................................................ Cindy Im
General Han Jue .......................................................... Brian Rivera
Cheng Ying (A country doctor) ................................... BD Wong
Cheng Ying’s Wife ...................................................... Julyana Soelistyo
Cheng Bo (Zhao Dun’s son) ......................................... Daisuke Tsuji
Ghost of Chen Ying’s Son .......................................... Philip Estrera

An early sketch of the set’s bamboo scaffolding, by set designer Daniel Ostling
Setting of *The Orphan of Zhao*

*China.*

**Synopsis of *The Orphan of Zhao***

**Act I** From atop his newly finished Crimson Cloud Tower, the Emperor shoots arrows into the Peach Garden below, indiscriminately killing his citizens for sport. His closest advisor, Tu’an Gu, the power-hungry head of the Palace Guard, stands by his side, encouraging him. Zhao Dun, a minister and the Emperor’s son-in-law, rushes in and chastises the Emperor. He is followed by General Wei Jiang and elderly counselor Gongsun Chujiu—the “old guard.” Upon learning that the Emperor is responsible for the massacre, Gongsun Chujiu announces that he is retiring and Wei Jiang asks to be reassigned from the court to the country’s borders; neither can bear to see their leader act so immorally. To Tu’an Gu’s chagrin, however, Zhao Dun vows to remain at court.

Wanting to remove any and all obstacles to his rise to power, Tu’an Gu employs his servant Chu Ni to assassinate Zhao Dun. Chu Ni finds his target alone in the garden, praying for his country. Upon hearing the prayer, the would-be assassin understands the loyalty of Zhao Dun and the treachery of Tu’an Gu. Rather than kill Zhao Dun, Chu Ni warns him of Tu’an Gu’s intentions. He then kills himself rather than return to his master.

The next day at court, Zhao Dun accuses Tu’an Gu of plotting his demise. Tu’an Gu denies it and reminds the Emperor that if there is any treachery in the court the Demon Mastiff, a gift from the people of Tibet, will sniff it out and destroy it. The giant dog supposedly has supernatural powers, but really Tu’an Gu has been training it to attack the court’s ministers. When it is brought in, the beast immediately attacks Zhao Dun. He escapes when his servant Ti Miming intervenes, but, having been singled out by the Demon Mastiff, Zhao Dun is now considered a traitor. Tu’an Gu orders the massacre of every member of the Zhao clan.

Zhao Dun hurries to his pregnant wife, the Princess, and, knowing his death is imminent, implores her to hide their child once he is born so that he can grow up and avenge the horrible crime committed against their family. A messenger informs them that every male member of the Zhao clan—300 souls—has been executed, but that Zhao Dun has been granted the dignity of killing himself because of his relationship to the Emperor. Zhao Dun stabs himself, and the Princess is locked away.

Later, a country doctor named Cheng Ying is summoned by the Princess to deliver her child. When he finds her, he discovers that she has already given birth to a baby boy, the only surviving heir of the Zhao line. She begs Cheng Ying to smuggle her child away to safety. Reluctantly, he agrees and hides the Orphan in his chest of medicinal herbs. He is stopped at the city gates by General Han Jue, an underling of Tu’an Gu, who discovers the child. Unwilling to destroy the final member of the Zhao line, however, the general lets the doctor pass. Han Jue kills himself so that no one will ever learn the
identity of the child’s savior. Tu’an Gu learns that the Princess’s son has been smuggled out of the palace and proclaims that if the child is not returned to court every male infant in the country will be executed.

Cheng Ying returns to his Wife and his own infant son. He explains Tu’an Gu’s proclamation and reveals that he gave his word to protect the Orphan of Zhao. Thinking of the safety of her own son, his Wife demands that he take Zhao Dun’s child back to court. Conflicted, Cheng Ying visits Gongsun Chujiu, who has settled in a cottage in the mountains. He asks the elderly man for advice, and together they realize that the only solution is for Cheng Ying to give Gongsun Chujiu his own child, and then report to the authorities that Gongsun Chujiu is protecting the Orphan of Zhao. Tu’an Gu will kill Cheng Ying’s son, thinking he is the Orphan. That way the real Orphan will live. The plan will cost Gongsun Chujiu his life, but he is prepared to make that sacrifice because Cheng Ying is volunteering to sacrifice his own son. They attempt to convince Cheng Ying’s Wife that this is the only way to save the Zhao line, and, against her will, they take the child.

Cheng Ying follows the plan and leads Tu’an Gu to Gongsun Chujiu. Tu’an Gu kills the baby boy and Gongsun Chujiu kills himself. Tu’an Gu, believing the Zhao clan has been successfully annihilated, rewards Cheng Ying for his help by offering to adopt the poor Cheng Ying’s infant son—really the Orphan of Zhao—so the child can grow up with all the benefits the court can offer.
Act II Eighteen years later, General Wei Jiang still serves on the outskirts of the country defending its borders, which is the post he took after the Peach Garden massacre. He is visited by Cheng Bo—Cheng Ying’s now-grown son, who still does not know he is truly the Orphan of Zhao. Cheng Bo pretends to be a harmless student studying the flora near Wei Jiang’s military camp, but in fact he was secretly sent by Cheng Ying to deliver a message to Wei Jiang about the ailing health of the Emperor. The general agrees to return to court to stop Tu’an Gu from taking power when the Emperor dies.

When Wei Jiang arrives, he recognizes Cheng Ying as the man who betrayed his old friend, Gongsun Chujiu. When he captures and threatens to kill the old doctor, Cheng Ying pleads for his life and reveals to Wei Jiang his secret: Cheng Bo is the Orphan of Zhao and he has been living in the palace as Tu’an Gu’s adopted son. As the Emperor’s private doctor, Cheng Ying learned that his royal patient was dying and sent the message to Wei Jiang. Wei Jiang demands that Cheng Ying tell Cheng Bo the truth about his identity so that he can avenge the wrongs committed against the Zhao clan.

Meanwhile, Tu’an Gu and Cheng Bo shoot geese. When Cheng Bo kills two with one arrow, Tu’an Gu interprets it as an omen of his own imminent ascent to the throne. The birds fall in the Forbidden Palace, which no one is allowed to enter because it is where the Princess is secretly imprisoned, but Tu’an Gu believes Cheng Bo is destined to go there to retrieve his trophies. There, Cheng Bo meets the aged Princess, who muses that her son would have looked just like Cheng Bo had he lived. The haunting interaction unsettles Cheng Bo, who does not tell Tu’an Gu about it afterward.

Back at the palace, the Emperor summons his old advisor Wei Jiang to a secret meeting to learn why he has returned after so many years. Wei Jiang admits that he knows that the Emperor is dying and that he came to protect the throne from Tu’an Gu, a man despised by the entire country. He convinces the Emperor to give him his royal seal so that he can take control of the Palace Guard.

Meanwhile, Cheng Ying explains to Cheng Bo that he is the last son of the house of Zhao, massacred by Tu’an Gu. He is unable to find words that are adequate to convey the weight of this truth, so Cheng Ying paints the story. Cheng Bo returns to the Forbidden Palace to tell the Princess that he is her son and that he plans to kill Tu’an Gu.

The Emperor dies, and the palace erupts in chaos. With the support of the Palace Guard, Wei Jiang takes the reins of the government, while Tu’an Gu frantically tries to take power. Tu’an Gu seeks help from his adopted son, Cheng Bo, who informs Tu’an Gu that he is the Orphan of Zhao. He gives Tu’an Gu the same chance to kill himself that Tu’an Gu gave Zhao Dun, but a terrified Tu’an Gu begs Cheng Bo to kill him. Cheng Bo obliges.

Having kept his promise to protect the Orphan of Zhao until he was old enough to avenge the destruction of his clan, Cheng Ying looks for the grave of his own sacrificed son so that he can lie down and die. As he searches, the Ghost of his son tells Cheng Ying that he does not deserve to find the grave. When Cheng Ying does not deny it, the Ghost tells him that he is, in fact, standing on his son’s grave. He then helps his father stab himself.
Songs That Come in the Night
An Interview with James Fenton

By Dan Rubin

There is a strong case to be made that James Fenton is the finest poet writing in English. His technical virtuosity is beyond doubt; his long experience as war correspondent, journalist, and traveler has given him an unmatched range of subject matter—war and revolution, the dementia of collective passions, reflections on fate, and love—he has written some of the most beautiful love poems of our times. He is a poet of great emotional depth and wisdom. . . . He is a modern master.

—English novelist Ian McEwan, 2007

In 2011, the Royal Shakespeare Company’s incoming artistic director, Gregory Doran, approached James Fenton to write an adaptation of The Orphan of Zhao. To be performed in tandem with Brecht’s Life of Galileo and Pushkin’s Boris Godunov as part of the RSC’s A World Elsewhere trilogy, Orphan had already been announced as part of the 2012–13 season. For Fenton, this meant two things: first, the clock had already started ticking down toward a firm deadline; second, a guaranteed production. He started writing.

Fenton was born in 1949 and grew up in Lincolnshire and Staffordshire, three hours north and two hours northwest of London, respectively. He attended Magdalen College, Oxford, where he won the prestigious Newdigate Prize for his sonnet sequence “Our Western Furniture,” a poem about the cultural collision between nineteenth-century America and Japan. His first collection, Terminal Moraine (1972), won an Eric Gregory Award, given by the Society of Authors to British poets under the age of 30, and he used the prize money to travel to the Far East. He rode the first North Vietnamese tank into the Presidential Palace when Saigon fell, and he witnessed the aftermath of the United States’s withdrawal from Vietnam and the collapse of the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia.

In 1976, Fenton moved to London and became a political correspondent and literary critic for the New Statesman. Since then, he served as the chief theater critic of the Sunday Times, wrote extensively on art and artists for the New York Review of Books and the Guardian and on gardening for the Guardian and the Independent, and reported on American politics and social life in his View from America series for London’s Evening Standard. His articles, essays, lectures, and poems have been compiled in more than 20 published books.
The Memory of War (1982), drawing on his experience in the Far East, brought him literary fame and secured his reputation as one of the finest poets of his generation—although far from the most prolific, as he is the first to admit. In 1983, he entered the Royal Society of Literature; he won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize in 1984 for Children in Exile: Poems 1968-1984. From 1994 to 1999, Fenton served as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. In 2007, he was awarded the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry.

Comparisons between Fenton and twentieth-century poet W. H. Auden are so frequent that they have become clichéd, but that is not to say they are unwarranted. Patrick McGuinness argues in his 2012 Guardian review of Fenton’s recent collection Yellow Tulips: “Aside from the technical virtuosity of his verse and his bravura in the face of daunting subject matter, it’s Fenton’s ability to meld public and private voices, along with a constant capacity for totally unexpected phrasemaking, that most justifies the comparison.” McGuinness also suggests that from the beginning of his career, “Fenton’s gift lay in mixing the direct, immediate, and deliberately uneloquent eloquence of what he calls ‘the poetry of pure fact’ with something refined and allusive. The Fenton poem homes in on details, then pulls back out to take in great vistas of time and place and human movement.”

Fenton is the author of the celebrated Introduction to English Poetry, which conveys his abiding passion for poetry as much as it guides the reader through the essence of the art form—which, he argues, “extends back around 500 years, and its scope is the scope of the English language. That is to say, when a North American, an Australian, an Indian, or a Jamaican writes a poem in English, that poem enters the corpus of English poetry.” This frank and inclusive understanding sets the tone for his exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of various poetic forms, all of which stem from a need to be heard. “The voice is raised, and that is where poetry begins,” he states.

In his Introduction, Fenton notes that while many poets write to be read on the page, “poetry carries its history within it, and it is oral in origin.” When we listen to poetry, we do not have the luxury of rereading a line. We do not have the assistance of footnotes explaining obscure allusions. “Any poetry that is performed—from song lyric to tragic speech—must make its point, as it were, without reference back,” he points out. “We can’t, as an audience, ask the actors to repeat themselves, or slow down, or share their notes with us. We must grasp the meaning—or enough of it—in real time. That Hamlet still works after 400 years is an extraordinary linguistic and poetic fact.”

The Orphan of Zhao has, in fact, been labeled the Chinese Hamlet, and the commission to adapt the Eastern tale for the RSC offered Fenton an opportunity to practice what he professed. This wasn’t his first experience writing drama. He wrote translations of Verdi’s Rigoletto and Simon Boccanegra for the English National Opera in the 1980s and contributed to the book of Les misérables; his libretto of Salman Rushdie’s Haroun and the Sea of Stories was performed by New York City Opera in 2003; and in 2004, he adapted Tirso de Molina’s Spanish Golden Age play La venganza de Tamar (Tamar’s Revenge) for the RSC, for which he has been working on an adaptation of Don Quixote for many years.
When Fenton started working on *The Orphan of Zhao*, first came the songs. He wrote a description of his process for London's *Guardian*:

The solution I adopted was to start writing straight away, even in advance of a clear idea of how the plot would go. I wrote a song. Then I wrote another song, and I thought: the first act could be like a suspension bridge slung between these two songs. The third song followed soon after, and the fourth came in a dream, out of which I woke and set it straight down almost word for word. . . . When you write a poem, you write partly with your head, but mostly with your solar plexus. It’s all a matter of how things hit you down there. And when I had my four main songs in place (a fifth, a lullaby, was to follow), I felt also that I had my poetic language up and running. The play isn’t written in verse. But it’s written in a poetic style that suggests the feudal psychology of early China.

After a draft was complete, the RSC took *Orphan* to Ann Arbor, where the University of Michigan and the University Musical Society hosted a ten-day workshop, which also included a daylong symposium organized by the university’s Confucius Institute featuring sinologists from around the world. These experts confirmed that Fenton’s “imagined language of a fearsome, distant kingdom” was on the right track.

When the play opened in Stratford in November 2012, however, its artistic success was overshadowed by a controversy surrounding the underrepresentation of Chinese actors in the multicultural (but heavily white) cast. What was obscured by the conversation, Fenton suggested during our phone interview in early May, was the RSC’s long tradition of colorblind casting and using the same company of actors for an entire season of shows. The RSC’s record of race-consciousness was, in fact, part of the complaint: the theater had successfully produced an all-black *Julius Caesar* and an all-Indian *Much Ado About Nothing* earlier that season, and some wondered why Chinese actors were being overlooked.
With its predominantly Asian American cast, A.C.T.’s production will not suffer the same distraction, which is only one of many reasons Fenton is excited that we are remounting The Orphan of Zhao. Fenton will join the cast and creative team for the last dress rehearsal and preview performances. When asked if he intends to make any changes, he said, “I don’t imagine there will be any rewriting at that stage, but it will be very nice to watch the same performance night after night and just see it develop.”

In May, Fenton generously spoke to me about his adaptation of The Orphan of Zhao by phone from his home in New York City.

In an article about the gardens of Tresco that you wrote for the Guardian in 2008, you conclude: “Be radical, be merciless, says one voice. Leave well alone, show some respect, says another. The first voice is classical, and loves a landscape tended by man. The second voice is romantic—it is the call of the wilderness. The third voice is the voice of the hurricane that makes the decision for us.” When you were approaching the centuries-old tale of The Orphan of Zhao, which voice did you listen to?

When the RSC sent me the material—which included published versions of the play, specially commissioned translations, and a mixture of other things—it was clear that the theatrical idiom was very far removed from modern theater, and that idiom was something we wanted to keep. The whole point of doing this piece was to give us a feel for classical Chinese theater, so certain rules I wanted to follow quite slavishly. For example, the idiom whereby a character comes onstage, introduces himself, and then says what’s on his mind or what his situation is. It’s very nice to keep an awareness of that.

On the other hand, I thought about how this play was to be done at Stratford, and people usually go there by car; I thought about all these people coming to the play, and when they leave, perhaps when they’ve driven for about ten miles, one of the people in the car will say, “Hey, it was really unfair for the baby that was killed, wasn’t it?” [Laughs] I thought, “People are going to be worried about the idea of that sacrifice, and their worry ought to be addressed.” It can’t be allayed. You won’t feel, “Oh yeah, that’s all very well and nice and dandy and it’s all been sorted out,” but in this version you will feel at least aware that everyone involved was conscious of the problems that the Chinese material brought up.

I wanted to address this question of the human being who had no chance as a result of the events in the story: the doctor’s baby. We were doing a workshop and I wrote the last scene [in which the ghost of the doctor’s sacrificed son returns], and we read it to an audience, which included various experts on Chinese literature. We wanted to see whether it would be accepted as being part of the idiom. One expert said, “Well, in the Chinese world, ghosts tend to do two things: they lure people to suicide, and they steal souls.” And I thought, “Yeah, that scene’s in the idiom!”
The play opens with a poem sung from the perspective of a different ghost.

Yes, that's right, and that was because I read somewhere that the events that happen in this play, in which a clan is wiped out, weren't unique. This was the kind of thing that happened. It was part of the struggles of the time. That song was the first thing I wrote. Act I begins with a song and ends with a song, and Act II opens with a song and ends with a song. I wrote those four songs, and then I started work on the main body of the story, and then I thought, “No, no: we'll have the final scene with the ghost after the last song.” That's how the structure went in our minds. It will be slightly different for the San Francisco production.

There are many versions of the play where the Princess either fades out of the story or dies of grief. But there was one version that we heard about in which the actress who played the Princess wanted a more prominent role and was given another scene in which the character hadn't died after all. I thought, “What a wonderful thing if she has been there all the time.” That made it possible to do all those scenes in the latter part of the play when the Orphan finds out who he really is.

You said our production is going to be slightly different from the RSC production in terms of when the songs happen?

You're going to put the interval in a different place. I was concerned when I was working on the material that by the interval people would just think, “Well this is a very bloody play in which everybody gets killed one way or another!” I wanted there to be something that looked forward, but some people felt that the interval came in the wrong place [after the play jumps ahead 18 years]. I'm very easygoing about this in principle and said for the San Francisco production, “Well, let's try it in a different place! Let's try a different approach.” It's exciting enough to be given a new production of this play after the one at Stratford. I'm very happy about that.

You spent some time as a theater critic, and I am curious about how that influences your playwriting.

I had several years as a theater critic, and they were very intensive years, going to the theater every night and having a great time, and then I stopped. I went abroad to a place where there essentially wasn't any theater, so I never saw any theater for several years. It wasn't that I was fed up with theater, but after a while, you can't really keep up that pace of theatergoing—at least I couldn't. But I was involved in the theater subsequently. At the RSC I worked on Les misérables and then I worked on a Spanish Golden Age play. I've been working on a version of Don Quixote for the RSC, and for a number of reasons it hasn't yet been done, but it is now being scheduled to be done. I translated a couple of opera libretti, a version of Rigoletto and a version of The Force of Destiny, and I did an original opera. So I've been on and off in the theater and the musical theater in one form or another quite often, but not all the time.
When you were seeing theater every night, were you attracted to a certain kind of play? Were you put off by certain things that you saw? Do you apply those lessons when you write for the stage?

I certainly think I must have been, but I can't consciously think of any examples. When I was writing *Zhao*, I kept thinking about my experience of the East. I lived in Southeast Asia for quite a long time: in Cambodia, in Vietnam during the war, and in the Philippines, and I don't want to exaggerate this, but that experience was certainly in my mind as I was thinking of what certain characters would be like. I was putting myself back in Cambodia and Vietnam, quite definitely.

It has been said that one of the defining characteristics of your work is a concern for foreign cultures and Western interaction with them. What are your thoughts on the situation of a Western playwright working on an Eastern story for a Western audience?

There are certain things that Chinese people, with their sense of history and culture, will find completely comprehensible in this play that other audiences will worry about. What worried me most is when the Doctor's Wife gives up her child. Why does she not just cling to it for dear life? Why doesn't it have to be torn from her arms? I asked various Chinese experts about this, and they told me, “She's a woman. She has no choice in the matter.” And I thought, “Well, why can't she just say that: 'I'm a woman, I have no choice.'” Then the audience would understand immediately. So instead of leaving it as a matter of her motivation as an individual who would say, “No problem, here's my child,” you make it absolutely clear what this was the reality in China long ago. So that's what I did.

Everything about this project has given me fantastic pleasure. I loved the production in Stratford, and I loved the idea that it was going to be done in San Francisco with a largely Asian American cast. The other day, one of the Chinese scholars who'd been involved in the preparation of the work with the RSC wrote to me and asked if a certain Chinese translator could have permission to translate my version into Chinese for a theater journal. It was somebody who had come to Stratford, seen the production, liked it very much, and thought that it would be of interest to a Chinese readership. Well, one couldn't be more flattered.

Is the pleasure you've experienced with *The Orphan of Zhao* dissimilar to what you experience as a poet?

Well, in a matter of poetry, you write the thing, and publication is nice, but nobody takes it out of your hands, nobody does anything with it. You have absolutely complete control. You mustn't become a playwright unless you're prepared to hand over your material, and then something happens to it, and it may be exactly what you want, or it may be a complete surprise, or it may be a mixture of everything. It may include choices that you really didn't want at all. I'm very happy about the way *Zhao* went.
In your *Introduction to English Poetry*, you write about the difference between a poem to be read and a poem to be heard, especially a poem to be heard onstage and especially a poem to be heard onstage that’s put to music. You suggest that one must take a lot of care in crafting those poems. Going back to the poems you’ve written for *The Orphan of Zhao*, how did you approach them differently from poems that have appeared in your collections?

At Stratford, I said to the composer, “Let’s get together and I’ll just read them to you,” and he was receptive to that idea. We had a session where he notated the rhythms that I had in mind, and then I went away. When I got back to Stratford a few months later for the dress rehearsal, I heard something very like what I’d expected. In the case of the San Francisco production, it will not be like that because I haven’t done that [i.e., been in touch with composer Byron Au Yong]. It’ll be much more of a surprise, but I think that can be nice, too.

Sometimes a piece of writing on the page communicates a given musical idea to a composer, but sometimes the composer will do something unexpected and not necessarily for that reason unwanted. I’ve worked with several composers and I’ve done enough of it to know that there are very different approaches. Songwriting teams don’t have that element of surprise because they’re both in the same room while they’re working, but handing over a text to somebody far away, you can be completely surprised.

There is a video of an interview online in which you read the general’s poem from *Zhao*. You articulate that it was written with a rhythm that is very clear so that any composer will basically understand what it is supposed to sound like. But that song is quite different from the others, and in fact all the songs are very different from each other. I’m curious about whether you think of them working as a unit or as separate pieces.

I imagined quite different musical characters for each, I think.

Were those characters determined by their placement in the story?

To tell you the truth, it was very instinctive, and sometimes when you’re working it’s very much a matter of what you’re doing during the day [i.e., when you’re not writing]. Often it was what I’d wake up in the middle of the night thinking, and I would just get up and go to my desk and write down an idea, and that often contained the musical idea. It was very instinctive and the whole thing was very emotional—the whole of working on this play.

Going back to what you were saying about maintaining the straightforward declarative style of classical Chinese theater, I was surprised how emotionally effective it is to have characters simply tell you what they’re about.

Yes, it’s almost working with no subtext. It’s not working with *no* subtext, but in a way it’s like that.
Writing it was imagining the ramifications of the situations. “The Orphan is sent to bring the general back”: that was part of the plot that I’d given myself. And you think to yourself, “Now, how does the doctor tell this boy what to do without letting the boy know what his real purpose is? And how does the boy get from the center of the kingdom to the outlying reaches to deliver a message to the general when he’s traveling through a country that is totally policed? Every time he comes to a bridge or a ferry-crossing, there will be people questioning who he is. He must have authority and authorization in some way, but how could he be sent . . .” All that invention of plot is completely absorbing when you’re doing it. And then you write something and you think, “Oh, no, no! If she says that then she’s going to get killed! Oh no, she said it!” Then suddenly your character is killed! You’ve just killed off your character! I found it absolutely and completely engaging in a unique way for me.

I understand that one of the Chinese experts you spoke to about the play told you that the poems are reminiscent of poems from the Book of Songs, which you then sought out and read. After reading the Book of Songs, did you change your poems at all?

No, I didn’t change them at all, because I was delighted that they reminded this person of the Book of Songs. Now, I’d never read the Book of Songs, although I’d read poems from it in various versions by Arthur Waley and by Ezra Pound quite a time ago, and it must have been the memory of those poems that I was relying on for the idiom. When I read the Book of Songs, I thought it was absolutely beautiful.

You are perhaps best known as a poet, but you’re also a celebrated essayist, lecturer, and journalist. Do you consider yourself a poet first?

Well, you know, there’s a thing about being a poet: you’re never really sure whether you’re a poet. [Laughs] Whereas if you were a violinist, you’d know whether you’re a violinist or not. There’s the joke: “Can you play the violin?” “I don’t know, I’ve never tried.” Well, with poetry a lot of people take that kind of attitude. It would be nice to think, “Yeah, I’m a poet,” but I have a very restricted outlook and I don’t produce a volume every three years in the way that some people can. Some people have a spacious oeuvre. I don’t at all. I have a very small number of poems, and if a small proportion of those last over time then I’ll be happy.

I read a review of Yellow Tulips in which the reviewer wrote, “If your subjects are war and love, you’re never going to run short of material.”

It’s very odd about love poetry: people actually have to make themselves a bit vulnerable in writing a love poem, and a lot of poets never touch it. They do something much more cerebral than “I love you” or “I don’t love you anymore” or “I love you, but you don’t love me.” It’s not to every writer’s taste to go into that kind of writing. I think it’s a shame. I did an anthology of English love poetry, and some poets have a lot to offer and some pretty well absolutely nothing. [Laughs]
Is the subject of war and violence easier to attend to because it doesn’t require the same level of vulnerability?

I think it’s a different set of problems. I went to Cambodia and Vietnam, but I had very little desire to convert what I had seen and done into poetry because I thought it would feel like a kind of calculation to do that. When I wrote poetry about war, it was ten years after those events. And now, it is an even greater distance in time.

I found a recording of you reading “Blood and Lead,” and I love this poem, especially this last stanza: “Listen to what they did. / Listen to what’s to come. / Listen to the blood. / Listen to the drum.” That really struck me when thinking about *The Orphan of Zhao* and the cyclical nature of violence and wars. Do you see modern examples of the violence we see in *Zhao*?

As a matter of fact, the other day I was reading the *New York Times* and they were talking about this family in China. One of them was a foreman and he clearly was a very rich and therefore presumably corrupt oligarch. It seemed that the punishment for him was being meted out throughout the whole of his family, and I thought, “Oh my God, it’s happening again.” Of course, they weren’t being killed, but there is the sense that when a leader gets it, the whole clan gets it.

When South Vietnam was falling, somebody went to the tombs of Marshal Ky and various other South Vietnam leaders and desecrated them, so that has gone on in our lifetime. That scene at the end, where the tombs of Cheng Ying’s family are desecrated, is actually for me a memory of Vietnam.

When *Orphan* premiered at the RSC, Artistic Director Gregory Doran suggested, “There’s a huge, rich seam of Chinese drama and we know almost nothing about it.” Have you and Doran considered adapting any other Chinese plays?

Well, he may have, but he hasn’t asked me yet. But yes, in principle, working on something new would be tremendous for me.
Where the Sounds Come From
An Interview with Composer Byron Au Yong

By Michael Paller

Pittsburgh-born, Seattle-raised Byron Au Yong grew up on musical theater and action flicks; he then became interested in drama and the martial arts, along with classical music. As he started his training as a composer, however, he found he was defined not by his interests, but by his ethnicity: his Chinese parents arrived in the United States in the mid 1960s via the Philippines, to which his grandparents had emigrated from China years before. Au Yong remembers, “When I was studying, there actually wasn’t necessarily a connection between my music and my family, and yet whatever I wrote, no matter what it was inspired by, it would be considered Chinese or Asian because the faculty would look at me and expect that.”

In searching for relevance and identity, Au Yong discovered a “fascination for people who migrate around the world and what they carry with them.” His musical creations are inspired by the ideas of movement, songs that have been dislocated. His works are compilations of diasporas, scored for voices accompanied by Asian, European, and handmade instruments.

The stories he tells with his music are set in a variety of environments. *Occupy Orchestra* 無量圍 *Infinity Garden*—a “site-responsive work” written for the Chicago Composers Orchestra and inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement, composer John Cage, and Chinese gardens—proposed a new relationship between the parts of an orchestra when it scattered its musicians across the grounds of Chicago’s Garfield Park Conservatory. Audience members were invited to freely wander near and around the musicians as they played, experiencing a unique proximity to and intimacy with the performers.

In *Surrender*, 24 performers executed tai chi moves while singing; in *O(pa)pera*, performed at the Seattle Art Museum, in addition to singing and drumming, musicians played on paper, a water gong, a toy piano, and a typewriter. “My compositions often require musicians to physically move around a performance space,” Au Yong explains. “For example, in *Kidnapping Water: Bottled Operas*, hiking opera singers and water percussionists performed in 64 waterways throughout the Pacific Northwest.” When the opportunity came to produce James Fenton’s remarkable adaptation of *The Orphan of Zhao* this season, Carey Perloff immediately thought that Au Yong would be the perfect
composer to set Fenton’s lyrics and create an entire soundscape for the play. Not only was his score for last year’s *Stuck Elevator* by turns haunting, witty, and heart-breaking, his unique ear for sound also led to his creating new instruments for the musical—for instance, an amplified bicycle wheel.

Last November, Byron joined Perloff and movement director Stephen Buescher in a workshop to explore the two great unknown worlds that had to be created specifically for the production: music and movement. Much of what came out of that workshop is both audible and visible in this production—including the actors performing the score and sounds live onstage.

You identify yourself as a composer of songs of dislocation. I’m wondering what that means and how *Zhao* may fit into that.

I feel like I’ve inherited a broken lineage. I’m a musician who comes from a family that left China. My grandparents were teachers on my paternal side, and my grandfather actually played music, as well. Yet I never learned any music from my grandfather. I have incredible regrets about that. As a young composer raised in Seattle, I played piano, and what I would write was within a Western classical tradition. The faculty at school was a primarily Asian faculty, and I thought it was weird that nothing I heard was Asian music, so I had to try to figure out what that was.
Because my grandparents left China, I feel like I don’t have a home base, and I used to feel incredibly conflicted by that. I didn’t have any music, or food, or clothing, or anything that I could call my own, which is, I think, a very difficult American dilemma—and more and more a global dilemma. But I do believe that music can function very strongly as a way to remind people of home—oftentimes, home is not where they’re living, but rather is a memory of their past. I do feel that maybe I have some psychic inheritance that is Chinese, just because I’m interested in the music and historically how the music has had to shift.

**Because of Chinese history and cultural development?**

I think, unfortunately, culture can be used to serve political means, and when China went through the Cultural Revolution, much art was wiped out. On the flip side, if you go to a place like Taiwan, they use music and art to establish themselves as true Chinese. So, it’s complicated, the way that culture is used. I guess as a composer, I’m trying to find out what is essential to me, what is accessible, and what continues to resonate intimately.

Let’s talk about *The Orphan of Zhao* and what attracted you to it as a project to take on. There are several songs in it, with lyrics that James Fenton wrote, but we’re not using the music that was used in the premiere at the Royal Shakespeare Company two years ago.

It’s a classic story, a great story, and it’s exciting that this is a new adaptation. I’m excited that the music is live, and that Carey’s thinking of the cast as an ensemble who do everything, who act and perform the music, as well. She mentioned to me that James Fenton had started with songs and then wrote everything around them. There are a lot of opportunities for bringing the work to life that resonate with what I do. It’s an incredible honor.

**How are you approaching the sound of the play’s world?**

Because *The Orphan of Zhao* involves loyalty as a theme, I’m going back to some things that were written about music during Confucius’s time. For instance, there were eight different materials for Chinese instruments: skin (like for drums), gourd, clay, metal, stone, bamboo, wood, and silk. I’m using those as the template for the materials which the sounds will come from. And, of course, you have voices throughout, as well. I like this very much because the sound will come from all these natural materials, and this will help the music feel organic, just as the costumes and set are also going toward an organic place.

Yes, it’s not going to be set in a specific historical period; it’s set in a kind of theatrical world inspired by different eras of Chinese history.

Which is great, because then the audience can place it in their own imaginations.
Are you inventing any instruments like you did in *Stuck Elevator*?

Well, I had some clay flutes made that I’m going to bring and use. We’re using bones, as well. But those are bought from the pet store. [*Laughs*]

Is there anything in particular that you’re challenging yourself with or that’s new for you in *Zhao*?

There’s a challenge in that there are so many scenes. I think there are 26. There are so many characters and about a dozen people who are playing them, as well as making the music. So there’s a logistical challenge, which is why we decided to do workshops before the rehearsals began. A.C.T.’s production staff is amazing; everyone from props to stage management is gathering all the materials in order to ensure that this goes smoothly. And I’m working with a cellist, Jessica Ivry; I decided not to have a specifically Chinese instrument. Cellos are used in China, and I think that it’s a sound that will help tie a whole world together. She will be onstage playing throughout.

With James Fenton’s permission, Carey decided to take some of the spoken text that wasn’t meant to be sung and musicalize it.

There are many places in the script where characters talk to themselves—maybe they would be considered soliloquies. They’re thinking out loud, thinking something through.
We’ve identified some of those as solo moments where people can start singing. To be clear, it’s not a musical; it really is a play with music. So it’s figuring out how seamlessly someone can start singing without making the audience think, “Oh my gosh, how did we end up in this place?” Hopefully, it will make sense.

We did a workshop back in November that was devoted to both movement and music. In one exercise you had us do, we had different objects that we made sounds with by putting them in water, or pouring water in or out of them. What came out of that exercise that was useful to you? What did you take with you from the workshop that might turn up in the show?

It was helpful for reminding us that natural sounds can evoke certain memories and that it can be played with in ways that set up a really visceral world, a sensual world. I also learned how the group numbers will work: because some of the text is lengthy, I was able to figure out how to keep the momentum and energy present in these choral numbers. And even though we didn’t have our full complement of singers, I was able to touch on what the sound would be.

Another question had to do with death: there are a lot of deaths, characters who bash their heads in, for example. There needs to be sound associated with that. So there’s the music, but there are also these sounds.

So much of your work takes place outside of traditional performance spaces, like Occupy Orchestra, which happened last year in the Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago. You had musicians scattered around a room full of plants, and the audience moved among them, talking, taking pictures, listening to this or that instrument and, as you write in your blog, “offering [musicians] pages of the score notated in graphic notation. The score also provides koans for the listener to reflect on their role as citizens in the new millennium.” It seems like you have a wider view about the uses of music, and I’m wondering where that comes from.

I feel that it’s practical. I feel that to be a composer is an anomaly. A composer is in a sense a nineteenth-century relic, so how am I relevant as someone who makes music nowadays? The Chicago Composers Orchestra wanted an orchestral piece, and I thought, “Why would I want to compose an orchestral piece? That’s not something that seems practical to me right now.” The Occupy movement was in full force, and at the same time there were orchestras in the United States that were closing. And so I thought, “Oh, maybe they can learn something from each other.” So I told the Chicago folks, “Hey, I have an idea for a piece—Occupy Orchestra.” They said, “Oh, we’re not a political organization.” [Laughs] I said, “That’s okay, I’m not a political composer.” I just wanted to see if there was anything that could inform both sides.

You know, there was a time when I didn’t call myself a composer, when I was fond of “singer/songwriter,” or “performance artist,” something that placed me in a different category, maybe more as a performer. But I found that “composer” is actually where I live, because there is a part of me that is private and likes to write in a room by myself and
think of sounds and what they mean. So, I’ve accepted “composer.” But you’re right, I do feel like there is a social aspect to music—that music deserves to be heard and played.

You reflect the tension that composer John Cage, who has influenced you, wrote about. You have some quotes of his on your website. One is: “My feeling was that beauty / yet remains in intimate situations; / that it is quite hopeless / to think and act / impressively in / public terms.”

Whenever I’m stuck in something, I read Cage. He has a way of opening things up, because oftentimes he’s nonsensical and absurdist.

He had a Chinese influence, as well; the ancient divination system the I Ching was important to him.

Definitely. But, you know, I use it differently. For me, it encompasses everything. I try to use all 54 hexagrams, whereas he used it very much as a chance device. He would throw some coins or whatever, and compose from there. I try to embody a totality. I feel that theater is creating a total world for an audience member to enter into.
“The play is a beast!” laughed movement director Stephen Buescher, before going on to list just a few of the demands *The Orphan of Zhao* makes of its designers and actors: “How do we make crowds of people getting shot with arrows? How do we make this Demon Mastiff? How do we create the Monkey Palace, where the Princess is imprisoned?” Early in the design process, director Carey Perloff, with whom Buescher recently collaborated on *Underneath the Lintel*, realized she wanted to solve some of these problems using movement. Speaking with me the week before going into rehearsal, Buescher, who is also the head of movement for A.C.T.’s Master of Fine Arts Program, knew he had a lot to tackle, but he was excited: “Movement will be a big part of the show,” Buescher said, “But I don’t know how much the audience will be aware of it. It won’t be sweeping dance or movement sequences. It will be things the audience might not even think about in terms of movement.” Because of the crucial if subtle role movement will play in the production, I sat down with Buescher to find out about his process in designing a play as elaborate and epic as *The Orphan of Zhao*. Overflowing with creativity, he was exploring the boundless possibilities of what this piece might look like even as we spoke.

Describe the style of movement you’re going for in *The Orphan of Zhao*.

We’re trying to figure out visceral, simple ways to tell the story. We’re not going the route of something that might look like the Peking Opera, but we’re doing research on what ancient Chinese silk painting looks like, what calligraphy looks like. It’s really trying to figure out what materials best serve this show. Like the demon dog: he’s supposed to be wild and hungry, so we’re putting a lot of emphasis on how this dog gets restrained, how he’s leashed, and how people are pulling him back. We’re using a lot of bamboo throughout the play. We’re not using metal swords (except for a real knife that will show up once). That also influences the movement, because now we have to figure out what fights with bamboo sticks look like. We’re inspired by different historical periods of art in China, but we’re also inspired by contemporary Chinese artists. We looked at a lot of Ay Weiwei, and Carey saw a big Chinese exhibit all about ink [*Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*] at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.
How will that exhibit translate into movement? Well, there’s the scroll scene [in which Cheng Ying tells his adopted son the truth about his origins through calligraphy], which Carey believes is at the heart of the whole play. It was a big thing trying to figure that moment out. I was looking at a lot of images of scrolls, and there was one where these women were holding the scroll horizontally, and an emperor was drawing on it. And I thought, “This is the scene.” In watching people do calligraphy, there are certain movements that I’m morphing a bit. There are really specific ways that you draw calligraphy; maybe we can see the doctor drawing the palace differently. . .

Have you had a lot of conversations with the other designers about how movement fits with the other parts of the design?

I keep riffing back and forth with Ryan Parham, who’s heading the props, and Linda Cho, who’s doing costumes, and Dan Ostling, who’s doing the set. For example, through the movement workshop we just did, we decided we’re going to be swinging around on the scaffolding in the Monkey Palace scene. But then Dan responded, “That area is actually going to be floor, so they can’t do that—but we could put extra bars here and you could do that there.” There’s a call and response between the movement and the design that’s informing what I can do.

Have you begun collaborating with the composer, Byron Au Yong?

There was a music workshop and he led that, so we got to play a little bit with him in the room. There’s going to be singing and a lot of instrumentation—working with water and bones, bamboo, and other sounds. Then some other things will be sound effects created by actors using a microphone.

Will there be any choreographed dances?

I’m going to push for one choreographed moment, when all the ghosts come in at the end, sweeping in and sweeping around. Simple, so they can still sing—which I learned
from working on *Stuck Elevator* last year: “Stephen, you can’t have him doing all those cartwheels and stuff, because he has to sing that solo now!” At this point, that’s the only specific choreography I see in my head, but that could change at any moment. We could discover, “We need *this* to be a whole movement sequence!” Then I have to go hide awhile and figure something out. It’s always trying to figure out what’s major and what’s minor, and trying to figure out how the different elements can complement each other and work in concert.

**Did you work with this cast during the workshops?**

Only some of the people: Brian Rivera, Cindy Im, and Philip Estrera. I think that’s it. Last year, I got to work with Marie-France Arcilla in *Stuck Elevator*. That’s the thing about movement: I can have a lot of ideas, but when I get into the room, it’s like, “Ooh, let’s see what these actors can do,” or, “Uh-oh, these actors can’t move in this way for whatever reason.” So it is always about making it in the room.

**What were you able to accomplish in the workshops?**

We tried to figure out the scroll scene. We tried to figure out how everyone is killing themselves. We tried to figure out the dog. What does the actor playing the dog wear? What does the dog do? How does the dog attack? For some of those questions, like the dog attacking, I had an “aha” moment of, “Oh! *This* is how it could be.” I was watching attack dogs and Spanish-style bullfighting, too. They put spears in the bull that stay there, which gets the bull even madder even as the matador gets closer to killing the bull. So in the play, we’re going to agitate the dog to the point of wanting to attack.

It was great being able to use actors and figure out if that idea would work. Trying, “Okay, let’s have you three do *this*. Does that work? Oh, that works! How about you four? No, it’s better with three.” Then Carey says, “We don’t have three actors in that scene.” “Okay, can we do it with two? Yes, we can.” Jonathan Rider, our fight director, actually was a big part of this movement workshop, because he’s looking at the combat. Workshops let us ask, “Does *this* work?” and “How might it work?” And the actors came up with ideas that we’re going to put directly onstage.

**How literal is the violence in the play going to be?**

There’s a scene where Zhao Dun, who’s about to be attacked by the dog because he’s wearing the purple robe, has to get out of there. The script says that his servant Ti Miming holds everybody off so he can escape. While playing with that scene, we found that we’re going to use the long bamboo sticks. There’s a wushu pole-fighting style, and there are certain moves that you can do up close and others that become bigger, longer, and more sweeping. So Jonathan’s going to choreograph something with bamboo sticks that starts in the close style and turns into the big, sweeping style. There won’t be blood or anything like that. The violence will be more metaphorical, symbolic. There is only one time when there will be a real weapon onstage, at the end when the ghost says to Cheng
Ying, “You need to kill yourself.” The ghost is going to have a real silver blade. This is going to be the only realistic weapon that we’ll see.

For me, that’s like looking at a black-and-white photo that somebody has colored in just one spot. It stands out. A lot of the show looks “made”; for example there’s a flock of geese that will look like paper and wood and not realistic. You’ll be able to see the inner workings of a lot of things—except that moment with the dagger. The violence will be not messy, but it will hopefully have a shocking impact every time.

What ideas are you really excited to put into movement?

I’m excited about it all. It’s hard to really gallop right now, until we get the real actors and the real scaffolding.

That’s right, because vertically, you only have a third of the three-story set in the rehearsal room. That must make it difficult.

That makes it really difficult! [Laughs] We’re going to have to imagine a lot of what’s happening. I can’t wait to see it all. I love the mathematics of how this goes to there and then those things spin. I love that.

What research have you been doing in preparation for rehearsal?

I’ve been watching a lot of Chinese movement, like qigong, tai chi, some slow movement. I’ve watched some wushu martial arts that have animal-based movements; I knew I was
going to do something with the Monkey Palace, so I watched some things on monkey and dog style in martial arts. I also watched the movement of calligraphy and scrolls and painting. Not so much dance. I watched monkeys, gibbons.

It’s about having little phrases of ideas that I want the actors to try out, and then coming up with ideas in the room. It’s a collaborative mix of discovery and having the right provocation for the actors: “Here, I want you all to try this.” That’s the process now for this piece.

Something that keeps ringing in my head is that when Chay Yew was directing *Stuck Elevator*, he was really careful not to exoticize Chinese culture. I think my passion for this story is that I’m adopted, so I have that key into *The Orphan of Zhao*. My sister was adopted from Vietnam, and she will never know her birth parents, but she knows people from Vietnam who have gone back to these villages to find out who they are. I love fables, fairy tales—Russian, African, Chilean, Scandinavian. I love that this story has an epic scope. It feels like in a way this production goes beyond America’s conversation about race. The heartbeat of that orphan story, I love. And I love that we’re going to have Asian artists in it.

I do African dance every week, and some of the main drummers are white, and clearly they love the music, they love the dance, they love the rhythm, so race doesn’t really play into it, because this white person might love it more than someone from Africa who would rather play the guitar. As long as we’re not trying to replicate something we don’t know about, and we go into the play with what we do know about, and we listen—I think that’s the key. I think anthropologically, we’ll fall short, because we’re not really pursuing things like, “You bow in a certain way.” But we are pursuing, “How do we show honor? How do we show respect?”

What would exoticizing it look like?

With *Stuck Elevator*, I was really attracted to Chinese dance and started going that route. And Chay said, “No. None of that. Tango. Do a tango. Or do a rumba.” “Huh?” “Yeah, Chinese people love to do rumba, it arrived during these years, and it was a craze, and everyone was doing rumba—my grandparents do it, my parents do it.”

I think that’s where the exchange happens, and I’m sure with a cast being racially diverse—Taiwanese, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese—people are going to bring different ideas to the table about the overall themes. I think it would be exoticized if it started looking like some strange martial arts play with lots of bowing. Fans and lanterns and dragons.

And you want it to come from a more visceral place.

I think so. Because other things, maybe the costumes more than anything, are going to make an imprint that has more of a Chinese tradition behind it. For movement, it’s more like collisions of different sources, so no one can say, “Oh, I know what that movement is from.” Nobody knows, and hopefully it’s more surprising.
Abstraction and Flow

Interviews with Costume Designer Linda Cho and A.C.T. Costume Director Jessie Amoroso

By Shannon Stockwell

Linda Cho is a busy woman. Her work can currently be seen on Broadway in two shows: The Velocity of Autumn and A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder, which received a 2014 Tony Award nomination for Best Costume Design of a Musical. In addition, on May 2, 2014, she was awarded a TDF Irene Sharaff Young Master Award, which is “presented to an early-career designer whose work has gone beyond mere beginner’s promise and has entered a period of fruition.” Off Broadway she has designed for Theatre for a New Audience, Manhattan Theatre Club, Second Stage Theatre, The Public Theater, and Classic Stage Company; and internationally she has worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company in England and the Stratford Festival in Canada. Her regional work has taken her around the country. On top of all that, she is the mother of two children. Despite her busy schedule, she generously gave us a few minutes of her time to discuss her beautiful costume designs for The Orphan of Zhao.

How would you describe the costumes for this show?

Abstracted historical Chinese—abstracted in that these are not period replicas, rather an interpretation and departure from historical garments. There is a lot of continuity within the Chinese eras; the shapes are based on a simple T-shape garment.

We understand that the production will not be set in a specific era. Has that fact complicated the design process?

Actually, I think it helped me. I don’t have to try to recreate with slavish accuracy a particular place and time. I’m free to take from the research what works for our movement, bodies, storytelling, and imagination. Also, it allows me to use a more familiar contemporary vocabulary, like color and materials, to convey character ideas. There are such rigorous demands physically in this show, and there’s a lot of music, so it’s actually quite liberating to be able to step away from the research and history and just use inspiration.
What kind of research did you do?

In an initial conversation with Carey, she mentioned an exhibit at the Asia Society in New York called *The Artful Recluse*. It featured lyrical landscape paintings from the Ming dynasty [1368–1644 CE]. That led me to also look at the Ming dynasty scroll called *The Emperor’s Procession*, which is rich with detailed illustrations of a royal court. The actual garments were clearly rendered, and it was useful to see the entire court as a whole to help understand the hierarchies. Carey was also interested in the flowing silhouettes of the Tang dynasty [618–907 CE], which have a more romantic quality. We flipped through books with images all the way through to contemporary China. We even looked at the “timeless” Mao worker’s uniform as a source of inspiration.

We talked a lot about this being a story that was written down. It’s a legendary story. Carey pointed out this wonderful exhibit in New York called *Ink Art*. It featured contemporary Chinese artists that have used ink in various ways. That also inspired me. Every actor has a base costume, a unisex look that looks like it’s been ombréd up from dark to light. So on top of that, we’ll just add pieces of armory, pieces of robe, add a hat, regardless of what character they play.

Was that exhibit the inspiration for the Ballad Singer’s costume?

Yes, there’s a lot of calligraphy on his costume. In the catalogue of the exhibit, there’s actually an artist who fills a room with writing on giant pieces of paper—but the writing is not real Chinese characters, they’re abstracted. Especially if you’re not familiar with Chinese,
it looks like Chinese writing, but it’s actually gibberish. We’re going to use that idea. For one thing, if you are Chinese, it’s very distracting to be reading this stuff onstage, but also it steps away from being a historical reproduction.

**How are the costumes influenced by the need for the actors to be physical in this show?**

Most of the performers play multiple roles, so not only do they have the physical demands of their characters’ movement, they also need to move from character to character with ease and fluidity. The basic unisex look allows for a full range of movement; even the footwear, dance boots, was chosen with fluid movement in mind. Very simple gestures like a hat or an apron are added to create different characters. We wanted the clothes to have the visual abstraction and ease of a contemporary dance piece.

**Do the actors carry any weaponry? How does that affect the design?**

Yes, some will carry weapons. Structurally, it will be the work of the costume shop to create belts and scabbards that will allow them to function correctly and carry the weight.

**How do the costumes portray class?**

We are using color and fabric quality to indicate socioeconomic status. The upper classes have brighter, finer, shinier fabrics. The working classes have more earth tones and rougher-textured fabric. Also, the characters that are older have a stylized, Chinese opera–esque makeup treatment. I think the notion of age is very important in Chinese culture.

*RIGHT* The Ballad Singer (above) and the Emperor (below)
What is the build process going to be like for this show?

Perhaps Jessie would be the best person to talk about this part . . .

_Taking Linda’s suggestion, we sat down with Jessie Amoroso, A.C.T.’s costume director, just before costume construction for The Orphan of Zhao began. Sitting on the floor of a fitting room, Amoroso detailed the practical side of the ambitious process of building the costumes for this elaborate production._

Where are you in the build process right now?

Right now, we are in what’s called the mock-up phase. We have received the designs from Linda, they’ve been approved by Carey, the colors have been run through the set design and the lighting design teams, and everyone’s agreed on colors, so we’re in the process of buying fabrics. The mock-up is where our draper and tailor look at the renderings and compare them against the body types of the actors. We’ll take a mannequin and pad it out to match the human form that’s coming our way. In one instance, we actually had to do extra padding, because one of the characters is supposed to be eight months pregnant. So, in addition to the actress’s natural shape, we have to add a little baby bump. Or, in this case, a big baby bump, because in a Chinese robe you have to go a little farther out there to show that she’s pregnant.

With a mock-up, we start in either a muslin or a cheap cotton, or sometimes if it’s going to be a drapey silk, we’ll try to find drapey polyester; you try to find something similar to the kind of fabric you’re actually going to use so you can also get some of the drape lines.

_LEFT Tu’an Gu (above) and Zhao Dun (below)
Then our tailor, Alexander Zeek, and our draper, Keely Weiman, play with the fabric to see how it falls. There's a lot of scholarship on Chinese costumes, and there are definite distinctions. Linda has taken a lot of elements from different times and melded them. We're not doing a history play or a documentary, so she's trying to get the feel of ancient China while also making it accessible for contemporary audiences.

We'll have fittings in the muslin, and that's where Linda will start drawing: “Oh, the seam should be here.” “Move the hem to there.” You actually start writing on the cotton garments, so when the fitting’s over, in addition to the notes we’ve taken, the draper and tailor actually have a road map of where to go next. Sometimes you actually just take that muslin apart and use it for a pattern for the next muslin (if you have enough time), or for the real fabric. If we could see every cast member—there are 15 of them—for a 90-minute fitting, that'd be great. But since everyone is onstage almost the entire time [and, therefore, always called for rehearsal], it’s going to be hard. So we'll probably get 30 to 45 minutes with each person, and then call them back when the designer’s not here and try to fix things along the way.

Each actor has from one to five costumes, and some people have six or seven depending on their understudy assignments. So it adds up. It’s a big show. In my experience this is an opera-scale show. Operas usually have anywhere between 40 and 150 performers, but for us, this has an opera quality to it because everyone has the same base look, from BD Wong to the ensemble players. And then on top of that, Linda has chosen different robes, armor for soldiers, armor for guards, a nosy neighbor look, a peasant look, etc.—those pieces just come on.

RIGHT Wei Jiang (above) and Gongsun Chujii (below)
and off. We’ve done a lot of armor shows in the past, but we haven’t done Chinese armor. Linda came by on a previous visit and we looked through A.C.T.’s stock going all the way back to *Marco Millions* [1988] and *Golden Child* [1998], but none of that stuff seemed to fit her palette. We really wanted to avoid the classic Chinatown brocades, so there was really nothing in stock to pull from. Everything had to be built or bought for this show.

**That’s ambitious.**

It is. A Chinese theatrical armorer made the 14 sets of armor for us. We’re bringing in someone for five weeks to help with the armor and the hats, but also daily stitching. We’ve also contracted with an outside person to make three of the robes. These people will lighten the load so that our team can really concentrate on the principal costumes; there are probably eight to ten of those we need to build, in addition to the fifteen ensemble costumes, the ten peasants, the eight soldiers, and the other six guards.

Looking at the renderings, I notice that they use a lot of really beautiful prints, some a geometric design and others more traditional florals. Are you buying the fabrics like that or are you creating them?

Six of one, half-dozen of the other! What looks like the geometric pattern is something that’s very Linda. You wouldn’t see that in a classic Chinese garment. You would see more of the florals, the dragons, the Chinese rainbow . . . sometimes they even do tiger prints. Linda is actually a Korean-Canadian-New Yorker, and there is a fabric technique from Korea called *pojagi*: it’s patchwork. It was traditionally used by peasants; if you couldn’t get a 45-inch wide
piece of fabric, you'd stitch together a bunch of little ones, like an American crazy quilt. It's very geometric, very linear, mostly rectangles, although occasionally you do see squares. And she liked that idea, especially in relation to Dan Ostling's set design. So what almost looks like a Mondrian quality is actually patching up fabrics.

The only “real” Chinese fabrics we’re using are for the Princess, but even then we’re faking it by creating a pattern. A lot of the smaller brocades really don’t read onstage and they just end up looking like Chinatown pajamas. So we found a couture fabric for the second Princess costume (after she has been locked up for 18 years), and it already had that distressed and faded appearance, so for the first Princess costume we’re actually going to create a fabric to look like the newer version of that distressed fabric by starting with a green satin, which is fairly heavy but also very plain, and then applying pink flowers on top of it.

Are you going to paint the patterns?

Probably more appliqué, and maybe a technique called trapunto, where you actually stuff felt or padding under a fabric to give it a bubbly quality. We could also maybe take apart some silk flowers and apply them to it, or paint it, as well.

What role does the shop play once the show opens?

Once the show is up and running, we step away and wardrobe takes over. It’s fabric in the store, it’s a costume in the shop, but once it’s in the theater it becomes wardrobe, and it’s under the guide of the wardrobe department. We’re very lucky at A.C.T. to have an amazing wardrobe staff. We help take care of the costumes during tech rehearsals and previews, because everything...
is still very fluid until the show opens. Once the show opens, the costumes are frozen, no more changes. It’s then up to the wardrobe department to look at the costumes on a daily basis and maintain them to the style, color, and fit of opening night.

This production is very movement heavy. Does that affect the build of the costumes?

I took part in some of the movement workshops by watching and providing things. With that physicality in mind, we knew our base ensemble costume had to be washable and we needed to have kneepads, so we’ve chosen materials that wash and wear easily. The painted treatment for the base ensemble is limited to the upper part of the body, which will receive a lot of wear and tear from movement, but shouldn’t get a lot of sweat on it, because we are going to have underlayers to absorb the sweat, and those will be laundered every night.

What is the painted treatment?

We’re painting the tops of the costumes in a graded ombré. We’re actually hiring an outside painter to come in and do some silk screening and painting. Because they’re painted, you don’t really want to wash them every night; they probably could hold up, but the fabric would lose its density and stiffness quite quickly, and we really want to try and maintain that. So we have a skin layer that can be laundered every night, and costumes can be sent out for dry cleaning once a week or once every other week depending on how smelly or dirty they get.

LEFT Cheng Bo, the Orphan of Zhao (above), and General Han Jue (below)
Does less movement happen in the bigger, more elaborate robes?

Yes, not as much movement. The real traditional robes are limited to the Emperor, the elder statesmen, and the Princess, who is eight, nine months pregnant, and her movement is very slow—those will be very graceful movements, there will be lots of flow, but I don’t think there’s a lot of physical action. The physical action tends to be limited to the characters who wear the armor—the armor is made so they have free movement of their arms—or when they’re wearing their ensemble costume, their arms are bare so they have freedom of movement to do anything. But we’ll see. Things always change in rehearsals. We may need to put more fullness in some of these robes so they can do the splits if they need to. I doubt they’ll be doing any cartwheels with their long hanging Chinese sleeves, but one never knows! We may need detachable sleeves!

I noticed a lot of headwear in the renderings.

There is a lot of headwear. We’re at a point where we’re not sure how much headwear we’re going to use because of the number of costume changes. It looks like some people have up to ten or twelve costume changes as it’s written, so we’re not sure if we have time for people to go offstage, change out of their guard costume into a peasant costume, and change headwear. We do have hats for the principal characters, but we’re not sure if all the helmets will stay in at the moment. We’re going to work with Linda to see if we have time for that.
Are you building the headwear here, or is it coming from somewhere else?

A combination of both. We did have some things made by the traditional Chinese company that made Peking Opera–style elements, and it’s a good start. The Peking Opera stuff can be very stagey and very theatrical, and with some of the naturalized movement and without the makeup of the opera it may look a little too showy. So we’re at this in-between phase of deciding. There was an idea of doing the Princess as one of those characters in full Peking Opera white makeup, but because of the quick changes into her second, third, and fourth characters, is there time to change out of the makeup? We’re fighting with those time constraints.

Is there a particular costume that you’re really excited to work on?

I’m really interested in the second Princess costume. Without giving too much away, we’re trying to come up with an interesting way for her to enter onstage. The headdress is over-the-top, and we’re lucky to have Marie-France Arcilla back—anyone who saw Stuck Elevator and the fortune cookie headdress knows that this woman can wear anything and pull it off. I’m really happy to see what she can do while wearing the Peking Opera headdress and a tattered costume, while making a grand entrance.
From Scenic Designer Daniel Ostling

I want the set to get out of the way. It’s a very presentational space that needs to support a number of things. There are a lot of scenes, one after the other, for which I tried to create entrances and platforms and levels. There are places that can be designated for musicians. The cellist is in a permanent location, but other cast members need to have easy access to instruments and mics. I tried to create a space that not only supports that, but can also transform into these various locations. So there is a large scaffolding that goes around the stage that’s fairly systematic. Particularly in China, they still use bamboo scaffolding, so there’s an organic quality to it, almost a sketchy quality. So, the scaffolding is not as straight as it is in the model; there are actually a lot of curves to it. There’s an honesty to what it is.
The History of *The Orphan of Zhao*

*By Shannon Stockwell*

James Fenton said of the process of adapting *The Orphan of Zhao*, “There seems to be no single text that presents the whole story from start to finish. It is a living piece of drama—continuously evolving and mutating.” Indeed, the tale has gone through many permutations, passed from country to country, translated from Chinese to French to English and back to Chinese again, leaving us with as many interpretations as there are adaptations. The origins of the tale reach back impossibly far, all the way back to the seventh century BCE, a time and culture completely foreign to modern-day San Franciscans.

*The Orphan of Zhao* is based on actual events that occurred during the Spring and Autumn era (722–481 BCE), which is a subdivision of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE). The era was marked by the increasing power of regional states, as opposed to the royal power of the Zhou king, whose authority began to wane during this time. This left China effectively leaderless. The various states struggled for power, although they did not break into actual combat until the appropriately named Warring States period (475–221 BCE). During the Spring and Autumn era, according to historian Charles O. Hucker, “struggles primarily involved diplomatic maneuvering, and the arts of interstate diplomacy were studied in earnest and practiced with finesse.” None of the states were actually powerful enough to overcome all the others, but they did “disrupt the existing order.”

Clans and patrilineal descent were the main structures of society during the Spring and Autumn era, and their power could rival that of the state rulers, and therefore that of the king. Clans were “well-organized groups whose heads controlled clan affairs, spoke for the clans, and inherited clan properties and official privileges,” writes Hucker. “By the Spring and Autumn era, almost all offices of significance were monopolized by clans, were occupied for life, and were transmitted hereditarily.”

The Spring and Autumn era is named after *Chunqiu*, or *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which record the history of the small state of Lu (1042–249 BCE) during the years 722 BCE to 481 BCE. It is in a commentary on the *Chunqiu* that we can find the first roots of the *Orphan of Zhao* story. The *Zuo Zhuan*, or *Zuo’s Commentary*, was written by an unknown author during the Warring States period. The work is a detailed expansion of the *Chunqiu*, which is, in the words of Hucker, “laconic in the extreme,” often only including one line of text for an entire month: “The sun was eclipsed,” or “Wu Te Ch’u
led an army that joined Ch’in in attacking the state of Cheng and laid siege to Lun-shih city.” The entire text of the *Chunqiu* is a total of 16,000 words. The *Zuo Zhuan*, in contrast, is written in a clear, narrative style, and elaborates on details the *Chunqiu* merely summarizes.

The *Zuo Zhuan* includes several accounts of a great minister named Zhao Dun. One of these accounts follows a familiar plot: Duke Ling of the state of Jin was a corrupt ruler, in power from 620 BCE until his death in 607 BCE. He “shot at people from the top of a tower to see how they tried to avoid his pellets. Because his cook had not done some bears’ paws thoroughly, he put him to death, and made some of his women carry his body past the court in a basket.” Zhao Dun told the duke over and over that his actions were monstrous, but the duke did not listen; instead, he hired an assassin, Xu Ni, to kill him. But when Xu Ni arrived early one morning at Zhao Dun’s home to carry out his duty, he saw the man he was to kill sitting in a reverent half sleep. Xu Ni could not kill him, and said, “He is indeed the people's lord. To murder the people's lord would be disloyalty, and to cast away from me the marquis’s command will be unfaithfulness. With this alternative before me, I had better die.” He then killed himself. Later, the duke invited Zhao Dun to the palace to drink with him—an invitation that turned out to be a trick. The duke’s dog attacked him, but Zhao Dun’s servant, Timi Ming, jumped in front of Zhao Dun and killed the dog. The duke’s soldiers killed Timi Ming, but Zhao Dun escaped. Later, Zhao Chuan, a relative of Zhao Dun (it is not clear what their relationship is), killed Duke Ling.
According to the *Zuo Zhuan*, Zhao Dun did have a son named Zhao Shuo, but there are no stories about him. However, the *Zuo Zhuan* does include an account about Zhao Shuo’s widow, Zhao Zhuangji, and the attempted annihilation of the Zhao family. Zhao Zhuangji (sister of Duke Ling’s successor, Duke Ching) had “illicit relations” with Zhao Ying, Zhao Dun’s brother. Upon finding out, two of Zhao Ying’s brothers sent him into exile and, in anger and hungry for revenge, Zhao Zhuangji went to her brother the duke and accused Zhao Ying’s brothers of treason. Duke Ching had the brothers killed and confiscated the Zhao family’s estates. A court minister by the name of Han Jue protested the duke’s actions, and the Duke, humbled, returned the estates to Zhao Shuo’s son, Zhao Wu. Ten years later, Zhao Wu became a court minister and served as a just and fair leader. The honor of the house of Zhao was restored.

There is no mention of an orphan in the *Zuo Zhuan*; that part of the story would come later. The *Shiji*, or *Records of the Grand Historian*, written by second-century BCE historian Sima Qian, covers a 2,500-year period, from 2697 BCE to 100 BCE; there is a retelling of the story of Zhao Zhuangji’s affair and its aftermath. The chapter titled “Noble Family of Zhao” tells the story of the orphan of Zhao Shuo, and this appears to be the main source of the Chinese drama that would be written almost one thousand years later. The story introduces the corrupt Tu’an Gu, a “minister of crime” in the court of Duke Ching, who killed all the males in the Zhao clan—with the exception of the Zhao child, still inside the womb of Zhao Shuo’s widow. The widow, who also happened to be Duke Ching’s sister, gave birth to a baby boy, and her late husband’s friends, Gongsun Chujiu and Cheng Ying, conceived a plan to switch the child with another in order to save it from Tu’an Gu’s wrath. Their plot was successful; Tu’an Gu’s army killed the other baby instead of the Orphan, and Gongsun Chujiu sacrificed his life. The real Orphan of Zhao was raised in the mountains by Cheng Ying. All was well until Duke Ching became ill. His advisor, Han Jue, who somehow knew of Cheng Ying’s actions, revealed the reason for the Duke’s illness: the wrongs he allowed to be committed against the noble and loyal Zhao family. Han Jue also revealed that there was one member of the Zhao clan left. After a battle between Han Jue’s army and Tu’an Gu’s, all the estates were restored to the Orphan, and honor was restored to the Zhao family. Later, Cheng Ying killed himself to pay the debt he owed to Zhao Shuo and Gongsun Chujiu, who sacrificed their lives for the Orphan of Zhao.

This compelling tale of good versus evil, honor, loyalty, and revenge caught the attention of many Chinese authors over the years, such as Liu Xiang, who wrote *Shuoyuan* (*Garden of Stories*) in the first century BCE; Wang Chong, who wrote *Lùnhéng* (*Disquisitions*) in 80 CE; and Zhu Xi, who wrote *Zizhi Tongjian Gangmu* (*An Outline of History*) in 1172 CE. By the time the tale was translated to the stage by Ji Junxiang in the thirteenth century, the story was already well known among the Chinese public; it appears that Ji was the first person to weave together all of the elements into the story we know today, consolidating the generations of Zhao Dun and Zhao Shuo into one. The play was catalogued as *The Story of the Revenge of the Zhao Orphan* in the library of a Ming dynasty emperor early in the fifteenth century.
More than 200 years later, the play was translated into a Western language for the first time in 1731 by Jesuit priest Father Joseph Henri Prémare, who had traveled to China as a missionary. His version, which notably left out all of the songs of Ji Junxiang’s version, found its way into the hands of the editor Jean Baptiste du Halde, who published it in his book *Description de la Chine* in 1735. From this publication, several English translations were made, including one by Thomas Percy, written in 1762. French philosopher and writer Voltaire adapted the story to fit his own beliefs, namely the superiority of reason over blind force and barbarism; he had the corrupt general (in his version, Genghis Khan) learn the evil of his ways through the love of a woman and the reason of a good doctor. His version was first performed in 1753. In 1756, influenced by both Prémare’s translation and Voltaire’s interpretation, Irish playwright Arthur Murphy wrote his own adaptation, inserting more action and reasserting the revenge story which had been undermined in Voltaire’s version due to his focus on Genghis Khan’s redemption. None of these plays were particularly true to the Chinese original: the songs, a major part of Chinese theater, were absent, characters’ names were changed, and often major parts of the story were altered or deleted in order to fit the perspective of the adaptors. Of course, the European public was unaware of how unfaithful Prémare’s translation was. All of the plays were successful; Europe was at the height of its fascination with Chinese culture, which it found exotic, exciting, and romantic when compared with the familiar life of Europeans—a feeling embodied by the prologue of Percy’s adaptation:
Enough of Greece and Rome. Th’exhausted store
Of either nation now can charm no more... . . .

On eagle wings the poet of to-night
Soars for fresh virtues to the source of light,
To China’s eastern realms: and boldly bears
Confucius’ morals to Britannia’s ears.

The “vogue” of China did not last long, however, and many philosophers began to hold that Chinese culture and art was inherently inferior to that of the West. Even Voltaire, who was a champion of Chinese philosophy, conceded that Chinese culture had reached its height with Confucius in the fifth century BCE and seemed to have remained at a standstill since then. The play wasn’t translated as Ji Junxiang had written it, complete with the songs and original plot, until 1834, when a professor of Chinese at the College de France, Stanislas Julien, created a new translation. After almost 500 years, the play was finally made available to European readers in the form Ji Jinxiang intended.

After all these years, the tale of the noble Zhao Dun standing up to a corrupt leader still holds the attentions of audiences across the world. In 1964, an adaptation by Li Jueben was inspired by the traditional Confucian virtues of loyalty; in 2003, two versions staged in China reimagined the play to focus on the humanity of the tale in one version, and on the cruelty of power and politics in another. In 2010, the epic movie Sacrifice, based on The Orphan of Zhao and directed by Chinese master Chen Kaige, received positive reviews; San Francisco Chronicle critic David Lewis wrote, “It charges out of the gate in Indiana Jones style, employing so many plot twists that you may need a scorecard. Then after an hour or so, it settles into an intimate, character-driven drama, before its low-key yet thought-provoking finale.” The story of revenge, sacrifice, and loyalty has endured for almost 3,000 years, and to James Fenton, it is no mystery why: “The story has resonances throughout the world: I have often thought of Cambodia; others might think of Uganda, or Rwanda. There is, of course, the recent history of China itself. One doesn’t need to insert these echoes. They resonate on their own behalf.”

SOURCES
When Loyalties Collide

By Michael Paller

The Orphan of Zhao makes almost a fetish of sacrifice. When called upon, characters perform the most extravagant gestures of renunciation. If it weren't for the resulting toll of blood and death, the play might be considered a riot of altruism. Yet, when all's said and done, when the bodies have been buried and the wrongs made right, another side of sacrifice makes its complex presence felt, as well—loyalty.

The Orphan Goes West

For almost 900 years, The Orphan of Zhao has been one of the most popular plays ever written in China. It was the first Chinese play to appear in the West, in a French translation by a Jesuit missionary, Father Joseph Henri Prémare. Called L'orphelin de la maison de Tchao, it was published in 1735 and appeared in English for the first time the following year. By the middle of the century, an Italian version, with little of the original text remaining (a trait that many subsequent versions would also share), was presented at the Viennese court of the Empress Maria Theresa, while at about the same time, the French philosopher, novelist, and playwright Voltaire produced his own French translation, entitled L'orphelin de la Chine. An English version based on Voltaire's soon appeared in London called The Orphan of China, written by a popular writer of farces named Arthur Murphy. It was a hit for the star David Garrick in 1759, and eight years later premiered in Philadelphia at the hands of the enterprising itinerant troupe the American Company. Meanwhile, following its initial production, the play went on to appear in hundreds of versions in China, in all manner of theatrical forms. A Chinese film version—titled, significantly, Sacrifice—was released in 2010. James Fenton's rendition, written for the Royal Shakespeare Company, which debuted it in 2012, is just one of the most recent takes on a story that, perhaps due to the weighty obligations it places on its characters, continues to fascinate.

The Original Orphan

The original Orphan of Zhao was written sometime in the latter part of the thirteenth century, possibly near present-day Beijing, by a playwright named Ji Junxiang. We know little about him other than he apparently wrote a total of six plays, giving him the distinction of being perhaps the least-prolific dramatist in an era known for the
popularity of its theater and the productivity of its playwrights. What he lacked in speed, though, he seemingly made up for in craft. A Ming dynasty prince writing in the fourteenth century described his lyric-writing as “plum-flowers in the snow,” meaning, according to the scholar Liu Wu-Chi, “that his songs are as pure and delicate as plum flowers and snowflakes.”

The Orphan’s story has its roots in tales as old as the fifth century BCE, but the evidence suggests that Ji was the first to dramatize what was by then a well-known story. Of however many variations he rang on previous versions, one in particular stands out. In Ji’s principal source, a history of ancient China called *Records of the Grand Historian*, when the prime minister, Tu’an Gu, orders the infant Orphan put to death, the country physician Cheng Ying and the former court counselor Gongsun Chujiu save him by putting another, anonymous child in his place. In Ji’s version, Cheng Ying sacrifices his own infant son to save the Orphan—raising the stakes for Cheng Ying and adding a layer of complication that raises profound ethical questions.

It was also a large storytelling risk. Male babies were greatly valued in Chinese society: family lineage and property were passed down through males, and it was the male who prayed for deceased ancestors. If a family had no male children, not only would the line end, but so would the worship of its ancestors. To identify with a main character who sacrifices his infant son may have been too much to ask of an audience. So, despite Cheng Ying’s pivotal part in the action, Ji did not make him the central character.

In Chinese drama of the day, the lead actor was given the privilege of singing four suites of songs, one in each act. The songs carried much of a play’s emotional weight and comprised a play’s primary structural element. This actor, who could have been either a woman or a man, didn’t necessarily play only one role; she or he might take a different part in each act, but each one sang the songs and was considered the lead character in that act. In Ji’s *Orphan of Zhao*, the characters with the songs were the Orphan’s father, Zhao Dun; the general Han Jue; Gongsun Chujiu; and the Orphan. Cheng Ying, who
has by far the most stage time and makes the play’s most profound moral choices, had no songs to sing, so he wasn’t considered by the audience to be a leading character and wasn’t, it seems, the focus of their identification.

There may well have been another reason for Ji’s seemingly odd treatment of Cheng Ying. As the scholar W. L. Idema suggests, Ji may not have been as interested in character development as in the development of an idea. The notion of sacrifice as an unquestioned ethical necessity is woven tightly into the play, as character after character makes one of a very high-stakes sort: the assassin Chu Ni, Zhao Dun, Han Jue, Wei Jiang, Gongsung Chujiu, and in Ji’s version, the Orphan’s mother, all make the supreme sacrifice: suicide. While it can be argued that Cheng Ying—not to mention his wife, who is the play’s only character with no say over the sacrifice she’s called to make—loses the most of all, in Ji’s structure, his sacrifice was just one more to be weighed against the others. Ji may be asking, What are we to make of this behavior, as we watch several characters give up their lives out of loyalty to a noble family, while two give up a child?

Loyalty vs. Loyalty

Liu Wu-chi suggests that Zhao’s story of noble self-sacrifice might have been what prompted Father Joseph to introduce the play to the West in the first place, but the issue, especially as we have it in Fenton’s version, is complicated. The other side of sacrifice is loyalty, a feeling of obligation so profound that we’re willing to give up something of great value for the sake of something bigger than our own well-being. Indeed, it’s a pale and thin (and dramatically uninteresting) loyalty that doesn’t at some point demand a sacrifice of some significance. The overused word “hero” once signified a person who sacrificed his or her life or well-being for the good of the larger community, and we tend to agree that such an action is an admirable thing.

Loyalty to one person or idea, however, may imply less loyalty, or even disloyalty, to another. What happens when loyalties conflict? What does loyalty mean when it leads us to sacrifice not our own life, but someone else’s, particularly when we owe that person loyalty, too? What if that person is a child? What if that person is our child? Is the sacrifice worth it? This fraught, even terrifying, dilemma occurs at the very heart of Western culture, in the foundational stories of Judaism and Christianity. In those cases, we’ve been taught that the answer to the question “Is it worth it?” is “Yes,” and over the course of 3,000 years rarely have we been urged to doubt the lesson. Watching Cheng Ying—clearly the play’s protagonist in our Western eyes—we may, perhaps, choose to challenge the answer. Indeed, Fenton seems to invite us to consider it, especially in the final scene, which is his own invention. There, both question and answer resonate far beyond Cheng Ying and the story of The Orphan of Zhao, and make this thirteenth-century play feel very modern, indeed.
Questions to Consider

1. In what ways do the songs illuminate the action of the play? How does the choice to have the actors perform all of the music and sound effects onstage impact your understanding of the story?

2. Unlike most Western drama, *The Orphan of Zhao* uses a declarative style in which characters tell the audience what they want and are doing with little subtext. What did you think of this style? In what ways did it surprise you? In what ways did its economy serve the story?

3. In most versions of *The Orphan of Zhao* the Princess disappears or dies saving her infant son. What is gained from James Fenton’s decision to include her as part of Cheng Bo’s discovery of his identity?

4. The appearance of the ghost of Cheng Ying’s son in the final scene of the play is Fenton’s invention. How does this ending shape your understanding of the story?

5. What role does honor perform in *The Orphan of Zhao*?

6. What do you consider to be the “greater good”? What would you be willing to sacrifice to protect it?

7. What parallels can you draw between the actions that take place in the play and current events?

For Further Information . . .


