

Beijing Diary: Watching Peking Opera

Contributed by Tom McGregor
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BEIJING: Upon arrival in Beijing in October 2010, I sought to watch a Peking Opera performance. Yet little did I know, I would be compelled to wait 18 months before getting a ticket for a show. Last evening, April 3, I saw "Battle of Red Cliff" at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing. Well, it was the worth the wait.

The opera exceeded my expectations as the play re-enacted a scene from the classical Chinese novel, "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms," by Luo Guanzhong. I already read the unabridged tale twice before and the literary work deserves recognition as one of the greatest novels of all times.

The costumes and actors were magnificent and foreign audience members will be pleased to know that the dialogue was translated into English subtitles that are easy to read. The Chinese instrumental players set a passionate tone with their musical instrument play.

One can become entranced with the narrative, but it's better to read Chinese literary classics before attending the Peking Opera. If not, the plot may seem somewhat confusing and the impact of the scenes will not feel as strong.

Nonetheless, there were disturbing aspects to last night's performance. Many audience members were very disruptive. Many people were observed engaging in phone call conversations, laughing about jokes unrelated to the show, talking loudly and worst of all, showing up late for the performance.

During riveting scenes, I was rudely interrupted by latecomers who demanded I let them sit in their seats. They didn't even bother to say, "Thank You." Perhaps, these would be considered Chinese customs, but an American businessman was also guilty of showing up late, talking on his cell phone, discussing business matters with another Chinese person. He showed up 25 minutes late.

Perhaps, theater organizers tried to be accommodating to all people who purchased tickets, but their efforts to please everyone, caused serious disturbances to the rest of the audience who showed up on time and preferred to watch the performance in silence. Nevertheless, I still enjoyed watching the Peking Opera.

To read The Romance of the Three Kingdoms by Luo Guangzhong, link here:

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