

SAILING THROUGH THE THREE GORGES

Corn Exchange, Brighton/Viaduct Theatre, Dean Clough, Halifax

Opened 12 May, 1998

It seems somehow *infra dig.* for a professional theatregoer to complain immoderately about something as supposedly peripheral to the main experience as shoddy surtitling of a foreign-language production; we ought, the belief runs, to be more directly attuned to the piece itself than to be irked by such minor distractions. However, when the production in question is one like *Sailing Through The Three Gorges*, presented by the People's Art Theatre of Sichuan as part of the Brighton Festival and ASEM 2 – a modern work, presented largely naturalistically in a wholly unfamiliar tongue – help is, frankly, necessary. However skilled the actors – and the cast, under the direction of Lu Ang and Li Jian Qiu, cannot be faulted – the combination of their performances and printed synopses can only furnish us with the broadest picture; for that wealth of nuance, we rely on moment-to-moment translation.

Last Wednesday evening's performance was augmented by probably the most erratically programmed and operated surtitles I have ever seen. Single lines would remain frozen on the dot matrix screen for minutes on end of impassioned stage dialogue, then in the blackout after the end of the scene, ten or so speeches would flash by at lightning speed, leaving one to attempt to reconstruct what one had just seen, as if walking a maze lit only by flashes of lightning; the most heavily peopled scene (other than the finale), with its several minutes of lively banter, went entirely untranslated even in such bewildering retrospect.

In so far as can be judged, however, Li Ting's play combines naturalistic narrative with both overt and discreet symbolism. The Three Gorges on the Yangtze through which the passenger boat sails may partially correspond to the three marriages in the balance: that of the deck officer, about to founder due to his frequent absences; that of the outgoing captain, which apparently broke up thirty years earlier but may now be resurrected thanks to the fortuitous appearance of a passenger who turns out to be his long-lost wife; and that of his adopted son, the incoming captain, which after many postponements will now never take place if he does not reach the destination in time.

Rear and side projections of painted landscapes carry the steel foredeck of the stage through the Gorges, and attendants make periodic touristical announcements, although snatches of contemporary electronic AOR music do little to enhance the proceedings. The 100-minute piece is perfectly agreeable and fairly engaging, but such delicacy and detail as it may contain were, on this particular evening, ground mercilessly underfoot by the surtitlers.

*Written for the **Financial Times**.*

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