

one else really to wear.

This is certainly not to say that Douglas is ineffectual, only that he and the part are no more than evenly matched. In fact he does quite well with my favorite moment in the script, when he is alone on the beach at dawn outside his Long Island home, speaking on his cordless phone to Sheen. The scene has a touch of Gatsby floating in his swimming pool at the end of his story.

But for all its knowingness, the script has crudities. We're not clear as to who it is that reveals Douglas's real intent toward the airline he wants to buy: How did the tipster know and why did he spill it? Amid all the hip banter and thrust comes a line like Sheen's at his sick father's bedside, "I never told you, but I always loved you, dad." It's hard to believe that Douglas would fall for the trick that finally undoes him. And when the break comes between him and Sheen, the older man says, "I look at you, I see myself. You could have been one of the great ones." (Besides the triteness, it's not believable about Sheen.)

But the worst line is the last line. Sheen père is taking his son to the place where he will face the consequences of misconduct. In the car, pa says that maybe all this will be good for the young man. Perhaps from now on he will "create, instead of living by the buying and selling of others." What twaddle—a distorting sentimentality about the economic structure of every society, capitalist or otherwise. It's understandable, in character terms, that a father who is a skilled craftsman might prefer a life for his son other than marketing and merchandising, but the position of the line, italicized as the film's last utterance, makes it the moral of the whole story. Thus it confirms that, for all the electric energy and hipness of the film, it is only one more Hollywood piety, dolled up in designer dress, a sheep in wolf's clothing.

But I learned—I think I learned—one thing from *Wall Street*. Every new expensive yuppie restaurant in New York is so noisy that couples sitting next to each other have to shout. Restaurant managers tell me that their patrons want it that way, and the waiting lines confirm this. The Wall Streeters among those patrons apparently spend their working days in the midst of comparable noise and not only don't mind it in the evening, they want it. By welcoming the noise, they prove that they're at least used to the boom of boom and bust.

EDWARD ROTHSTEIN ON MUSIC

Dimsum Nixon

The twists and turns of the contemporary musical "avant-garde" will someday require a chronicler all their own, but I am sure that the opera *Nixon in China*—which opened at the Houston Grand Opera, played at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (where I saw it), and will now proceed to the Kennedy Center, the Netherlands Opera, and the Los Angeles Music Center Opera—will deserve a separate chapter. As these hosts and sponsors, past and future, attest, the "avant-garde" is now big business, and so deserves mention only in quotation marks. The contemporary avant-gardist need not fight the mainstream: he need only claim to.

Nixon in China has all the credentials needed to certify centrality. It was conceived and directed by Peter Sellars, composed by John Adams, conducted by Edo de Waart with a libretto by Alice Goodman, choreographed by Mark Morris. I expected Adams's music to be a calculated mixture of kitsch and facile allusion. I expected Sellars's direction to swerve between hauntingly brilliant and quixotically willful. I expected the opera as a whole to be an extension of the minimalist operatic style and countercultural imagery pioneered by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson. I expected all this—and was surprised. For *Nixon in China* isn't even coherent enough to arouse such mixed reactions.

And if this much-hyped, much-prepped, much-attended work so thwarted even a skeptic's expectations, something quite unusual must be taking place. How could the intermission crowds be stifling yawns (and they were when I went) when this was an opera that promised everything—not only the avant-garde in music and theater, but the avant-garde in politics too, dramatic figures of mythic importance: Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong? This was a work that, in Sellars's original conception, was to be a recounting of the former president's trip to China in February 1972. It was to turn that event into a primal meeting of cultures. Its six scenes recount the landing of the Nixons in Beijing, the meeting with Mao, the first banquet in the Great Hall of the People, a tour Mrs. Nixon takes to a pig farm and a glass factory, a

performance of Mme Mao's ballet at the Beijing opera, and a last introspective night in Beijing.

If Glass's *Satyagraha* was a heroic opera about Gandhi, in which each scene about his life had a counterpart in the 1960s counterculture, *Nixon in China* apparently was to be a sort of sequel, the meeting of the counterculture's demonic villains (Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger) with some of its heroes (Mao and Chou Enlai and the Chinese people). The minimalist music of Adams—more vulgar and more pompous than anything Glass has written—would presumably be used to heighten the contrasts between East and West, to show how, if in *Satyagraha* the East could be an inspiration to the West, here the East could at the very least outclass the West.

To a certain extent, the opera follows this map quite precisely. Henry Kissinger is sung by Thomas Hammons, his bespectacled head tilted forward, his chins pressed against his chest, looking like a college professor turned derelict—a buffoonish villain. During the final introspective scene in which the characters dream of their hopeful pasts, his only role is to go to the bathroom. Kissinger also boasts to Mao of assigning the chairman's books at Harvard, and seems altogether less swift than Nixon; his music is bumptious, vulgar, intemperate. Finally, during the opera's fantastical ballet when the visiting Americans are shown Mme Mao's agitprop work, "The Red Detachment of Women," Kissinger appears as a character in the ballet—a villainous overlord, leering and leching, whip in hand, pressing his body against a bound, innocent peasant, singing: "When the first cut—/Come on you slut!—/Scored her brown skin/I started in,/Man upon hen!"

Nixon—finely sung by James Maddalena—seems to have a bit of the buffoonish villain about him as well. When his plane is shown landing outside Beijing, the music becomes positively heroic, bombastic, as fakely grand as only Adams could make it. Nixon walking out of the plane received guffaws from the audience just for the tilt of his head and the wave of his hand. He is

obviously a fool abroad—and at sea too, when meeting Mao, whose book-lined shelves and gnomish comments are supported by the cool, imitative melodies of three secretaries (known informally during rehearsals as the Maoettes). In case anyone misses the point, Adams gives Nixon a sort of self-important stuttering musical style, when not being overtly nostalgic (touched with musical hints of Glenn Miller).

THESE MAY sound like the ingredients for a strident, satiric polemic—a revival and celebration of the political lusts of the counterculture. But there were other ambitions at work. At least one was expressed by the librettist, Goodman, who insisted that the opera be a “heroic” opera, not a satire; the text was written in near-rhyming couplets. The idea may have been to append to these political figurines some deeper nuance and complication, the grandeur of this meeting of cultures.

But the execution of such high ambition was also fraught with complication if not contradiction. With poetic grandeur, Nixon calls himself “An old cold warrior/Piloting towards an unknown shore/Through shoals”—a proud vision undercut as he undresses, giving his clothes to Pat, who is standing dutifully nearby. Pat herself (sung by Carolann Page) begins a scene in cutesy sentiment (“I treat each day/Like Christmas”), just as she is about to be portrayed as a sensitive observer of Chinese culture. But the most telling ambiguities occur later in the opera, when it is clear that there really is no dramatic structure to the work at all, so uncertain is it about its subject and its purpose.

For in the phantasmagorical ballet scene, in which Kissinger demonically appears as representative of the Evil the Communists overturned, Pat Nixon runs onstage, later assisted by Dick himself, to help the poor victims of his oppression. And then, after the opera dutifully shows the victory of the revolution and the People’s Army, Mme Mao (Trudy Ellen Craney) herself holds aloft the Little Red Book and passionately sings as the dancers turn violent, bashing each others’ heads in the name of the Cultural Revolution.

What is happening here? What are we to make of her hysterical shrieking about “the book,” the brutality of the Cultural Revolution, the villainy of Henry K., the intercession of Pat, and then, in the final

scene of the opera, the two couples—Mao and Madame, Dick and Pat—each engaged in sentimental reminiscence and embrace? It is as if the opera’s principal creators had decided against a political cartoon but then had no idea of where to go, and so resorted to touching on every possible permutation of interpretation without ever settling on any. Nothing depends on, or grows out of, anything else.

SOME EXPLANATION of all this is found in Goodman’s program notes, which muse about the characters’ disillusion and motivation in this “heroic opera”; each character, she asserts, is meant to be as “eloquent as possible.” Thus, Nixon is occasionally fleshed out with human longing and nostalgia, American innocence and thrust; Mao takes on some earthly shadows as he speaks his knowing ironies. (Even Kissinger, I assume the thinking goes, must be somewhat human; he has to use a toilet.) I am not sure where Goodman would have gone with this material on her own, but I am sure that what is left is much less than eloquent. There is evidence of many hands at work in this opera, each fussing with the work of the other—opera by committee. Goodman hardly keeps it a secret:

There are places where the music goes against the grain of the libretto, and places where the staging goes against the grain of both. My Nixon is not quite the same character as John Adams’s Nixon, and they both differ slightly from Peter Sellars’s Nixon, not to mention James Maddalena’s. My view of the Cultural Revolution is not the same as theirs, and theirs are not the same.

She calls the collaboration “polyphonic,” but the result is more polymorphously perverse. Anything goes, characters shift under our eyes, the heroes turn villainous, the villains turn sentimental, and all the issues of revolution and reformation, of ideals and power, are discarded with postmodernist distaste for distinction. It’s a Chinese brunch, all courses offered.

By the end, the Nixons become somewhat sympathetic characters (a shock for anyone who wants the comfort of cartoons) and the Chinese somewhat confused by the forces of history. But this is just another perspective thrown in, not a dramatic resolution or revelation. The opera depends on lyrical talk during the long last scene as if it has lost the will to dramatize what it is saying;

it can’t take the dissolution of its own clichés seriously enough. That would undercut the very notion of doing an opera that appealed to the “avant-garde.”

BY CONTRAST, Kissinger, in the first volume of his memoirs, actually presents a portrait of Mao that could well be the focus of a contemporary *Boris Godunov*. He was a man who summoned his guests suddenly and without warning, and lived as mysteriously as the emperors he disdained. He projected such “raw, concentrated will-power” that Kissinger is as awed by this “colossus” (a word used without irony), “that great, demonic, prescient, overwhelming personality,” as by Mao’s lucid, elliptical conversation. “It was as if one were dealing with a figure from another world who occasionally lifted a corner of the shroud that veils the future, permitting a glimpse but never the entire vision that he alone has seen.” One sentence Kissinger hears makes its way into the opera’s libretto in altered form. Nixon said that the chairman’s writings “moved a nation and have changed the world,” and Mao replied, “I have not been able to change it. I have only been able to change a few places in the vicinity of Beijing.”

This declaration, treated in offhand fashion in the opera, is taken by Kissinger as central: the modest claim of a man whose life had been devoted to overturning the entire structure of his society. “In its matter-of-fact resignation it underlined the revolutionary dilemma.” For what began in revolution congealed into regimentation, a “fate that so cruelly mocked the suffering and meaning of a lifetime of struggle.” Hence, Kissinger writes, came the cycles of frenzied campaigns to continue the revolution, destroying the country, killing millions, overturning institutions, purging the Party—tragic cycles, which, Kissinger hints, no one understood better than the chairman himself.

The Kissinger who wrote in this way was no mere overlord or dissolute professor; the Mao he describes hardly resembles the man who appears through the haze of confusion and contradiction in this dull, dissipated opera. To have taken such a perspective into account would have meant discarding the received political and aesthetic worlds, and attempting a work that was not postmodern but tragic, not “avant-garde” but avant-garde. □

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