

CHINA'S GREAT ACTOR.

PLAYING IN NEW YORK.

A Night at the Choy Ting Quoy Reveals a Fine Artist Harrassed by Cen- tury Old Traditions.



It may surprise the unlearned to know that the greatest actor in the world is now making his first American tour, and, furthermore, that he is playing in New York. You may perhaps not agree with me in the statement that he is the greatest actor in the

world, nor shall I quarrel with you if you don't. I take the word of Luk Ling for it, and Luk Ling is a man of much knowledge of the drama.

If you wish to see for yourself go down to the Choy Ting Quoy, in Doyers street, some night and sit in judgment upon the merits of Fon Chong Mai. You may not take the same view of it as Luk Ling, for he is a manager, and managers, you know, sometimes look at art through gold-rimmed glasses. But you must admit to yourself that Fon Chong Mai is a great actor.

Had you gone last week you might have seen the popular tragedy "Son Fong Quon"—that is, you might have seen it in its entirety if you had attended every performance, lasting from six o'clock in the evening until after midnight. This is a condensed version, for Luk Ling, who manages Chinatown's theatre, has absorbed one quality of the American manager—a quality which permits him to take liberties with the works of the great masters to suit the exigencies of the hour.

"Son Fong Quon."

If Augustin Daly may "adapt" Shakespeare and Restand, why should we frown upon Luk Ling when he cuts a thirty day play to fit in one week?

I had the pleasure of seeing a portion of "Son Fong Quon" one night last week, and carried away with me a vivid recollection of a gifted actor harassed by century old traditions; of an orchestra reminiscent of a hundred boiler factories rolled into one, and a headache which defied either analysis or cure.

You dive into the Chinese theatre, down in Doyers street. You don't walk in, or stroll in, or even drop in, although the latter means of egress is quite possible. Dive is the only word that really fits. You go down a couple of steps off the narrow sidewalk, when you come to the box office. Here you exchange the coin of the realm for a bit of pasteboard bearing queer hieroglyphics, which you present at the door after going down another step.

The man who takes your ticket at the door is a white man. If you are so fortunate as to make his acquaintance he may make it

very pleasant for you. He will tell you that his name is Fred Delaca, that he is the assistant manager and the only white man employed in the establishment. He is a most amiable young man, and if you strike his fancy he may even arrange it so that you can meet the great actor, Fon Chong Mai.

The Chinese Superstition.

This is an honor, however, that is not lightly conferred, and you must not expect too much. At any rate, you would have to wait until the end of the performance, for the Chinese actors are by no means free from the superstitions which the members of the profession are prone to.

I do not think Fon Chong Mai would hesitate to begin a tour on a Friday, even should it fall upon the thirteenth of the month. I believe he would even walk under a ladder if he were satisfied in his own mind that it wouldn't fall on him. But speak to any one during the course of a performance? Never. The thing is unheard of. It would bring him bad luck.

Fon Chong Mai is a tragedian and female impersonator. Did he have a press agent we should hear great stories of stolen jewels, of romantic love affairs, perhaps of milk baths. But they had no press agents eighteen hundred years ago, when "Son Fong Quon" was written, and the play was given last week exactly as produced on its first night in Canton.

The great actor brings over with him an all star company, including two or three Chinese actresses.

The amiable Mr. Delaca conducted me to a box in the rear of the house, from which I could see the stage through a cloud of smoke arising from a sea of black hats with serious, yellow faces under them. The box was quite large, and contained in addition to myself a party of sightseers from the avenue, under the escort of "Chuck" Connors, and a rara avis in the person of a communicative Chinaman. I made friends with him at once.

An Intense Audience.

There was a sharp slope down to the queer little stage, but the spectators in the rear of the crowded house sat perched up on the backs of the wooden benches, so as to miss no portion of the play. Occasionally, as the chatter of the intruders from up town became noticeably loud, they would glare back and say:—

"Too muchee talkee!"

It was for all the world like a box party at the Metropolitan; only it was all so different. But the elements of human nature were identical.

The play was being given "by request," and my friend, the communicative Chinaman,

who had seen it many times, told me all about it. His version was corroborated by the versatile Mr. Delaca, who boasts, among his numerous accomplishments, the ability to understand Chinese.

In "Son Fong Quon" the great actor plays a female part, that of the young wife of a rich old warrior who has gone to fight a neighboring clan. At the time of my arrival he had been absent for two years. His son had also gone to the rescue of his fond father, who was held captive by the enemy. In the meantime the wife, forgetful of her liege lord, falls in love with a rich nobleman. A baby is born to her, and she is in despair of the return of her husband.

She was a very lachrymose creature, and twice did she attempt to commit suicide, once by throwing herself into a well, and once by hanging. The child is stolen from her, and in the incidents that follow I gathered a vague idea of a battle in which the victorious son rescues the father, while the unfortunate baby grows up to be a big boy, and is returned to his mother. Just how the marital difficulties are straightened out I could not comprehend, despite the efforts of my communicative Chinese friend.

Like most of the Chinese dramas, "Son

Fong Quon" is said to be based upon actual historical incidents.

A Master of Pantomime.

Fon Chong Mai is undeniably an accomplished actor. His art is the most difficult art of the mime, the art of creating an illusion without the aid of stage environments. His pantomime was superb. His impersonation of the false wife moved the audience deeply. His portrayal of the varying moods, even to one who had no idea of what it was all about, conveyed a feeling that here was primitive art.

Fancy an Irving or a Mansfield attempting to create an illusion on a perfectly bare stage, with no curtain, no scenery, no footlights, no calciums, and a maddening orchestra sprawled at the back, punctuating each sentence with the wall of weird string instruments or the deafening clash of great cymbals.

Could any English speaking actor interest his audience in a play when a placard, stuck up at the side of the stage, announces that ten years have flown without even the dropping of a curtain? Think you that by walking twice around the stage any actor of your knowledge could create the impression that he had gone on a two days' journey?

I was fortunate in seeing both the attempts at suicide. The first time the unhappy woman personated by Fon Chong Mai attempted to drown herself in the well. Although it looked like a soap box covered with a silken scarf, you knew it was a well, for the old gardener with a horse's tail for a beard had just drawn a bucketful of water from it after much effort.

Fon Chong Mai jumped recklessly into the well, but was rescued by the faithful old servant to accompaniment of an outburst from the orchestra. This was a most thrilling moment. I have more than once sat in the top gallery of a Bowery theatre, during the course of some thrilling Western melodrama, in the old days before the gods had assumed the blasé air of the habitual theatre goer, but never have I seen such intensity of interest as was pictured on the faces of that throng of Chinamen.

Some had even mounted the very stage itself and stood grouped on the outer edges at either side, without a rebuke from either management or players.

Another Attempt.

The second attempt at suicide was more elaborate. The preparations were made with due care. A chair was placed in the centre of the stage by an attendant. Propped against this was a long pole, surmounted by something that looked like a feather duster. My friend, the communicative Chinaman, said it was a tree.

Then Fon Chong Mai, with much elaborate explanation in pure Cantonese, proceeded to make another attempt to shuffle off this mortal coil. With a long scarf, and aided by his wonderful pantomime, the feather duster on the pole became a gibbet. But Woo Falk came to the rescue, and in the mêlée that followed I turned to my friend the Chinaman for an explanation.

"Him cuttee lee down," said that enthusiastic spectator. And I had to be satisfied.

Finally the evening's entertainment came to an end, and the Chinamen all left their seats and filed solemnly out of the dingy little theatre to await the following evening, when the thread of the story would be resumed. Just how they knew it was over for the night was something of a puzzle, for as near as I could judge there was no denouement, and certainly there was no curtain to be rung down.

Fon Chong Mai at Close Range.

Back of the little stage, in the one large dressing room curtained off at one end for the comfort of the ladies of the company, I was much interested in studying the personality of the great tragedian and female impersonator. Despite the fact that my interpreter was rather uncertain of his lines, I fully realized that I was in the presence of an intellectual giant.

Fon Chong Mai has never seen a dramatic performance other than in Chinese. Nor has he any curiosity to visit our American playhouses and compare his own primitive methods with our modern achievements in stagecraft. He is perfectly content in the traditions of his fathers, nor does he realize that the rest of the world has left him far behind.

I found him to be a young man of thirty, with a plastic face, keen, glittering eyes, and a wonderful voice, ranging from the guttural gruffness of the soldier to the purring staccato tones of the intriguing wife. Fon Chong Mai comes of a family of celebrated actors, and for three hundred years they have been at the head of their profession in Canton.

A Man of Learning.

I found him to be a young man of much learning. Indeed, how could he be otherwise? His repertoire is large, and some of his plays fill a hundred volumes. Think of the man's memory! Think of the mental training and the intellectual force and energy necessary to interpret these dusty old plays! And yet Fon Chong Mai is an enthusiast.

He has made much money. He is rich. His salary at the Chow Ting Quoy in Doyers street is a record breaker, and he has a year's contract. His costumes are marvels of Oriental richness. Mr. Delaca is authority for the statement that some of them are valued at as much as \$1,500 apiece.

In the dressing room behind the scenes, where joss lamps throw their faint glow over a little altar, and where the air is heavy with incense, hung a mass of the most exquisite gowns. Embroidery in gold and silver adorned many of them, and all were of rich texture and bewildering tints. Some are heirlooms, passed down from other generations, and the entire collection represents the accumulation of several lifetimes.

Century Old Traditions.

It was useless to ask many questions, for Fon Chong Mai was weary after his night's work. I wanted to ask him how he would like to appear on the American stage, with all its accessories, but it was a futile thought. He knew nothing of any stage save his own. That had sufficed for his ancestors, and it sufficed for him. The passing of the centuries has left no imprint upon the art of the Chinese actor.

And yet he has the personality and the magnetism without which no actor is great. He exercises a complete control over his Oriental auditors. His every gesture, his every trick of voice, is to them the height of art. The Chinese repudiate reforms, whether in the government of their country or in the traditions of their stage. And who shall say that Fon Chong Mai is not a wise man?