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Monkey King at Spider Cave



No Smoke, Many Mirrors

By Linda Ayres-Frederick

Challenging as it is to wait 25 minutes for a show to begin, and to sit on Somarts' uncomfortable bleacher seats among impatient children of all ages, *The Monkey King at Spider Cave*—narrated by local Shadow Light Production founder Larry Reed and performed by the multi-talented visiting company members of The Puppet and Its Double Theater of Taiwan—is visually quite impressive.

TMKASP is one episode in the literary masterpiece "Journey to the West", which was first published in the sixteenth century during the Ming Dynasty. Most often seen on

TV in animation or as the subject of Chinese opera, it has retained its popularity over the centuries because of its elements of fantasy, magic, wisdom and common sense. The most popular character is the Monkey King, Sun Wu Kong, known for his cunning, acrobatic talents, and playful attitude that hide his wisdom—equivalent to the Trickster of the Native Americans.

The story is about a Buddhist Monk and his disciples' journey to India to bring Buddhist scriptures back to China. As a penance for their misdeeds, the monk's four magical disciples (each representing a different aspect of human personality) struggle to protect the monk as he journeys through the mountains and defends himself against all manner of demons and alchemists. In this episode, they battle against the flesh-hungry Spider Demons and their army of insects. The monk

is a little too proud of his own goodness and a little too quick to trust strangers. Although his disciples are there to serve him, he rejects their help, and brings his own rice bowl to beg for food at a strange house in the mountains. The house is filled with beautiful women who entice and entrap him, and then show their true selves as spider demons. (This part becomes a bit offensively misogynistic) They wrap the monk in their web and hoist him to the rafters saving him for a feast later on. Monkey and his friends must use all their magical powers to save their master, and just when they think they're safe, the battle starts all over again.

Promoted by Dimension Performing Arts—advocates of Asian performing arts in the U.S. since 1995—co-creators Larry Reed and Chia-yin Cheng (founder of The

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Puppet and Its Double Theater), are both veteran visionaries who have been internationally recognized for their artistry and advancement of shadow theatre, a traditional art originated in Asia a thousand years ago. Using giant projected shadows, no smoke but many mirrors, and an ensemble cast of actors, dancers, puppeteers, and musicians, they aim to create theater that unites the scale of film with the immediacy of live performance. Interacting with hand-painted scenery (Man-lin Yeh and I Made Moja), the performers create shadow images by moving in precise choreography to create dream-like moving pictures. The action is set to an original soundtrack (Hsu Hsiang-hao) in which artists and musicians combine digital and traditional instruments.

The most fascinating part of the afternoon was after the performance when the screen was raised and the company members in their black costumes (in subtle variations by Lin Ching-ju) came out holding their multi-sided head pieces that resembled intricately designed lanterns with lattice cut outs. In answer to questions from the audience, many of the secrets of their craft were revealed, how the fire and water effects were created and how a moving moon's sphere of light was reflected by a skillfully hand-controlled mirror. With ninety percent of the text spoken in Mandarin, and ten percent in English—just the scene synopses—following the story was a bit frustrating. Perhaps next time, translated super-titles might be projected to accommodate the unschooled westerners in the audience. After all, isn't it supposed to be a Journey to the West? A worthwhile adventure of mesmerizing artistry, follow Shadow Light and The Puppet and Its Double to their next journey wherever it might take you. www.shadowlight.org ▼