He Is the Greatest of the Chinese Actors

Fon Chong Mai, the Highest Priced of All Chinese Delineators, May Come to Philadelphia

THERE is a very enthusiastic rumor now going the rounds in Chinatown in this city that Fon Chong Mai, who is acknowledged to be the greatest of all Chinese actors, is soon to come to Philadelphia and rake in a few American dollars from those who like to see queer stage scenes. Whether this rumor has any foundation in fact is not known, for the Chinese residents of this as well as other cities are always close-mouthed about anything and everything pertaining to their race. But if Fon Chong does come he will give Philadelphians a chance to see some of the funniest scenes ever produced on a stage. Just now this man, who is the highest priced Chinese actor in the world, is playing to large audiences over in New York. It has there become something of a fad for members of the swell set to include in their repertoire a little slumming expedition, which usually takes in the Chinese theatre where Fon Chong holds forth in all his oriental splendor. And these Americans could do worse, for Fon Chong is really great.

The plays presented are centuries old and are presented just as they were acted hundreds of years ago in China. And that is where Fon Chong Mai proves himself a great actor. He adheres strictly to the traditions of his ancestors who laid down inviolable rules providing that each thing should be done thus and so; and he is great in spite of all the obstacles with which custom has surrounded him.

The visitor to the New York theatre dives into the basement of a typical Chinatown building and finds himself in a big barren room, in which the only seats are plain board benches, without backs, rising tier upon tier from the platform upon which the performances are given. Every night this barn-like theatre, bare as to decoration, is filled with stolidly interested spectators, all wearing their black slouch hats and all smoking or nibbling at the Chinese dainties that are sold by the ushers during the performance.

If every seat is filled the overflow of spectators step placidly upon the stage, grouping themselves about in the most picturesque manner, sometimes almost hiding the orchestra that plays a strange and guttural although not entirely unpleasant accompaniment to the performance from the back of the stage.

In China these plays last for months, sometimes for years, but Fon Chong Mai has assumed the right of the artist and cuts his month-long plays to fit into a week.

There is no curtain in this unique playhouse. There is no scenery or other accessory to assist the mind in bridging the chasm between the real and the ideal. Fon Chong Mai relies wholly upon his power as an actor to make his auditors forget the realities and live with him the life he is portraying. That he is successful there can be no doubt.

One glance at the strange audience is enough to prove that they only see the picture as he paints it, while even the American stranger who has drifted into the theatre out of curiosity or in search of new sensations, and to whom the words of the players are nothing more than gibberish, can understand the pantomime and follow the course of the strange drama from act to act, comprehending nearly all that is done by the performers.

Fon Chong Mai has the power to do this, and so Fon Chong Mai is a great actor. Could Richard Mansfield or Irving or Beerbohm Tree do more when a piece of red paper attached to a post is the only indication that one act has ended and that ten years have elapsed? By walking twice around the stage could they give the impression of having taken a two days' journey? Could they do more than succeed in creating an illusion on perfectly bare boards, without scenery, footlights or curtain? And think of the brain a man must have to be able to memorize not one but fifty of these month-long pieces, and Fon Chong Mai's repertoire contains more than half a hundred of these classic Chinese dramas.

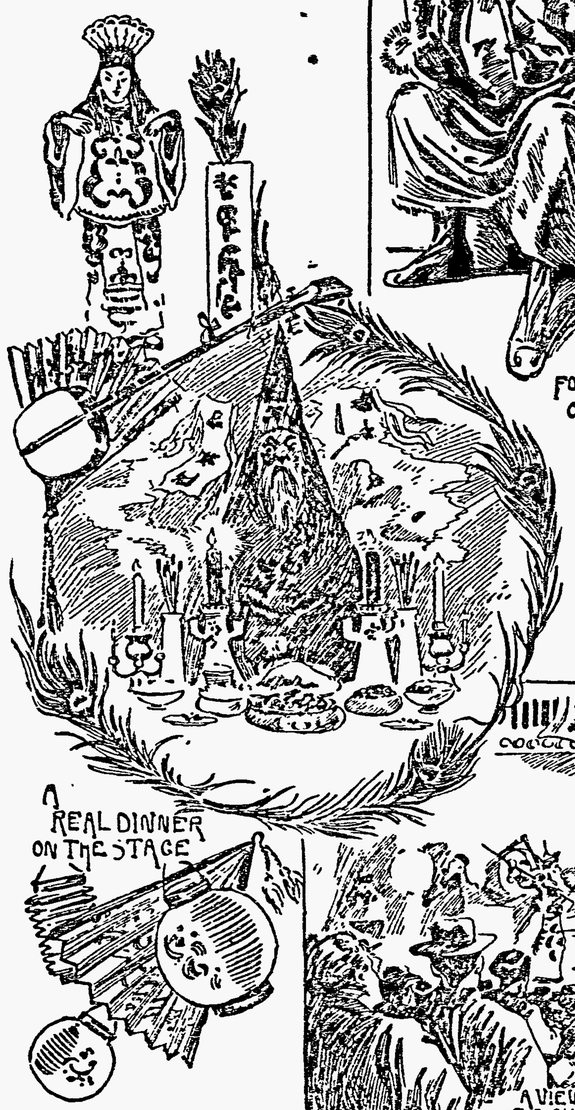
Like all great Chinese actors Fon Chong Mai is a female impersonator, and if he has no scenic accessories he certainly has many gowns of gorgeous splendor. Some of these costumes were worn by his father and his father's father, for all his ancestors for many generations have been great actors. These gowns are marvels of Oriental art and luxuriousness, silks and satins of every hue, heavily embroidered in solid gold and silver. Several of them are worth more than $1500 each.

Fon Chong Mai had never seen a foreign play until he came to America, when Augustin Daly invited him to occupy a box at his theatre. The invitation was accepted and Fon Chong Mai witnessed a presentation of the "Merchant of Venice" with Miss Ada Rehan as Portia. During the performance the Chinese actor sat as if spellbound, and when the curtain fell he said:

"I walk as in a dream. Here is the best that the world can give. Better than this is only in the realms of the gods. For three hundred years my people have been actors before me, but I am a humble one of the Brethren of the Pear Orchard."

In these phrases, so Oriental in their extravagance, the son of the East bowed before the daughter of the West, and one great actor paid his tribute of homage to another.

FON CHONG MAI



A REAL DINNER ON THE STAGE

A VIEW OF THE STAGE OF A CHINESE THEATRE

FON CHONG MAI IN CHARACTER