Nixon in China

The Dream of Democracy

Rick McGinnis

A scene from *Nixon in China* - photo by Martha Swope

In *The Chinese Difference*, his blandly cynical memoir of the 1972 Chinese Summit, journalist Joseph Kraft recounts this faintly surreal scenario:

> **"The two men [Nixon and Chou En-Lai] leave the Great Hall of the People walking side by side but not speaking. As they go downstairs, Mr. Nixon suddenly sees the TV cameras. He begins moving his lips as if in conversation, but if he is saying anything, it does not engage the interpreter."**

Twelve years later, poet Alice Goodman, stage director Peter Sellars and composer John Adams began work together on a three-act opera to be written in rhymed couplets. The subject: the 1972 summit. Given the irreverence that has characterized Sellar's career — casting Don Giovanni as a junkie, setting Handel's *Orlando* in Cape Canaveral and on Mars — it was expected that *Nixon in China* would be an irreverent satire on the soon-to-be-disgraced president. Far from it — the far more sober personalities of Adams and Goodman dominated the finished opera, which premiered at the Houston Grand Opera in the fall of 1987.

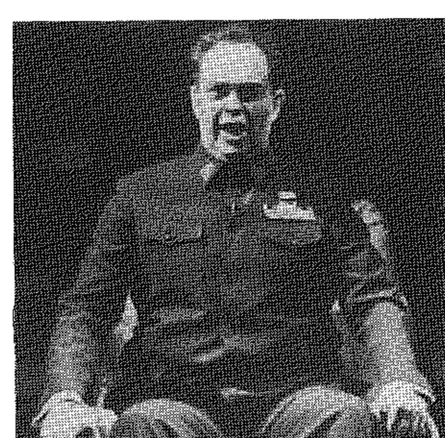
It's one thing to say that there's little tradition for explicit political content in contemporary opera, it's another to realize that there's little tradition for contemporary opera. Of Adam's minimalist contemporaries, only Philip Glass has produced a body of operatic work, of which the most overtly political, *Satyagraha*, swathed its subject — Mahatma Ghandi — in the imagistic metaphysics that typify Glass' recent work; half Gurdjieff, half headshop. There have been, of course, other political operas written in the last 40 years, but the lifespan of contemporary opera is short — one commissioned production followed by a quickly deleted recording, at best. *Nixon in China* has made it this far, and from the evidence at hand — reviews of the production as it played in Houston and New York, and the subsequent recording made under Adam's supervision (Nonesuch 9 79177) — *Nixon in China* has turned out to be more than a facile political revue with pedigreed music. Taking their cue from the Kraft anecdote above, Adams, Goodman and Sellars have stared long enough at the familiar rituals of statecraft, seeing past the mundane and giving shape to more ambiguous mechanisms of power.

In a short essay that accompanies the libretto, Goodman states that by mutual agreement with Adams, the character of the opera would be "heroic," and that "the heroic quality of the work as a whole would be determined by the eloquence of each character in his or her own argument." Embarking on her research, Goodman decides that "having started out ignorant, I was not going to become wise after the fact...," and so she makes an effort to avoid reading any material published after 1972, in effect giving her Nixon the benefit of the doubt.

The opera begins on the airfield outside Peking, and Adams music sets the tone immediately, mining minimalism for its atmospheric potential and creating, like so many old film scores, a sense of mystery and urgency. The Nixons' plane enters in the midst of a thundering series of crescendoes, dwells at its peak just long enough for the Nixons to emerge and create the familiar tableaux, then descend the walkway to where Chou En-Lai waits for them. Chou is eloquent and loquacious, while Nixon's voice breaks and stutters, making the "nervous small talk" that Kraft notes in his memoir. As he is taken down the reception line, Nixon launches into an aria, the first of many in the opera, that lifts out of the realistic action and dialogue and into nearly abstract expressions of emotion and imagery. It's not an innovation — arias have suspended stage action since Monteverdi — but the imagery employed by Goodman takes the language of journalism and geopolitics into utterly purple, romantic verse (no criticism, these arias contain some of Goodman's best writing). Nixon sings:

> "...The Eastern Hemisphere
> Beckoned to us and we have flown
> East of the sun, west of the moon
> Across an ocean of distrust
> Filled with the bodies of our lost."

Keeping in mind the amplifications im-



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plied in the word *operatic*, it's a natural progression from the sentiments expressed in Nixon's own memoirs:

> "I knew that Chou had been deeply insulted by Foster Dulles's refusal to shake hands with him at the Geneva Conference in 1954. When I reached the bottom step, therefore, I made a point of extending my hand as I walked toward him. When our hands met, one era ended and another began... 'The Star Spangled Banner' had never sounded so stirring to me as on that wind-swept runway in the heart of Communist China."

These are the words of someone whose life is lived in the public eye, whose every action is symbolic. The summit is a reconciliation, and Nixon's whole life force seems to propel his outstretched hand across the ocean to Chou, where they meet and climax in the national anthem, sending Nixon reeling as he crosses the tarmac under a barrage of introductions.

Whereas the thrust of Nixon's arrival and his reverie on the airfield are the focus of the first scene, the second scene shows dissipation and a hint of greater confusion to come. It was never definite that Nixon should meet the ailing Mao during the summit, and since the greater part of the Shanghai Communique was drafted by Chou and Kissinger behind the scenes, the meeting would be mostly symbolic. Adams launches the scene with an urgent pulse that is halted with the first words: Mao's lines are echoed by a trio of interpreters who will intone gravely as Kissinger, Chou and Nixon speak, building a babel of misunderstanding. Mao speaks in metaphors, and deflects Nixon's overtures on specific issues with philosophical musings, puns and riddles. Communication breaks down completely and voices descend into a murmur as Kissinger, the epitome of the *realpolitik* diplomat, mutters, "I'm lost" over and over. Mao clearly dominates the scene, and though we won't see him again until the third act, he has proven himself, as he rides over a turbulent patch of history being created with a raft of words, auto-summarizing as he goes, to be more in control of the drama's logic than either Nixon or Kissinger.

The first act ends and the second begins with enactments of the most mundane protocol — a diplomatic banquet and a sightseeing photo op. The momentum that propelled the Nixons into China and onto the stage is lost in the rituals of statecraft. Pat Nixon is taken on a tour of a glass factory, a pig farm, a People's clinic and the Summer Palace, where she stops and sings an aria full of disparate, abstract imagery, evoking an America of truck stops, families at dinner, the Unknown Soldier rising from his tomb and "the eagle nailed to the barn door." As if responding to an audience shifting in their seats under the weight of so much staged protocol, she sings, "...let routine/ dull the edge of mortality," the most striking of the homilies that the Nixons repeat to themselves as they struggle through an increasingly alienating experience.

As act two ends the Nixons attend a performance of Madame Mao's revolutionary ballet "The Red Detachment of Women."

Kissinger appears as a brutal, lecherous, landlord's factotum, and the Nixons find themselves unable to distinguish between theatre and reality, as Pat intervenes in the action to confront the proletarian heroine. Just as chaos breaks loose, the Nixons standing drenched by a staged rainstorm, Mme Mao stands up to deliver an aria full of bitter imagery and zealous revolutionary sentiment.

In conventional drama, this is far too late a point to introduce a major character, but with the lines between history and dramatic licence erased, the audience is encouraged to view events unfolding as if in the media, where consideration of dramatic structure is superfluous — the subject has dictated the form.

Act three is a single scene, originally scripted as yet another banquet, but changed by Sellars during rehearsals to a line of beds in a dormitory, where the main characters have retreated, exhausted physically and spiritually. A jaunty, Gershwinesque theme asserts itself then loses its momentum in the ponderous rhythms of the scene. Chou En-Lai and the two couples reminisce. Mme Mao and the Chairman dance a foxtrot, then recall the hardships of the Long March. The Nixons are left on a less-than-grand note — the president recalling a hamburger stand he ran in the South Pacific during the war. Chou is given a final aria full of regret and doubt: "How much of what we did was good?/Everything seems to move beyond/ our remedy." The opera ends on a quiet resolution, a single violin completing an arpeggio.

Goodman has remained true to her word — there isn't the slightest allusion to Watergate, she has treated the Chinese Summit for what it was, the decisive opening salvo in Nixon's campaign for re-election — a photo op. Nixon himself didn't see this at the time, as Kraft recalls the Chinese resignation in the face of Nixon's anxiousness for results. It wouldn't be for another five years, after Nixon's disgrace and the death of both Mao and Chou, that diplomatic ties would be established between the countries, paving the way for a tentative Chinese embrace of capitalism. As Mao mutters to his secretaries at the end of his meeting with Nixon: "Founders come first, then profiteers."

Goodman has also chosen to ignore the context of the summit, and has Mao dismiss Vietnam quickly in the same scene. In the end, *Nixon in China* has more to do with Reagan-era media politics than the last days of the activist sixties. As Nixon sings in his wired first aria: "They watch us now;/The three main networks' colours glow/Livid through the drapes onto the lawn." The event itself generates an independent dynamic, rolling forward mercilessly, exhausting its participants. Reeling across the airfield, Nixon stutters: "News news news news news news/Has a has a has a kind of mystery." Both taking part and watching himself, Nixon is drunk on the spectacle. By the end of the opera the Nixons seem unsuited for politics, idealistic and bewildered by the roles they have come to play. Chou's final aria makes him a spectator, too, wondering whether any good will come of what they have done. As the media, fragmented by editorial bent and the demands of technology, clumsily pieces together history for a world full of spectators, we condition ourselves to our ultimate ignorance of what really happened, and speculation after the fact only breaks the event into more shards, each one more incapable of reflecting the whole picture. Goodman, in giving Nixon the historical benefit of the doubt, acknowledges her own spectatorship.

For all we can know about the '72 summit, the opera is about as real as the historical event. Goodman, Adams and Sellars have given a face to the participants, and a sympathetic one at that, but given future productions, this might not be the case. A director like Sellars can recast *Nixon in China* in any shape. Nixon's stuttering first aria and Pat's mad leaps of imagery can form the basis of a political dementia, like the profane, babbling Nixon of Robert Altman's *Secret Honour*. As Chou will never know the verdict on his life's work, Goodman and Adams will never know the shapes theirs will take. By changing the light on a historical event, reshaping it as a dream (or a nightmare), the future directors of *Nixon in China* give shape to a simulacra-like world, where politics, democracy, communism and history are only as real as the next actor who is cast as a politician.

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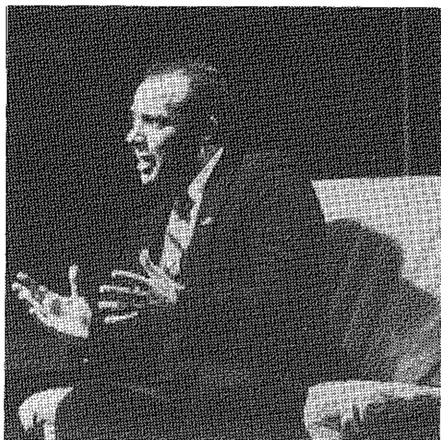

"Mao Tse Tung" and "Richard Nixon" - photo by Martha Swope