

Wayang for the Good Brothers

By Heather Clark

A blast of heat from a 'hell money' bonfire met us as we opened the taxi door. It was the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts in Changi Village, and the spirits were getting a significant cash deposit for use in the afterlife.

In previous years I had heard that traditional Chinese opera (called *wayang* in Singapore) was performed in Pulau Ubin during the Hungry Ghost Festival, but I had never known just when. This year I was lucky enough to spot a notice on a Nature Society blog and was determined to see the show.

During the Hungry Ghosts Festival, the dead are included in feasts and festivities for an entire month. Lonely spirits without any living relatives are treated with particular consideration. Food is left for their enjoyment and the front-row seats of performances are left free so the corporeal don't block the view of the 'good brothers' who are out on a month-long leave from the underworld, presumably painting the town red.



Offerings for the hungry ghosts

We set out from the Changi ferry terminal on a bumboat, which operates at no charge during the two nights of the *wayang* shows. A leathery boatman took us across the straits just as the sun was beginning to set – very atmospheric, despite the strong diesel fumes. We reached the dock at Ubin and made our way to the stage through the small village centre, noticing unhappily that the restaurants were all closed. Luckily there were a few convenience stores open, so a can of Tiger and a bag of chips later we were having dinner under the stars.

Through a door at the side of the stage we caught glimpses of the actors painting their faces in the traditional stylised patterns. Musicians picked up their instruments, the sun went down and with a crash of cymbals the show began. The curtains parted to the music of drums, cymbals and *suona* (Chinese oboe), revealing sets painted with old-fashioned delicacy. The actors spun around the stage, pulling the long pheasant feathers on their ornate headdresses and twirling the flowing 'water sleeves' of their spangled robes. The finer points of the storyline were frankly lost on me, but there was romance and strife, absolutely adventure galore – that much was clear.

Midway through the performance the actors made their way down the steps of the stage to the temple across the

square, which was decorated with enormous painted incense sticks, sequined banners, electric figurines and legions of bright red candles. Offerings of pomelos, steamed buns and cans of Carlsberg were stacked in neat piles. Here the actors made offerings at the altar and lit small joss sticks.

A tableful of uncles sat drinking beer and watching the evening pass. Some street-smart whip-tailed dogs paused to glance at the show and

cadge a few chips before continuing on their way. Apart from uncles and dogs, the audience comprised a couple of serious shutterbugs, a school group that happened to walk past, a dozen of us *ang mohs* (westerners) and a few scattered tables of locals. That was it. Where was everyone?



A wayang god



The full pantheon of actors

Bloggers wax nostalgic about audiences in the thousands that the show drew in earlier decades, but not that night. I suppose this is what a 'dying tradition' feels like. The elderly residents of Pulau Ubin are dying or moving off the island and the young ones aren't interested in the old-time shows. Would there have been a larger audience had there been a burst of publicity beforehand? Perhaps there was a bigger turnout the following night. Or maybe the good brothers were there, enjoying the best seats in the house.

Heather Clark works with the *PASSAGE* team and is currently in docent training at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

All photos by the author