# FON CHONG MAI SEES ADA REHAN AS PORTIA.

## China's Greatest Female Impersonator Comments on "The Merchant of Venice."

Fon Chong Mai, the Chinese female impersonator now playing at the Choy-Ting-Quoy Theater, was a guest at Daly's in New York on Wednesday last to witness the presentation of "The Merchant of Venice," with Miss Ada Rehan as Portia. He was accompanied by two of his colleagues—Lee Son, the tragedian; MoQuoy, comedian—and by Luke Ling, manager of his theater. The Chinese star was there for the purpose of seeing a great English play for the first time, and its interpretation by a great actress of a school so different from his own.

Fon Chong Mai comes of a family of great actors, who have adorned the profession for centuries. He has a repertoire which includes all the great religious plays of the Mandarin dialect, some of them filling scores of volumes, and has a prodigious memory. He is a man of the keenest perception from an Oriental point of view, highly educated in his native arts and sciences. His impressions of Shakespeare and of Miss Ada Rehan, in the role of Portia, shows that nothing escaped him, and that the traditions of the Chinese stage did not hamper him in his judgment of the play and its interpreter. The following observations were secured from the celestial Thespian through an interpreter in an interview, committed to paper and reinterpreted to the actor for amendation, and for his signature of approval. It is at least a criticism of our stage from a new point of view.

To-day is Tche-Tung. It is a national holiday of the change of seasons. Throughout my country there may be found feasting and song and praise. It is the Chinese Thanksgiving. The grand mandarins of the several provinces will have their house parties, in their sumptuous gardens, fragrant with rare blossoms, flaming with ancient proverbs lettered in gold, on silk or purple and scarlet, stages will be erected without the sound of a hammer.

Thereon will the plays of centuries gone be presented, under noble patronage, dramas of love and war, of virtue and freedom and triumphs over vice and tyranny. Grand ladies and great statesmen will sit on silken divans, nibble sweet melon seeds and watch the plays of our forefathers presented by our foremost actors.

From the courts that surround the temples of the Confucians and the Taoists alike, there will come the far-calling "Kinkin," call of the temple gong. Thousands will hear it, and in holiday attire will gather there to witness other bands of players, who have erected their stage near the temple of the gods, where both the mortal and the immortal may witness it. It is a great day for the theater in China—the last day of the season holidays—a time of feasting and good fellowship.

But, though I am here on the other side of the great globe, I, too, have been celebrating—indeed, a few of my people have ever had the honor. I have seen a play of your foremost dramatist, and interpreted by a lady of genius. It is a red letter day of my life; and, with your permission, I burn four sticks before Fo in grateful thanks." Give you my impressions of Miss Ada Rehan as Portia in the "Merchant of Venice"?

I fear I know not where to begin and, once begun, I fear I shall never end. It was the first time I had ever seen a foreign drama, and I did not know what to expect. It was one of the best, given by the best people. With the curtain down on the first act I said to myself: "Surely this is all that the world can give. Better than this is only in the realm of the gods." The effect upon me was beautiful and cumulative; and when I left the theater I talked of Portia.

I might preface my observations by saying frankly that the most striking features of the play to me were the simplicity and sincerity. But how vain does that sound to you till you know that I mean that it is simple and sincere as only our own dramas, which are not simple, but complex, which are not natural, but artificial, and, alas! not many removed.

You cannot understand me until I tell you who I am and through what spectacles I see. This is the true Chinese manner of the actor. And Quamea he gives his name, his history, his business; he proceeds to the end of it, and away again. Bear with me while I devise, since I too, like the Chinese drama, have no scenery nor other aid to bear out my meaning.

I am a humble one of the Brethren of the Pear Orchard. Centuries ago, when I am an actor. For 300 years my people have been actors before me and I still wear many of their garments. The euphonism of the "pear orchard" runs back to the Tang Dynasty, the golden age of China. Then literature, art, music and the drama flourished as never before or since. In those days actors were an outcast band of nomads, who wandered from province to province, asking alms at the temple gates. Soon some of the cleverest found that by giving drama in return for alms they received the greater bounty. Some recited proverbs, some played instruments, some juggled and at last some devised plays wherein half a dozen took part. The public patronized. The priesthood was divided between suppressing them or allowing them the freedom of the temple court on feast days. All honor to them that they decided upon the latter, and I should not be here.

Thus began the Chinese drama; more than 2,000 years ago. It became an institution. Priests and law-givers saw in it an opportunity for preaching to the people pictures of life, with lessons in virtue, in humility toward superiors, in patriotism and worship of the ancestors. Hence the actor became a factor. This was more than 2,000 years ago. He is a factor in Chinese life to-day.

I must confess that as the plays still cling to the ancient lines, so does society in a measure still regard the actor in China. Though he is held high above the plane of his forefathers, he is still barred from many of civil and political life, and is prohibited from competitive examinations—the system wherein a Hunderd Millions moves to greatness. At the age of 10 the child is still bound out to the manager, who believes that actors have no more rights than ordinary mortals, and the child's first lesson is a beating.

The law does not make a manager beholden if he kills a child bound out to him while trying to pound him into a great actor, the abuse goes on, but not as formerly, when beatings to death were frequent. But mark this—as with old Shylock to-day, who hoarded riches because every other avenue of affairs was closed to the Jew, so compulsory restrictions have made some great actors among us.

We have excelled, though always upon traditional lines. As in the Sung and Tuen dynasties the stage had no scenery, so have we none now. As the cultivation of a second voice—a far reaching falsetto for the "pear orchard" exhibitions—was necessary then, tradition compels us to retain that method. As complexity of plot, mountains of incident and volumes of talk, extending over a period often of a full month, was the fashion then, so is it now, for the Chinese reverse the archaic and abhors the new. Particularly is this true of anything that bears a religious significance; and the stage in China is, as in ages past, closely allied to the temple.

Now to return, when I say that the most salient points of the presentation of the Shakespearean masterpiece by Miss Rehan and her admirable support were simplicity, naturalness and sincerity, you understand me better.

I mean that it is the reverse of our own method, as your manners and customs are all the reverse of ours, and I am continually embarrassed by seeing people do things literally backward. The Chinese drama still clings to the dear tradition that complexity and bombast are an evidence of great power, while simplicity is the perfection of yours; that only the supernatural inspires great thoughts, while you believe that the natural is supreme; that sincerity is the badge of fools and the glory of dead men read in books, while you lay bare every thought and sentiment, as if concealment, with us a virtue, with you next a crime, and your fidelity to truth challenges like a god. This is very beautiful—it is sublime, but it is not Chinese.

Let me say right here that there is nothing new to me in the incidents of "The Merchant of Venice."

You say that Shakespeare is a universal spirit. I am convinced that in his throes of inspiration his spirit must have flown half way round the world and walked with our own Sin Fatah and She King and Lao Tsze, for scarcely an incident or proverb in the play but has a Chinese parallel. The exchange of rings and Bassanio's broken pledge to his wife I recall in three plays in my own repertoire, and the episode of the three caskets is found in another of my favorites called "Ching-Won-Boh-Ow," wherein there are three boxes, one incrusted with gems, a second wreathed with garlands and the third covered with dust and sprinkled with human blood. Instead of the portrait of the latter lies a single white rose from the hair of the Princess, and he who chooses it pledges forthwith to go through Hachhih and even to kill to vouchsafe the happiness and preserve the honor of her whom his voice has made a fair partner for life.

I remember playing before a great statesman of my native Canton, a great American being present. After the play I met the latter and he told me that the chief incident of the play, wherein a Buddhist priest and a waterman quarrelled over a handkerchief belonging to the latter's fair spouse, was identical with a Shakespearean play, and afterwards sent me a copy of Othello. I had the plot translated into my language, and was struck with the resemblance.

But if the test of a great play is the ability to hold the observer, even though he be a stranger to the language, "The Merchant of Venice," as interpreted by Miss Rehan, is supreme.

Therein lay the charming actress' power in my eyes—the ease with which she possessed me with the spirit of the drama and held me with it spellbound for two hours, even though I was a stranger to the letter. Her first words had a peculiar effect upon me, like that of the music of some celestial instrument, far reaching as the temple gong at midnight, yet rich, mellow and of inexpressible sweetness. I never knew before what roll and rhythm and fire there is in the cadences of your language, and that voice was a revelation.

It was all the more amazing when upon meeting Miss Rehan afterward behind the scenes, where Mr. Daly accorded myself and others of my support the honor of a presentation, I discovered that this supernatural voice was really the natural—that it was not, as with us, a second voice brought to perfection for stage uses only, and never used save on these occasions.

It was so spontaneous, so unforced. It was like Miss Rehan's acting, wherein she never rose so high but one felt that she could still go higher; never so sublime but that great reservations of power lay behind it. It was all so perfectly easy that it was easily perfect. And so joyous! She exhaled happiness, even in the dread trial scene. It was then that I mused with Kea-Paou in the folk legend, "With a smile like that may not a woman overthrow a city, and with another a kingdom?"

I must confess that the trial scene disappointed me somewhat. The idea that Portia could be there undisguised in the presence of her husband and of learned judges and neither her personality nor sex discovered appeared to me a grievous fault, for which only consummate beauty of scene and the admirable acting of Shylock atoned. My great successes have been in female impersonation, and I was naturally intensely interested in Miss Rehan's impersonation of a man—the learned Balthazar, whose edict frees Antonio and condemns the Jew. I expected to see Miss Rehan in mask and otherwise in complete disguise, as I was myself when taking a female part.

After all that had gone before was so consistent and natural, I could not forget the utter impossibility of a wife in no other disguise than a man's gown, cajoling a precious ring from her husband. This appeared to me carrying stage license too far; but our codes are different.

We rely so entirely on costume and mask, while you utterly ignore the use of the latter, that I merely speak of the episode as a query. Could Shakespeare have meant that Portia should go quite undisguised into court, or is this a fault where much is left to the imagination? If the latter, then it is the only instance where anything was left to the audience to imagine.

With us all is left to the imagination save costume and voice. A stride across the stage suffices for a hundred-mile journey if the actor there but throws aside a garment and says, "Behold! I am now in Ho-Nan, having traveled all the way on foot!" The new locality is imagined.

With you it is placed before you in the twinkling of an eye during a dark interval, when queer, swaying objects are seen running hither and thither after the stage. Then come the lights again, and lo! the garden is a palace interior, or the latter transformed into a court of justice. It is magical; but to adopt such methods on our stage would necessitate the reconstruction of all our plays—which would be like tampering with your own Holy Scriptures—or the writing of new dramas which no one would ever go to see.

And therein lies the great gulf which separates the drama of the Celestial Empire from that of the Western world. You look at life as it is, the reverse again. We regard it through the penumbra of tradition. Your hearts are in present, your eyes on the future. Our reverence is for the past, and the present is all sufficient in this reverence.

You observe we are both right. Your plays on our temple court stages would be irrelevant and even sacrilegious; our plays on your stage vain and ineffectual. I have learned from the great noble work of Miss Rehan and her strong support that I can incorporate into my own presentations any more than a great swordsman could learn anything needful to him in his profession by witnessing a sharpshooter. We represent different worlds, times and manners. In life in eternal parallel; they will never converge. I am inexpressibly happy, however, and broader of view for having seen Miss Rehan in "The Merchant of Venice," and I vow that I shall never again say with our ancient lawgiver, She King, "Woman! that thou wert not born a male is owing to thy unkindness in a previous state of existence."