The M. Butterfly Effect

by Kate Pitt

While the title of M. Butterfly recalls a beloved Western opera, butterflies both literal and metaphoric have a long history in Eastern culture, where they often symbolize love, long life, and transformation. Since its premiere in 1988, David Henry Hwang's play M. Butterfly has metamorphosed several times and exists in multiple editions – including two Broadway productions ¬– and now as an opera. M. Butterfly's opalescence is much like that of the creature itself: constantly revealing new facets as it shifts form and perspective.

Both the play and the opera weave Western stereotypes about Asian culture into the true story of the relationship between French diplomat Bernard Boursicot and Chinese opera singer Shi Pei Pu. In the fictionalized guises of René Gallimard and Song Liling, they alternately embrace and reject not only each other, but also narrative and cultural assumptions about their relationship. Playwright and librettist David Henry Hwang says, "Gallimard is wrong about a-lot of things because he is imprisoned within this Western lens. But what he gets right – both in the revision of the play and in the opera – is that there is a love between the two of them and it is both reciprocal and required." This love deepens over the life cycle of the relationship, however it is born from an exoticized illusion. After seeing Song Liling perform an excerpt from Puccini's Madama Butterfly, an entranced Gallimard asks, "Are you my Butterfly?" mapping his onstage fantasy onto offstage reality.

New information about the historical story has been incorporated into revisions of the play as well as the opera. For instance, Shi Pei Pu played the role of Zhu in productions of The Butterfly Lovers, a traditional Chinese opera based on a legend about the lovers Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo. According to David Henry Hwang, this "was not something I knew when I wrote the original play, but it is one of the things that Julie Taymor and I decided to put into the [2017 Broadway revival] to create an alternate butterfly trope." This addition has been preserved in the opera. In the Butterfly Lovers, Zhu disguises herself as a man in order to attend school and falls in love with her classmate Liang. He returns her love but dies of heartbreak when he learns that Zhu's parents have arranged for her to marry someone else. On the day of her wedding, Zhu goes to Ling's grave and throws herself in. The lovers' spirits emerge from the grave as butterflies and fly away together.

In another expansion from the original 1988 play, the libretto of M. Butterfly references a famous Taoist parable about the philosopher Zhuangzi, who dreamt of being a butterfly. When he woke, he was unsure if he was a man dreaming of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming of being a man. The chronicle does not tell us if Zhuangzi lived long enough to resolve this uncertainty but his question survives, demonstrating that doubts about identity and reality outlive any individual attempt to resolve them.

In opera, we may not always be able to promise our characters long lives and enough time to resolve their existential fears. At some point, the curtain must come down. However, we may be able to offer them something greater: the immortality that comes though telling their stories. It may help both them and us find peace, if only in our dreams.

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