

OPERA REVIEW

Agitprop Lives, Mythic in Spirit, Swinging in Style

By JON PARELES

Fred Ho's "Warrior Sisters," which is at the Kitchen (512 West 19th Street, Chelsea) through tonight, is a manifesto in the form of a jazz opera. Subtitled "The New Adventures of African and Asian Womyn Warriors," it bluntly and sincerely proffers messages like "Only when oppression from within is banished will we banish oppression from without."

It's not the first agitprop American opera; consider Marc Blitzstein's 1937 "Cradle Will Rock." Yet it may be the first to have staging and slogans akin to the didactic "revolutionary operas" of modern China, with dastardly oppressors and blazingly courageous heroines. But the music has an American swagger, taking its doctrinaire text seriously yet making it swing.

Throughout his career Mr. Ho has created cultural hybrids. His long-running jazz group, a septet that's the pit band for "Warrior Sisters," is called the Afro Asian Music Ensemble, and his music pulls together the pentatonic melodies of China and West Africa with the lush, bluesy harmonies of Charles Mingus and Duke Ellington and touches of free jazz.

Ann T. Greene's libretto resurrects three legendary women to aid a fourth. Fa Mu Lan (the same Mulan portrayed in the Disney movie, but made into a white-haired immortal and transported forward more than a millennium) battles the British during the 1900 Boxer Rebellion. She saves Nana Yaa Asantewa, the

Queen Mother of the Ashante, from British troops in the 1890's, in what would become Ghana.

Together with Sieh King King, a Chinese feminist organizer in San Francisco in the early 20th century, they stage a jail break for Assata Shakur (Joanne Chesimard), a radical black militant who was convicted of killing a policeman in New Jersey in 1973. In the final scene Ms. Shakur, safe in Cuba, holds her new baby while the chorus proclaims "All power to the womyn!"

The 90-minute piece rockets through its mythic history. An ensemble in red pajamalike uniforms — the color of courage and loyalty in Chinese opera — embodies Chinese and African peasantry as well as colonialist troops. There are acrobatics and martial-arts drills with long bamboo poles, and when the action moves to the 1970's, Ms. Shakur's followers become a Broadway-style chorus line.

The music is centered by the septet's brawny saxophones, with Mr.

Ho on baritone saxophone. It shifts with era and locale, suggesting Chinese-opera melodies for Fa Mu Lan, using African ululations with the Ashante and hinting at Marvin Gaye ballads for Ms. Shakur. Mambo drums herald the women's arrival in Cuba.

Mr. Ho disdains pop catchiness; the vocal lines are full of demanding chromatic leaps that sometimes strained the unamplified singers. Hai-Ting Chinn as Fa Mu Lan, Allison Easter as Nana Yaa Asantewa, Miki Yamashita as Sieh King King and Jacqueline Patricia Howell as Ms. Shakur projected determination; Walt Frasier, as the all-purpose colonial villain, reached up to countertenor range with appropriate craven boorishness.

Mr. Ho's music and Mira Kingsley's direction and choreography (with martial-arts choreography by George Crayton III) put considerable gusto into the dry outline of "Warrior Sisters." All in all, the opera seems to come out of some alternative reality: an America with cultural commissars stipulating politically correct fables.

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