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Song of China

A new opera based on
an old legend blends
love and kung fu
and a girl's quest
for independence

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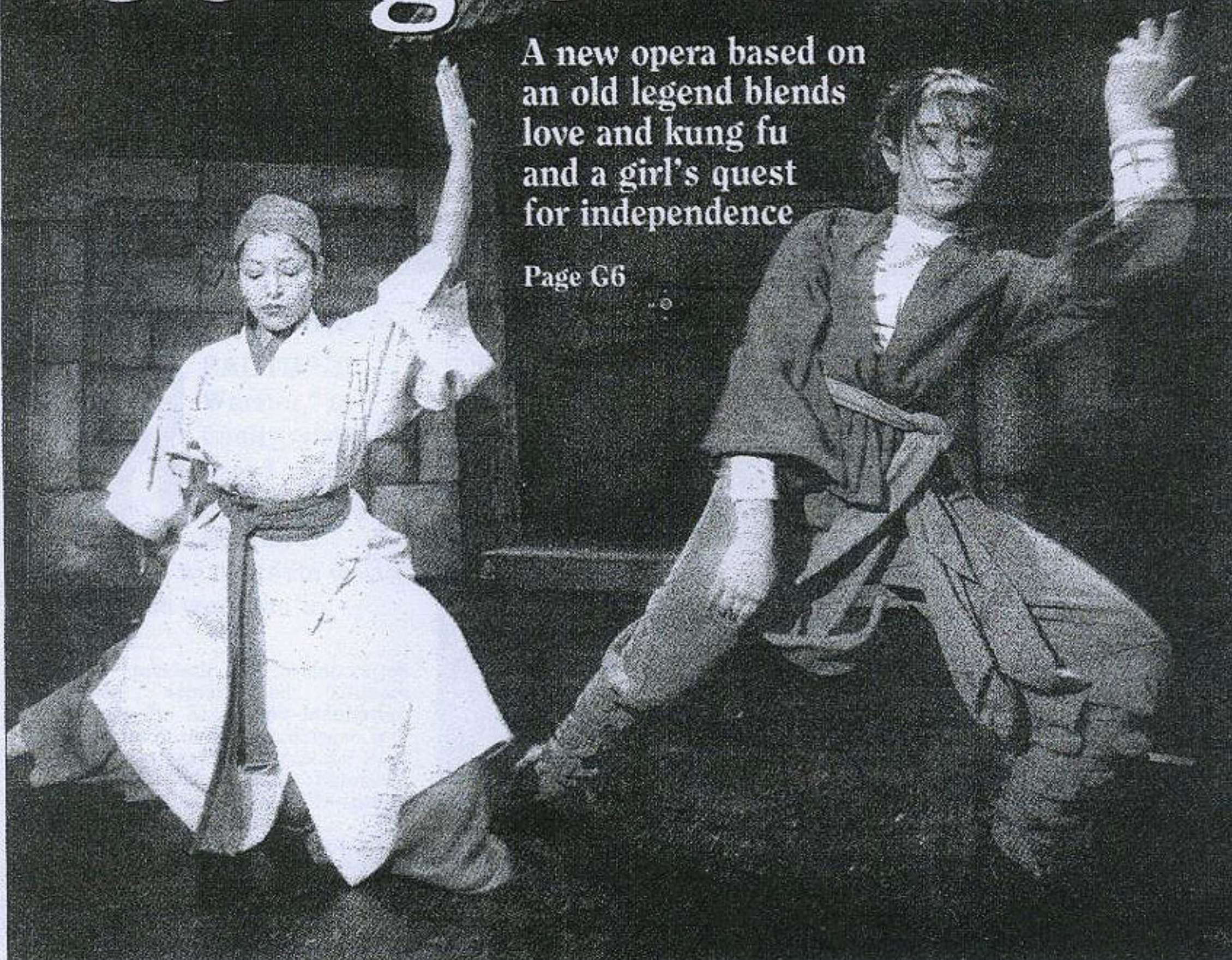


Photo by Daniel Avil

Sunita Param and Anjali Nardi, right, rehearse for the world debut of "Beautiful Warrior," a family opera based on a Chinese legend, at Queens Theatre in the Park.

Mingyi's World

The story of a girl's journey in 17th century China arrives in Queens for a world premiere



Photos by Daniel Avila

BY NAOMI SERVISS

'BEAUTIFUL Warrior," a family opera based on an ancient Chinese legend, is scheduled to make its world debut this weekend in Queens.

The musical, a collaboration between accomplished Chinese composer Jin Xiang and Manhattan playwright Barbara Zinn Krieger, is to open at Queens Theatre in the Park for two performances — Saturday, Jan. 26, and Sunday, Jan. 27 — before embarking on a world tour.

Based on a coming-of-age tale set in 17th-century China, "Beautiful Warrior" is an hour-long story about 12-year-old Mingyi, betrothed to a man she despises. In her quest for independence, she is befriended and mentored by a kung fu-practicing Buddhist nun named Wu Mei, which translates into "Beautiful Warrior."

The illustrated picture book on which this production is based, written by Emily Arnold McCully of Manhattan, is steeped in traditional Chinese philosophy, martial arts and



Playwright Barbara Zinn Krieger with composer Jin Xiang, who is one of China's most popular composers and spent 20 years in a labor camp there.

ultimately self-reliance. The same themes will unfold on stage, replete with authentic Chinese costumes, martial arts choreography, shadow puppetry and traditional Chinese instrumentation.

Krieger, the founder and executive director of the Vineyard Theatre in Manhattan, has written librettos for other family operas and views "Beautiful Warrior" as a timely and significant piece accessible to adults and children alike.

"The message behind this story is that nonviolence and knowledge of self can prevail over brute strength," Krieger explained before a recent rehearsal. The tale, especially resonates for girls, she added. "The little girl's struggle for individuality is extremely important in this day and age. And another important message is that learning is a two-way street: Teachers can learn just as much, if not more, from their students as the other way around."

Krieger, herself a successful librettist, has drawn on her teaching background to create operas based on children's stories. She also established a literacy and arts-in-education program, Making Books Sing, seven years ago. This effort has exposed children from Queens, Brooklyn and

Manhattan to performing artists who breathe life into ancient tales from diverse cultures. Teachers and artists who participate use culturally significant stories to introduce basic universal values and beliefs, she said.

Students participating in Making Books Sing will attend special performances of "Beautiful Warrior" after learning the story in class. After seeing the opera, they will return to their classes and create their own 10-minute story. Krieger views the New York community, and especially Queens, as a perfect microcosm of world cultures. She is committed to enriching the lives of schoolchildren by sharing an eclectic mix of ethnic fables presented in an accessible, entertaining manner. Next year she plans on working with an African-American story and, the year after, a Latino tale.

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Krieger anticipated a decline in interest by schools. "Instead we have 1,000 more kids than we expected who have signed up for the program," she said.

Xiang brings a personal poignancy to his most recent endeavor. He is a former conductor of the Beijing Symphony Orchestra and currently teaches composition at the China

Opera, Offered By the Book

LONG AGO, in the reign of the last Ming emperor, a baby girl was born in the Forbidden City. And with those simple words, award-winning children's author Emily Arnold McCully, 62, weaves a fanciful tale of Eastern philosophy, martial arts, and a young girl's mystical journey laced with lessons of courage, self-reliance and knowledge of self.

"Beautiful Warrior," the lushly illustrated picture book that is the basis for the Chinese opera that is to debut in Queens this weekend, is one of about 20 McCully has written and illustrated since 1966. Set in 17th-century China, this mythic tale of a kung fu-practicing Buddhist nun may have a scintilla of truth, McCully said.

The book is also central to this year's arts-in-education program, Making Books Sing, founded by Manhattan playwright Barbara Zinn Krieger six years ago. This program sends theater professionals into public schools for six weeks, where they team with teachers in introducing literature to schoolchildren. More than 4,000 elementary and middle school students from Queens, Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx will attend performances of the opera "Beautiful Warrior."

"I make an effort to retrieve stories about real women from history who do courageous things," said McCully, who lives in Manhattan. Even though this story is fictional, her characters ring true, she said. "In every culture there are stories about girls who are brave and go off on their own," she continued, referring to 12-year-old Mingyi's adventure with a Buddhist nun named Wu Mei, Chinese for "beautiful warrior." In ancient Chinese history there have been female generals, as well as black belt martial artists, she said.

McCully researched her subject thoroughly before setting a word or paintbrush to paper, developing a relationship with Zen philosophers and martial arts experts. She studied Chinese brush and classical painting to achieve the dreamy Eastern-influenced, muted earth-tone illustrations in the 34-page book, which was published in 1998 by Scholastic Press.

McCully hopes that young readers' curiosity about Chinese culture will lead them to other fables. She is also a firm believer in exposing children to stories containing challenging vocabulary. If young readers don't understand a word, they are motivated to use the dictionary to look the word up, she said. "And if children are reading books, at least that takes them away temporarily from video and computer games," she said with a laugh. — Serviss



The cover of "Beautiful Warrior," the book on which the opera is based



Clockwise from upper left, Kathleen Siapno, as Little Brother Jing Yong, left, and Anjali Nardi, as Mingyi, in rehearsal. At right, Anjali reviews some moves with Sunita Param and, below right, with cast members Robert Stoeckle, left, and Lawrence Craig.



Photo by Carol Roszgg



Photo by Carol Roszgg

Music Conservatory in Beijing. One of China's most prolific and popular composers, Xiang's promising career was derailed when he was charged as a political dissident during the notorious Cultural Revolution, and sent to a labor camp in the Xinjiang Province for two decades. His determination, passion for music and will to reclaim his musical career resulted in his much-acclaimed grand operas, "Savage Land," "The King of Chu" and "Native Fatal Woman."

His other works include a six-part cantata that was performed at Carnegie Hall in honor of the victims of the 1937 Nanjing massacre.

He expressed hope that audience members of all ages will appreciate the universal truths explored by "Beautiful Warrior."

"I hope children will become engrossed in the story and have a good time watching the martial arts, the gorgeous silks and satins of the costumes and appreciate the unusual Chinese instruments," Krieger said.

Performances are at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Jan. 26, and Sunday, Jan. 27, at Queens Theatre in the Park (Flushing Meadows-Corona Park). Tickets are \$15. Call 718-760-0064 for more information.

Naomi Serviss is a freelance writer.