

The Bell Maiden

A Musical play

By Nava Semel

Music: Ben Artzi

Translated from Hebrew by Michael HarPaz

SCENE ONE - CONNIE REFUSES TO FLY TO CHINA

The stage is set to look like an airport. Passengers are boarding. They will play the different characters in the Chinese legend. The passengers are greeted by the flight attendants. The flight attendants - man and woman - will play the choir. The musician is also on stage, dressed as the captain.

(an announcement on the PA system)

FLIGHT ATTENDANTS (CHOIR)

All passengers travelling to Beijing on flight 157, your flight is now boarding at gate number five.

(coming through pa system)

Qong-Ge ... Qong-Ge...

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

This is the final boarding call for all those travelling to Beijing on flight 157. Please make your way to gate number five immediately.

DAD is dressed in a suit and tie dragging his young daughter CONNIE behind him. She is grumpy and unwilling to cooperate. The stage transforms into an airplane. DAD and CONNIE are sitting in their seats, buckling their seat-belts for takeoff.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT (as CHOIR)

Qong-Ge ... Qong-Ge...

CONNIE

(grumbling to herself)

I wish this plane would have some kind of mechanical failure and never take off.

DAD

China. Listen to the sound of it, CONNIE.

(stretching out the word)

Chiiii-n-ahhhhhh!

CONNIE

Dad! Stop it!

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

(trying to sing to her jokingly)

Chhh-chh-chhh-iiii-nn-ahhhhhhhh....

CONNIE turns her back.

SCENE TWO - DAD CONVINCES CONNIE TO LISTEN TO HIS TALE ABOUT QONG-GE

FLIGHT ATTENDANTS

(through PA System)

The duration of our flight will be ten hours. We will leave Tel-Aviv, heading north, towards Ankara, Turkey. We'll then cross the Black Sea towards Georgia and from then on to Azerbaijan and the coast of the Caspian Sea. We wish you a pleasant flight.

CONNIE

(cynically)

Yeah, right. Pleasant. You didn't even bother asking me if I agree to go.

DAD

Connie, sweetheart, it's my job. I'm on a mission. I'm going to represent the State of Israel there...

CONNIE

(bitterly)

Great. Well guess what? I don't represent anything.

DAD

To be the Israeli Ambassador to China - it's a great honor.

CONNIE

Honor, shmonor. What about my friends? What about Yaeli and Ben? And Sasha? They're going to forget me.

DAD

We don't forget that quickly.

(pausing)

You know that.

CONNIE

Yeah. I dream of Mom every night. She would never have agreed to go.

DAD

Actually, mom loved to travel. After her army service, she even made it to China.

CONNIE

But she was only there on a short trip. And I'm going to be a complete stranger there. Besides, I don't understand one word of Chinese.

DAD

You think I won't be a stranger there? I don't have any friends in China either....except for you, that is.

CONNIE

That doesn't count.

DAD

Doesn't count? Listen, Connie. We're going to see places that are so different than ours. Maybe we'll even make new Chinese friends. Who knows?

(chuckling)

Yaeli-ying, Ben-yong... Connie's friends...Ping-pong...King-Qong...

CONNIE

(cynically)

Don't quit your day job.

DAD pulls out a little bronze gong, suspended by some cord from a small wooden frame and little wooden mallet. On the gong is a hand-painted picture of a Chinese girl.

CONNIE

(suspiciously)

What's this?

DAD

A gift. For you. It's a gong – a kind of...kind of a Chinese bell.

CONNIE

(spitefully)

And what am I supposed to do with it?

CONNIE hits the gong with the small, wooden mallet with contempt. A sound is heard in the background.

CHOIR

QONG-GE ...

DAD

(surprised)

Did you hear something?

CONNIE

(sings childishly)

I can't hear you....

DAD holds and strikes the gong again. The CHOIR is heard, this time even louder.

CHOIR

Qong-Ge...

DAD

Weird. I could swear I heard something. Mom said there was a legend about this gong.

CONNIE

Mom never told me any legends.

DAD

(whispering)

She didn't have time...

A silence falls over them as CONNIE grips the locket of her necklace that hangs from her neck.

DAD

She bought it next to the Great Bell Temple in Beijing. Tomorrow, after we land, I thought we might... Well, that we might go visit there as well. People from all over the world come to listen to that bell.

CONNIE

A bell. Who rings bells?

DAD gives the gong back to CONNIE.

CHOIR

Qong-Ge... Qong-Ge...

DAD strikes the gong.

CHOIR

Qong-Ge...

DAD strikes the gong again.

CHOIR

In this royal gong
There a secret lies
Of an ancient legend
That is in disguise
Of a clapper girl
And her founding father
Who makes all our bells
Ring just a little louder.

DAD

Listen! There are people over there!

CONNIE

What are you talking about? You're imagining things.

CHOIR

Inside this gong
Lay a magical life
That's run by a two-faced
King and his two-faced wife
The earth is red
And molten with fire

For they both rule a vast empire.

CONNIE

What language is that anyway, Chinese?

DAD

It's *Legendese*. A very old language. Perhaps the oldest in the world.

CONNIE gives the gong back to her father. The singing is heard again.

CHOIR

Qong-Ge, Qong-Ge
Our lost beloved daughter
Qong-Ge, Qong-Ge
Your voice will not falter
Those who hear
Their hearts will open
What was once played
Will not be forgotten.

CONNIE

(covering her ears)

I can't hear you.... can't, can't, can't...

CHOIR

Everything around begins to play
Up and down the scale, do, re, mi, fa, re
We're full of so many noises
The world is a string of lonely voices...

CONNIE

(patronizing)

Who likes kids' stories anyway?

DAD holds the gong. The gong opens as a book.

DAD

I actually love children's stories. I learned to from Mom. She told me that a legend is like a journey to another world. Hey, look Connie. There are letters.... "In the ancient land of China...." Let's read it, Connie. We've got a long flight. Hey, if you don't like it, we can always stop in the middle.

CONNIE

(bitterly)

Can we stop your mission in the middle?

CONNIE pushes the gong back into her father's hand. The CHOIR sings again.

CHOIR

Ding dong... ding dong...
An old tale hides inside the gong

A larger echo looms
 A quiet night, behind the moon
 What is real? What is not?
 QONG-GE the bell maiden teeters and tots.

QONG-GE appears in the background. CONNIE peaks in QONG-GE's direction, curious.

CONNIE
(compliantly)

Fine. I guess. It's not like I've got anything better to do.

SCENE THREE - THE LEGEND - MEETING KWAN-YU AND QONG-GE

CHOIR
(The CHOIR begins to read)

In ancient China, where the sun sets on one side and rises on the other, lives an illustrious bell founder...

KWAN-YU appears.

DAD
(Together with the Choir)

KWAN-YU...
(continuing alone)

Customers came from distant lands to his workshop - even from across the Great Wall - to place an order for one of his wondrous creations of welded metals which he would found into bells and gongs.

CONNIE
(smiling)

Dad, who talks like that?

DAD
 Wait a second. This bell founder was very famous. His fame even reached the Emperor's palace.

CONNIE
 A celebrity. Chinese Idol. Ha ha.

DAD
 Every morning the bell founder would take his big, padded mallet and strike the gong, in thanks to the gods for the new morning's sun. Then he would begin his daily work.

The stage transforms into the bell founder's workshop. KWAN-YU is center stage, vigorously stirring a bubbling cauldron with a stick.

CHOIR

The cauldron is burning
 It's surging and swarming
 Scalding and boiling
 A blade of fire is forming
 Everything cut and welded
 For what is given is what is taken.
 In this cauldron all is the same
 A rifle, a sword, a children's game
 All their strength
 Has been lost and forsaken
 For what is given is what's taken
 What is given is what's taken.

KWAN-YU

The cauldron is burning
 It's surging and swarming
 Scalding and boiling...

CHOIR

The cauldron is burning
 It's surging and swarming
 Scalding and boiling...

CONNIE cuts them off. She turns to her father.

CONNIE

(to DAD)

Wait! What is all this "cauldron" nonsense?

DAD

It's a melting pot. Like a giant washing machine with a raging fire inside it.
(he gets a little carried away)
 It can melt anything. Everything that goes in it completely disintegrates.

DAD instructs Kwan-Yu to resume singing.

KWAN-YU

(singing)

The cauldron is burning
 It's surging and swarming
 Scalding and boiling...

QONG-GE appears. She approaches KWAN-YU slowly. CONNIE recognizes QONG-GE.

CONNIE

Hey, isn't that the girl in the picture on the gong?

DAD looks at the gong and then at QONG-GE, comparing the two. He looks at the gong again.

DAD

Yes, that's Qong-Ge. The bell founder's one and only daughter.

The CHOIR disperses. The MAN approaches QONG-GE. The WOMAN approaches CONNIE.

CHOIR

(to QONG-GE and CONNIE as well)

Listen girl
The whole world
In the palm of your hand it lays
Wherever you go
From near or from far
Your ringing will always be played.

KWAN-YU pulls out a bracelet of bells he just made from the cauldron and puts it on QONG-GE's wrist.

KWAN-YU

A golden bracelet I've tied around your wrist
Should a tiger of sorrow
Decide to jump from behind
Or a serpent, snake of pain
Will threaten to ride
Just pull upon your golden chain
And I'll be right by your side.

QONG-GE shakes her wrist. The bells ring.

CHOIR

Qong-Ge, Qong-Ge....

CONNIE

(to DAD)

Tell me again what he said to his daughter?

DAD (SPEAKING)**KWAN-YU (SINGING)**

I've tied a golden bracelet upon your wrist
So you never get lost or wander off
And should the darkness fly
In the night like a crow
Pull upon your chain
And I'll be there before you know.

CONNIE is transfixed by QONG-GE's bracelet. It enchants her. She approaches QONG-GE and touches the bracelet.

CONNIE

Qong-Ge...

(this is the first time she utters her name)

QONG-GE

Ding dong, ding dong
 From a thousand nights away
 Ding dong, ding dong
 No matter where I go
 My bells will always play.

CHOIR

(towards DAD)

Qong-Ge grew up around her father's bells.

DAD

(continuing)

She didn't like to play children's games. Instead of a doll, she had a little gong in which she could see her face's reflection. Every time Qong-Ge touched the bells, it felt to her as if she had set out on a journey in the world or that the world was travelling towards her.

THE CAULDRON IS SURROUNDED BY MANY DIFFERENT BELLS AND GONGS.
 QONG-GE PASSES HER HAND OVER THEM AND THEIR SOUNDS CORRESPOND
 TO DAD'S FOLLOWING DESCRIPTIONS.

DAD

The rustling of a peach tree.

(rustling sound is heard)

The croaking of the frogs in the lotus pools.

(croaking is heard)

The rattling engine of the rice boats.

(engine rattling is heard)

Raindrops hitting the temple roofs.

(raindrops are heard)

KWAN-YU turns to QONG-GE and strikes the gongs with a mallet, demonstrating their sounds.

KWAN-YU

A rock falls from the mountain
 A feather from the wild goose
 Thunder is heard in the distance...

QONG-GE

...The butterfly's wings adduce.
 Father, please tell me
 From where does the sound come?
 Is it here inside?
 The spirit of the string
 Where does its secret hide?

KWAN-YU

Many years ago

I was an infant too
 Our great grandfather
 Came across a hunter's lure
 In it he found a captured nightingale
 Great-grandfather's heart had opened wide
 As he set the songbird free
 And received the nightingale's gift, did he
 Ding-dong, the spirit of song
 That is your birthright, Qong-Ge
 My secret is yours
 The little songbird entrusted us
 With the secret spirit of all sounds.

CONNIE

Father, tell me
 Where does the sound come from?
 The spirit of the string, the hidden bell
 Does the secret lie within me as well?

KWAN-YU

The nightingale's gift
 Ding-dong, the spirit of song
 You yourself will discover
 The world is so vast and great
 Both cursed and blessed
 Its gifts it will bring
 The day will come and you too
 Will make your own bells ring.

FLIGHT ATTENDANTS

Our altitude is just about 37,000 feet. Our flight path has taken us right over Krasnovodsk in Turkmenistan. We will then fly over Tashkent, the capitol city of Uzbekistan and then finally Bishkek, the capitol of Kyrgyzstan.

CONNIE looks out the window of the plane curiously. For the first time she repeats the unfamiliar names of the different places and smiles to herself...

CONNIE

Kyrgyzstan... Turkmenistan... Uzbekistan...

**SCENE FOUR - THE EMPEROR ASKS FOR A SPECIAL SOUND SO HE CAN
 FEEL LIKE EVERYONE ELSE**

DAD

One day, the famous bell founder, KWAN-YU arrived at the Imperial Palace in Beijing, the capital city.

THE STAGE changes. THE GONG'S TURN INTO A BOULEVARD. KWAN-YU PASSES BETWEEN THEM. THE CHOIR KNEELS BEFORE HIM.

CHOIR

(to KWAN-YU)

You are the greatest of them all!
Your sounds are the voice of the earth!
Who are we without you?
Our ears we bear unto you.

The EMPEROR approaches KWAN-YU, his hands are outstretched as if to welcome him warmly. The CHOIR continues to kneel before them both.

DAD

The Empress had heard the noise from her window in the palace and was furious with envy.

The EMPRESS enters the boulevard of gongs and disturbs the order.

EMPRESS

Only the Emperor is master of China.
For the mighty ruler has no equal.
Who is this slave, pursuer of crowns
That dares to spread these rogue sounds?

DAD

He was indeed a great ruler, but he was a miserable human being. Estates, lands, horses, carriages, jewels, servants - He had them all. But the emperor was looking for something else.

EMPEROR

(to the EMPRESS)

I will not be able to fall asleep
I have no rest
My kingdom is great
But I have no happiness
Nothing but emptiness
My soul is hollow
I've forgotten how to embrace
Emptiness swallows
My soul is a void, amiss
I've forgotten how to hug
How to kiss
As if I am dead
Even the tears refuse to shed
What I've once had
Only a special sound can bring back.

(pointing to KWAN-YU)

I will not be able to fall asleep.

KWAN-YU

(playing or singing simultaneously)

The cauldron is boiling

Bubbling, scalding...

EMPRESS
(to the EMPEROR)

Conquer another land!

EMPEROR

I have no rest...

KWAN-YU
(singing simultaneously)

The cauldron is boiling
Bubbling, scalding...

CHOIR
(to KWAN-YU)

You'll be the greatest of them all!

EMPRESS
(to EMPEROR)

Together we will stretch every border on earth!

EMPEROR

My kingdom is great
But there is no joy in me...

EMPRESS

More and more slaves -
Bow to you. Do you see?

EMPEROR

Woe is me
No happiness
But emptiness,
Hollow is my soul
I've forgotten how to embrace, amiss
I've forgotten how to hug and kiss
As if I am dead
Even tears refuse to shed
What I once had
Only the artist can bring back.

EVERYONE

The cauldron is boiling, bubbling, scalding
Erupting, gurgling...

EMPRESS

No!
The bell founder offends your honor!
He defiles the Great Wall of China!

They follow him, to his sounds they are drawn!

CHOIR

The vile Kwan-Yu degrades your crown!

EMPEROR

As if I am dead
Even tears refuse to shed.

EMPRESS

Tears were intended for the common man
The Emperor does not cry
The Emperor leans upon his sword
Tears have no place in the ruler's world!

EMPEROR

Emptiness, no happiness
Hollow is my soul
I've forgotten how to embrace
What I once had
Kwan-Yu must pull me back from the dead.

CHOIR

Seeds of sounds,
The bell founder scatters round
The silence of the herd breaches
Striving for the kingdom, reaches
Undermining the law
Awakening the rebels
Ruminations of heresy are born...

EMPRESS

Only one sound exists
There are no lone voices
Only...

The EMPRESS pulls the EMPEROR behind her, distancing him from KWAN-YU.

EMPRESS AND CHOIR

...The trumpets of those marching
Chases hunters, slave keepers
The whispers of all worshipers.

EMPRESS

It always was, is and will be this way
The world will speak its voice as one.

CHOIR

Kneel down, Kwan-Yu the bell founder
In front of the Emperor, son of the sky - your master,
Bow now. He's the Lord of all

Governor of everything - both great and small.

SCENE FIVE - THE EMPEROR'S DECREE

THE STAGE CHANGES INTO A MINIATURE MAP. THE EMPEROR APPROACHES AND WAVES HIS SCEPTER OVER THE MAP AND THEN BANGS THE GONG AS IF TO MARK THE TERRITORY OF HIS KINGDOM. KWAN-YU FOLLOWS WITH THE MARBLE-TIPPED MALLOT.

EMPEROR

My kingdom exists
It spreads from sea to sea
Secured and intact
So very perfectly
Seemingly solid and fortified
But something in me is missing
So very deep inside.

(to KWAN-YU)

Give me a voice in the darkness
Remove this curse
Give me a sign, save me
Teach me how to feel again
To desire, and hurt like you
Oh Master of bells.
A sound known only to you
Create this wondrous sound
This you must do
And I will sing your praises too.
Make me a special, fantastic sound
Where is it hiding? In heaven? on the ground?
Fill my life again, this is your goal
For this glorious sound must awaken my soul
I want to laugh, to cry again
Like any other human, I shall remain
I'm sure it exists, this magical tone
The bell of all bells
Somewhere it dwells.

EMPRESS

(to KWAN-YU)

Give him a wondrous sound
It will make him powerful for all to behold
You must create a majestic bell
Founded from copper, silver and gold.

KWAN-YU

(to the EMPRESS)

Great lady!
You of such power
That combination - no bell has been made

It is not known
 A secret in shade
 Silver, copper, gold are no bricks
 Those molten ores will never mix
 This task cannot be done
 Matters won't live in the cauldron like one.
 For the silver will tarnish...

QONG-GE

Copper will rust.

KWAN-YU

Gold cannot be crushed into dust.

EMPRESS

(to KWAN-YU)

That is our will.

CHORUS

That is his will.
 That is his decree
 Obey it at once
 Or you'll never be free!

EMPRESS

Give us a sound
 Never played before
 Never heard
 Nor created
 This magic must be done
 You meddler of metals
 Will unite them all to one.

CHORUS

That is his will.
 That is his decree
 Obey it at once
 Or you'll never be free!

KWAN-YU

Gold is soft, shining and glossed
 Silver is thin - like patches of frost.

QONG-GE

Brass guards its strength at all costs.

KWAN-YU

This metal is warm, the other is cold
 One too young, the other is old
 One is dim, the other is lit
 These metals are estranged

They will never fit.

EMPRESS

If you defy the Emperor, you are dead!
Tomorrow - off with your head!

CHORUS

The sword is at your throat
Off with your head, this is an oath.

CONNIE

Don't freak out, Dad. Legends always have somebody threatening to cut somebody else's head off.

DAD

(miserable)

That's not the legend I was hoping for. I thought it would be some sweet, cute Chinese story, like a fortune cookie...

CONNIE

Don't worry! All legends are the same. Keep on reading!

DAD stretches his back and continues to read from the gong.

SCENE SIX - KWAN-YU'S FIRST ATTEMPT

DAD

Kwan-Yu had no choice but to obey the Emperor's order.

(pauses)

That very same day he founded the metals, as Qong-Ge kept bringing him more and more nuggets of copper, silver and gold.

KWAN-YU and QONG-GE stir the cauldron tensely.

QONG-GE

Where will the sound come from?
Spirit of the string, is it inside?
Where does this magical secret hide?

DAD

Kwan-Yu pumped the bellows, pushing more logs under the bubbling cauldron. Then the bell-founder poured the molten river into a bell-shaped mold. Both father and daughter held their breath. Ever so slowly, the sides of the bells appeared. The bell founder raised his hand...

Dad raises his hand and at the same time, so does Kwan-Yu. Kwan-Yu strikes the gong. A grating sound is heard. The Emperor is disappointed. He pulls at his cheeks.

EMPEROR

No tear is shed
As if I am dead...

EMPRESS

Shame on you! Disgrace, you bafoon!
 This is a bell? It's a mere balloon!
 Lock the bell-founder up behind bars!

CHORUS

Oh how you've fallen, down like a fool
 We will enforce the government rule!
 We will finally carry out this verdict!
 Cut off his head, decapitate him!

EMPRESS

Cut off his head, decapitate him!

KWAN-YU

(begging)

These materials cannot be united
 How will I find what is missing?
 How to decipher a dream made of gold?
 Nothing is perfect in our world.

The Executioner (the man in the CHORUS) waves his sword, but the Emperor stops him.

EMPEROR

(to the EXECUTIONER)

No! Stop!
 Spare his life, these are my orders
 The bell-founder's head will remain on his shoulders.
 (to KWAN-YU)

Make me a wondrous sound, bell-founder!
 The Emperor demands
 Perfection is a must
 So says my law
 You will obey, you must try
 I will not give up my wish
 To laugh and to cry.
 And you, artist, by my great grace you now move
 I grant you a chance your talent to prove
 One more try....

EMPRESS

Best that you succeed the metals to brew!
 Or we'll lock up that daughter of yours too!

Dad puts the gong aside. He recoils from it.

DAD

That's enough!

CONNIE*(giving him back the gong)*

But dad, that's not me! Read. I want to find out what happens next.

SCENE 7 - KWAN-YU'S SECOND ATTEMPT

QONG-GE and KWAN-YU work diligently at the bell foundry.

DAD*(reading from the gong)*

Kwan-Yu searched for the secret of combining the precious metals; gold, silver and copper. He measured and weighed and calculated. Qong-Ge never left the workshop for even a second. From dawn till dusk the devoted daughter helped her father.

KWAN-YU*(to QONG-GE)*

Where will I find this wondrous sound?
 An exalted note, so great
 To change the Emperor's life and fate.
 How to decipher an impossible dream
 This task is beyond any scheme
 Nothing is perfect in our universe
 How can I unite all things diverse?

QONG-GE

Father, give me a hand
 Mine too is shaky, what an ordeal
 If you too are afraid
 How is a child to feel?
 Father, give me a hand
 Mine trembles too
 If a grown up is scared
 Then what shall I do?
 You must solve the riddle
 Find the answer we need
 For you are the father
 And I'm but your seed.

DAD*(continuing)*

With sooty hands, the daughter and father molded the second bell.

QONG-GE*(to herself)*

Father, give me a hand
 Mine too is shaky...

The EMPEROR and the EMPRESS appear.

EMPRESS*(to KWAN-YU)*

This second test
Obey the decree
It's either you
Or is it me!

CONNIE
(to *DAD*)

Dad, are you scared?

DAD

Yes. Grown-ups get scared too, Connie.

QONG-GE
(to *KWAN-YU*)

You must solve the riddle
Find the answer we need
For you are the father
And I'm but your seed.

KWAN-YU strikes the gong with his padded mallet. A shrill wail arises. The EMPEROR wrinkles his face in disgust.

DAD

No tear is shed
As if I am dead.

EMPRESS

Scarred bell
By lightning struck
Only the deaf
Will be drawn to its bark
Sick bell, out of luck
Faulty and defective
Only a fool would believe it's effective
Kwan-Yu's gong is so cheap
It will be thrown to the trash heap.

CHORUS

Oh how you've fallen, down you fool
We will enforce the government rule!
Decapitate him, cut off his head
Soon he'll be dead!

CHORUS (WOMAN)

Look how happy the Empress is at the fate of the bell-founder.

CHORUS (MAN)

He has failed his second test as well.

DAD

Now all of China will know that Kwan-Yu's bells are inferior and flawed.

Everywhere people will point at them and boo...

EMPRESS

Kwan-Yu, into the dungeon,
There's nothing you can do
When evening comes, darkness will fall
The sword will separate your head from the rest of you.

The CHORUS arrest KWAN-YU and chain him. They approach QONG-GE as if to arrest her as well. CONNIE pushes QONG-GE away from the EMPRESS.

CONNIE

(to QONG-GE)

Maybe we'll just kick the wicked Empress out of the legend and that's it?

EMPRESS

(to QONG-GE)

This is your end, you insolent cymbal-girl.

(to the CHORUS)

Chain her up as well.

KWAN-YU

(screaming)

My beloved only daughter
I prefer to be dead
Take my life
Kill me instead!
Just not my child!
My one and only
Please, just not she!

EMPEROR

(to EMPRESS)

The decision is mine
This will not be!
The bell-founder has a sound he owes me!
A man only pays for his own deeds
A daughter will not be punished for her father's sins.

CONNIE

(to the EMPRESS, victoriously)

You see!

KWAN-YU the prisoner is dragged by the CHORUS. QONG-GE runs to him. The CHORUS separates them.

CONNIE

Is that the end?

DAD

I don't think so. But we're getting close.

DAD

(singing like the bell-founder)

Connie, give me your hand
Mine too is shaky...

FLIGHT ATTENDANT ON PA - O/S

Our flight is going to land for refuel in Alma Atta, the capital of Kazakhstan. We kindly ask our passengers to wait patiently.

CONNIE

Dad, you think somewhere in China someone's telling a story about us too?

DAD

Anything's possible, Connie.

The MAN from the CHORUS takes a step towards DAD and motions for him to turn the page.

SCENE EIGHT - QONG-GE BEGS FOR MERCY

THE STAGE CHANGES. THE LIGHTING IS DIM. IT'S NIGHT.

CHORUS (MAN)

Night has fallen. Qong-Ge rolled in her bed and could not close an eye.

CHORUS (WOMAN)

She held her little bracelet to her heart. Worrying about her father ate at her like a silkworm.

DAD

(continuing)

Finally, she decided to do something. She put on her nicest gown, left the foundry and went to the Imperial Palace to beg the EMPEROR for his mercy upon her father.

THE STAGE changes. THE IMPERIAL PALACE. QONG-GE IS STANDING IN FRONT OF THE EMPEROR. THE EMPRESS STANDS TOWARDS THE BACK, EAVESDROPPING.

QONG-GE

(to the EMPEROR)

Oh Imperial Father, you too have children
You hold them at night when they're scared.
My Lord, father of China, please help my father.
Please promise that his life will be spared.

THE EMPRESS STEPS FORWARD AND STANDS OPPOSITE QONG-GE.

EMPRESS

No! The Emperor will grant nothing more

Neither to you nor your heavy handed father.
 His fate has been sealed by the Ruler
 And this conversation will not go on any farther.

QONG-GE
(to EMPEROR)

Oh Imperial Father
 A furnace burning and bubbling -
 that's how this world was formed
 Is there not a place for an imperfect sound?
 Silver, copper, gold - pure contrasts, we know
 A boundary also lies between fire and snow
 What connects all to each other?
 You are a ruler, but also a father.
 In the name of Kwin-Yan, the benevolent goddess
 Grant my father a spark of hope.

EMPEROR

I will fulfill your wish, cymbal-girl
 For I have the power.
 Kwan-Yu's life - I will hold as a marker
 With my good graces
 I will grant a final test.
 I will fulfill your request
 This is my commandment -
 Silver, copper, gold
 The bell-founder must grind
 To fill my missing part inside.

The EMPRESS comes out of hiding and stands in front of QONG-GE.

EMPRESS

But if the required sound won't be heard
 Tomorrow he shall die, that's an oath
 The knife is already at his throat.

CHORUS

That's the decree
 The bell of all bells
 Silver, copper and gold
 Someone must fuse them, or else...

EMPRESS

Go a search all of China for a new father!

CONNIE
(horrified)

A new father? There is no "new father"!!!

**SCENE NINE - THE THIRD ATTEMPT - QONG-GE JUMPS INTO THE
 BOILING CAULDRON**

QONG-GE runs on the stage. The CHORUS encircles her, urging her.

CHORUS

Hurry, Qong-Ge
Run, run at once
For you will not get
Another fair chance
Destiny is knocking
Here comes the threat
The Ruler his promise - soon he'll forget
Run quickly, it's the end of the day
For He who giveth will taketh away.

QONG-GE continues to run. CONNIE tries to run after her.

CHORUS

Hurry, Qong-Ge
Run, run at once
For you will not get
Another fair chance...

CONNIE

Someone must know the answer to this riddle. How to fuse gold, silver and copper together? My worst class is chemistry. Dad, do something! Please!!!

DAD

(exhausted)

I don't know what to do.

The CHORUS approaches DAD.

CHORUS

Not everything has gone wrong
Dad, do not give up, don't despair
An image is seen in the flame
Pay attention, beware!
The benevolent goddess
This is her face
She will bring order, put things into place.
Remember - a bonfire burning
Remember - the sun is turning
Illuminated drops in the grass
Exploding vessels of colorful glass
Piercing torches through the dark
Fire – this is its spark!

DAD

(reading from the gong)

Oh, benevolent Goddess of Fire – here lies the answer, said Qong-Ge to

herself. If fire is the ancient power that melts all matter, and dissolves the most stubborn of knots...

(to CONNIE)

She has the answer.

CHORUS

Even an iceberg from the pole breaks
And in the sealed heart, a fissure cracks
For an eternal candle will always cast its ray
Even after tomorrow's star is gone, fades away.

QONG-GE waves with support to her father who is bound and shackled.

QONG-GE

Not everything has gone wrong
Dad, do not give up, don't despair
An image is be seen in the flame
Pay attention, beware!
The benevolent goddess
This is her face
She will bring order
Put things into place.

THE STAGE CHANGES: A FLAME COMES OUT OF AN ALTAR. QONG-GE BOWS BEFORE IT. THE WOMAN IN THE CHORUS BECOMES THE GODDESS OF FIRE. CONNIE KNEELS AT THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ALTAR.

QONG-GE

Madame of the flame
Ignite some hope
Wisdom you must spread
So my father will be heard
This sound I must now create
Madame, I beg, it cannot wait
This quiver, the spirit of the string
Is it inside?
Where does this mystery hide?

GODDESS OF FIRE (FEMALE FLIGHT ATTENDANT)

(to QONG-GE)

The light will enter you
I grant you my spark and my ray
However, this is my condition
My order you must obey
The sound won't be born
Until you fulfill this part
A gift of humans
Must be given to art
Into the mixture, into this mud

You must pour human blood
You must pour human blood!

**CHORUS (MALE FLIGHT
ATTENDANT)**

(from behind, silently)

Jump! Jump!
Spark, a flame in the dark
A candle in the night
Soon it will ignite
The promised light.

CONNIE stands up next to the other side of the altar.

GODDESS OF FIRE

The light will enter you
I give you my spark.

**CHORUS (MALE FLIGHT
ATTENDANT)**

(from behind, silently)

Jump! Jump!

CONNIE

(to GODDESS OF FIRE)

I don't understand what you're saying.

(to QONG-GE)

Do you?

QONG-GE

(to herself)

The sound will come from me
This quiver, the spirit of the string
I am the missing ring.

The EMPRESS appears, from behind the bound and shackled KWAN-YU.

EMPRESS

Will the bell-founder carry out the task?
This we must ask
Maybe the artist is false
He's nothing but a mask!

CONNIE

(panicked)

What's going to happen, Dad? What?

The EMPEROR and EMPRESS appear.

CHORUS

Kwan-Yu the bell-founder, kneel
Before your master, the immortal Emperor.

EMPRESS

The third attempt, the final test, you knave
Who is the ruler and who is the slave.

**CHORUS (MALE FLIGHT
ATTENDANT)**
(quietly)

Jump! Jump!
Spark, spark the light
Soon it will ignite!

**GODDESS OF FIRE (FEMALE
FLIGHT ATTENDANT)**

The sound won't be born
Until you fulfill this part
A gift of humans
Must be given to art
Into the mixture, into this mud
You must pour human blood
You must pour human blood!

QONG-GE

The sound will come from me
This quiver, the spirit of the string
I am the missing ring.

DAD pushes the gong aside.

DAD

Enough! I don't want to hear anymore. That's it. We will never retell this legend again. Why did mom like it so much? Too bad we can't toss this gong out the window.

CONNIE lifts the gong and decisively hands it to her father.

DAD

No! We don't need the end.

CONNIE

And if we say the the end doesn't exist, doesn't it?

DAD, miserable, opens the gong and reads against his will.

DAD

The cauldron is boiling
Bubbling, scalding, feverish, burning, churning, swarming.
Silver, copper, gold - the river's overflowing.

KWAN-YU

The cauldron is boiling
Bubbling, scalding, feverish, burning, churning, swarming.

QONG-GE gets up. She spreads her arms and approaches the cauldron.

CHORUS

Jump! Jump!

EMPEROR

Emptiness, emptiness, emptiness...

QONG-GE joining the whispers which grow into a chant.

CONNIE

(to QONG-GE)

What are you doing?!!

QONG-GE jumps into the cauldron.

CONNIE, DAD AND KWAN-YU

(screaming)

No!!!

KWAN-YU beats at his chains frantically. The perfect sound is heard.

CHORUS

(in perfect harmony)

Qong-Ge...

The EMPEROR applauds. He touches his cheeks. Tears flow from his eyes. Finally he is able to cry.

EMPRESS

What a strange sight
Is this true? Is it right?
Haven't seen that in years
The Emperor, he is in tears.

EMPEROR

(crying)

Perfect, perfect!
No more an outcast!
I'm like any other man - at last.

Connie burst in tears. Dad is stunned. He is not able to continue reading the legend. He hugs her. The CHORUS takes over as the narrator.

CHORUS

A miserable father. What wouldn't he do to get his daughter back? The bell-founder envied the deaf so much. For he wished he would never hear another sound again.

DAD

(with sorrow)

If I would have known before, I wouldn't have told you this story, Connie. It's so sad.

The CHORUS approaches CONNIE and takes her aside.

CHORUS

(preaching)

We are the chorus
Passing on the message
For worse or for better
Our task is to teach every maker
For he who listens now
Perhaps he'll get it later.
Spirit of the string, a sacrifice it needs
The true creator must pain and bleed
There is no perfect sound
Without a human's blood
Without a human's blood.

CONNIE

(to the CHORUS)

Get out of here with your message! No one needs to sacrifice any blood!

DAD

Connie, that's just a legend. Calm down.

CONNIE

In my legend there's not going to be any blood!

DAD

(surprised)

Your legend????!

FLIGHT ATTENDANT ON PA - O/S

Our aircraft is now cruising over the Tian-Shan mountain range. Soon we will reach Shenyang, the largest city in North East China. From there, we'll pass over the barren Gobi Desert and cross Mongolia toward our final destination - Beijing.

DAD

Connie, if you want to go back to Tel-Aviv, we can stay in the plane. We just won't get off. The State of Israel will find herself another ambassador.

CONNIE

What happens when the legend is over, Dad?

DAD

Maybe there's another ending after the official ending, who knows?

DAD smiles at her.

CONNIE
(*determined*)

I will now solve the riddle
Where does the secret hide
Even though you are the father
And I'm but the child.
Give me the gong.

DAD gives CONNIE the gong. CONNIE opens it. She flips through the pages and finds the place where they left off. From there she begins to read again.

CONNIE
Found it... Oh benevolent Goddess of Fire – here lies the answer said Qong-Ge to herself. If fire is the ancient power that melts all matter, and dissolves the most stubborn of knots...

SCENE TEN - CONNIE RE-WRITES THE END OF THE LEGEND

CONNIE turns to the CHORUS and once again, arranges the woman as GODDESS OF FIRE. (CONNIE is now acting as the director).

CONNIE
(*to QONG-GE*)

Madame of the flame
Ignite some hope
This sound I must bring...

CONNIE pushes QONG-GE towards the GODDESS OF FIRE. Beckoning her to kneel, she too kneels beside her and they both turn towards the GODDESS.

CONNIE AND QONG-GE

This quiver, the spirit of the string
Is it inside?
Where does this mystery hide?

GODDESS OF FIRE (FEMALE)

Spark, a flame in the dark
A candle in the night
Soon it will ignite
The promised light.

CONNIE interrupts the GODDESS OF FIRE's song.

CONNIE
Qong-Ge didn't listen to the Goddess of Fire's advice, because gods don't always know what's best for humans.

CONNIE pulls QONG-GE to her feet in front of the cauldron.

CONNIE
(Commanding)

Don't jump!

QONG-GE

No?

CONNIE

Absolutely not!

QONG-GE
(determined)

I won't jump!

Everyone freezes.

**CHORUS (MALE FLIGHT
ATTENDANT)**

What will happen without the necessary sacrifice?

**CHORUS (FEMALE FLIGHT
ATTENDANT)**

How will the bell be made without blood?

EMPRESS

And what about the ruler decree? What will come of it?
Silver, copper and gold...

They surround CONNIE.

CONNIE

These materials don't mix, they won't mold
There isn't just one single voice in our world.

EMPEROR

So where will I find the perfect sound?
This thing which I miss...

CONNIE

Searching for it - that always exists
And by the way, my disappointed Sir
Why only one, single sound?
An abundance is out there to be found
Listen - around and above -
Everything we care for and love!

(she makes a sound)

A flying dove

DAD

The blow of the breeze...

THEY MAKE A SOUND.

QONG-GE

The rustling of autumn leaves...

THEY MAKE A SOUND.

CONNIE

The crow of the rooster, courting the hen...

THEY MAKE A SOUND.

QONG-GE

The wave of the sea embracing the sand!

THEY MAKE A SOUND.

CONNIE

Babies sneeze...

EMPEROR

The buzzing dance of the bees...

CONNIE

(to the EMPRESS)

EMPRESS

The thunder of cannons and guns...

SILENCE.

CONNIE

No!

SILENCE.

EMPRESS

The footsteps of fugitives on the run?

SILENCE.

EMPRESS

The wounded scream?

CONNIE

In your dream!
Not in my legend!

The EMPRESS turns to the EMPEROR and touches him.

EMPRESS*(hesitantly)*

Children laughing...

CONNIE nods in agreement. The EMPEROR turns to the EMPRESS.

EMPEROR*(taking her hand in his)*

Hearts are finally opening.

EVERYONE MAKES THE SOUNDS OF BABIES LAUGHING.

CONNIE

And that, for me, is my chosen ending!

Please, no more human price

My own perfect endings suffice

Away, away with bloody sacrifice.

(to the audience)

Kwan-Yu and Qong-Ge crossed over the Great Wall of China and began to wander. Everywhere the father and daughter went, they would leave a small gift - a gong which they made together. People have been passing these beautiful gifts from one to another for centuries, and one gong finally made it back to Beijing. That's how Mom got it.

CONNIE hangs a bell chain upon KWAN-YU's neck and hands out a bell to everyone on stage.

KWAN-YU*(To the audience and cast)*

A gift to you

People on a journey, going on a quest

In this world we are all just travelling guests

All musical tools are brothers at best

The sound of your soul will always be blessed.

CHORUS

Ding dong, ding dong, nothing is lost

We will create notes and more notes

Together we shall listen, around and above

To this small song of caring and love

Sounds of silver, copper and gold

This story will always be told

The voice of Qong-Ge forever will ring

Her bell continues to play and to sing.

QONG-GE approaches CONNIE.

EVERYONE

Thousands of butterflies are trembling around

Upon a great ladder we go up and down

The world is many, so many voices

Never melting to one, never melting to one.

QONG-GE wears CONNIE's bracelet.

QONG-GE & CONNIE

Ding dong, ding dong
 Sounds circle around
 Ding dong, ding dong
 Wherever I go
 I'll always add my own sound.

KWAN-YU begins to play all of the bells, as does the CHORUS. The EMPEROR, EMPRESS and DAD join in. Everyone plays.

EVERYONE

Thousands of butterflies are trembling around
 Upon a great ladder we go up and down
 The world is many, so many voices
 Never melting to one, never melting to one.

QONG-GE & CONNIE

(to the audience)

Ding dong, ding dong
 Sounds circle around
 Ding dong, ding dong
 Wherever you go
 You'll always add **your own** sound.

THE END