

Chinese fest at Pier 21 a cultural cornucopia

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN Arts Reporter | 4:47 AM

Pierre Elliott Trudeau was many different things to many people, but one thing he did has become fundamental to Canadian culture: the passing of a bill in 1971 which modernized Canada by officially declaring it a multicultural nation.

Halifax's Mu Lan Chinese Cultural Centre and Pier 21 celebrated the Chinese Mid-Autumn Moon Festival in Heritage Hall on Monday night, with an evening of poetry by George Elliott Clarke, Anna Quon, Jia Tsu Thompson and Cheng Sait Chia.

The second half of the program featured excerpts by jazz pianist D. D. Jackson from Quebecite, and Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path, two jazz operas he wrote with libretti by Clarke. Soprano Janice Jackson and tenor John Lindsay-Botten sang arias and duets. Henry Bishop provided a half-hour of African drumming as the audience came into the hall.

Long at three hours, it was yet a happy affair. How could it not have been with Clarke's hearty laugh ringing throughout the hall and that perpetual grin of mischievous glee?

Clarke read his What I Believe to set the tone. It's a rapturous endorsement of the dignity and equality of all beings which he paced with enthusiastic hand gestures hammering the accents home. Thompson followed him with her own translation of the poem into Chinese.

Thompson contributed her own short poem in English about immigrant identity (Someone in Between) and read five poems from Cheng Sait Chia's Turned Clay in Chinese.

Clarke continued with two readings from Quebecite and Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path, as well as an excerpt from Whydah Falls in which the principal character, X, writes a letter home to his girlfriend Shelley after a long absence abroad. Clarke modelled the letter on Ezra Pound's famous translation of Chinese poet Li Po's The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter. Shao-Pin Luo then read a Chinese translation of the excerpt.

The Chinese tones and cadences clearly followed the same considerations of accent, rhythm and melody as English poems do. Appreciation of the poetic skill of these Chinese writers and speakers required nothing else but our willing attention. Anglophones listened raptly. Chinese speakers also got the jokes.

At intermission we drank exquisitely delicate Jasmine tea and munched almond cookies and tiny cakes filled with minced red-bean curd. Delicious and refreshing.

Back in Heritage Hall we listened to the Love Theme from Quebecite. Jackson's extravagantly florid instrumental over a jumpy bass line was the kind of composition Chopin might have written had he been a jazz composer. Lindsay-Botten and Janice Jackson sang a love duet called Lushly as Malcolm Bates and Colette Chan, who are based on D. D. Jackson's African-Canadian father and Chinese mother.

Seven excerpts from Jackson-Clarke's Trudeau followed, including Tahiti, where Trudeau first meets Margaret. Jackson brought down the house with her rendition of Satisfaction, a star turn from the opera in which a rebellious, sexy Margaret kicks up her heels as she liberates herself by partying with the Rolling Stones. Jackson's physical enthusiasm and the astonishing power of her high notes earned her prolonged applause and shouts of approval.