

Henry Kissinger was one of several dignitaries invited by the Metropolitan Opera's general manager, Peter Gelb, to the final dress rehearsal, last week, of "Nixon in China," the opera by John Adams that reenacts the historic state visit that Richard Nixon made in 1972 and once described as "the week that changed the world." Kissinger was too busy to attend, being preoccupied with writing up his own version of that event, in a new book that he is planning to call "On China." On the telephone the other day, he explained that the book examines the interaction between the United States and China from the revolution of 1949 to the present. As for the opera, he said he had heard that he is unflatteringly represented in his role as Nixon's national-security adviser, a part that is sung by a bass baritone. A friend of his who had seen the opera when it was first performed, in 1987, had suggested that its creators were having "fun" at his expense, but, Kissinger said, "this friend might have underestimated my level of tolerance."

Many of Kissinger's colleagues from the Nixon Administration did accept Gelb's invitation to the rehearsal and to a Chinese feast that followed, at Shun Lee West. Among them were Winston Lord, who in 1972 was Kissinger's special assistant, and who sat in Mao Zedong's library during Nixon's first meeting with the chairman; Nicholas Platt, then a deputy director in the State Department; and Ronald Walker, a special assistant to President Nixon. Gelb also invited journalists who were on the trip, including Dan Rather and Bernard Kalb, of CBS; Helen Thomas, of U.P.I.; Av Westin, of ABC; and Max Frankel, of the *Times*, whose coverage of the trip earned him a Pulitzer Prize.

Seated among the diners, and listening to their mostly polite comments about the production, were the opera's composer and conductor, John Adams; the director, Peter Sellars; and the set designer, Adrienne Lobel. Winston Lord, a trim, gray-haired man of seventy-three, who was the most knowledgeable person present on the subject of the visit, had many things to say.

"Over all, I admired the opera, with the important exception of the gratuitous and ugly portrayal of Kissinger," he said, and then proceeded to read from notes he had made during the rehearsal:

"The first act dramatized the central elements of the Nixon visit. The arrival and famous handshake stirred forty-year-old emotions in me. The Nixon-Mao meeting captured the verbal approach and body language of both protagonists—Nixon, earnest and awkward, and Mao projecting will power. The President wanted to talk about issues; the chairman kept the dialogue at the philosophical level. The libretto was superb in expressing Mao's elusive brushstrokes, filled with allusions and metaphors that were either subtle policy statements or senile detours.

"The second act," he continued, "dealt with Mrs. Nixon's sightseeing excursions and recalled the Potemkin-village dimension of the visit. Throughout the opera, she is the one totally sympathetic character."

Lord's wife, the Shanghai-born author Bette Bao Lord, was seated next to him at one of five round tables piled with plates of smoked carp, Cantonese roast pork, and plum-blossom dumplings. She admitted that she had come for the food, not the opera, which she had skipped, so as not to miss a midday tennis date. (She has tickets to see it later in the run.)

"Then the opera falls apart, as it moves from reality to fantasy," Lord said. He stiffened slightly. "I'm prepared to give some slack to poetic license, but making Kissinger a lecherous, cruel character is beyond the pale. It turns a heroic figure into a cardboard monster. There is no artistic rationale that explains this. One can only suspect a personal vendetta by the creators. It is a travesty and sullies what otherwise is an estimable work."

He went on, "In the third act, the opera regains its footing as the principals lie in bed, recapturing both their histories and the meaning of what has just transpired." He added, "This final scene is marred by another unnecessary putdown of Kissinger. But it sews together various themes, including surface versus reality and the struggles between Chinese factions."

Nicholas Platt, an elegant man with a head of silvery hair, stood up and read an account of meeting with Nixon in his suite on the last day of the visit, February 28, 1972:

"The President was sitting in a flowered silk dressing gown over an open-collar shirt and trousers, a long, fat cigar in one hand and a tall Scotch-and-soda in the other. . . . What an extraordinary-looking man he was up close! Huge head, small body, duck feet, puffy cheeks, 'about three walnuts apiece,' my notes indicated, and pendant jowls hanging down." Platt described how Nixon patted him on the back and said, "Well, you China boys are going to have a lot more to do from now on."

Besides Kissinger, another absentee was John Burns, of the *Times*. He had covered the trip for the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, and, being detained in London, sent a letter of reminiscences to his fellow-correspondents. He reminded them of the night he had pocketed Nixon's chopsticks and some other mementos after a grand banquet. "The inimitable Helen Thomas saw me, and reported it on U.P.I.," Burns wrote. The next thing he knew, a New York curio dealer had cabled him and offered him twenty thousand dollars for the loot. "Fool that I was, I turned that down, thinking it somewhat scuzzy of a reporter to profit from the curio trade. So those items now sit in the Nixon Presidential Library, in San Clemente, and I am still poor as a church mouse. Lesson learned, as they say."

—Gay Talese