Henry Kissinger was one of several dignitaries invited by the Metropolitan Opera’s general manager, Peter Gelb, to the 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.

“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 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

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