

THE LANTERN PROCESSION

(Two parallel monodramas)

By Jana Bodnárová

Translation: Heather Trebatická

Characters:

She 1 A European woman from the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries

She 2 A Chinese woman from the period of the Ch'ing dynasty at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries

(The stage is divided into two parts by a taut white sheet. It can be of brocade, whose whiteness symbolised sorrow for the Chinese - they used it to line all the roads along which a funeral procession passed.

During the play the women - in stroboscopic flashes - will press their faces, palms, their whole bodies into the tightly stretched fabric, as if they wish to communicate or hear each other through time and space.

Darkness. Silence.

The right-hand side of the stage - the space occupied by the Chinese woman - lights up. In the background a video projection shows an enlarged white Chinese lantern swinging to the sound of a strong wind, until the candle inside sets the paper on fire. The lantern flares up.

In stroboscopic lighting, to the sound of stylised music inspired by that of China, She 2 enters in a stylised costume, taking tiny steps typical of Chinese women of that period.)

She 2: *(Still in stroboscopic lighting.)* I am an old geisha. Ten thousand things no longer await me. Only, perhaps, the convent below the rocks with the ancient pine trees. Clothes made from coarse cloth. Scabs on my shaven skull. Bitter tea. The past?! Huh! Tiny lights over the river! Even those will soon be quenched by the cold rain.

(In a comic imitation of Chinese singing, she sings an extract from a song sung by the heroine Tach Ti-er in the classical Chinese play Pavilion Above the River.)

She 2:

Desolate is this room, where only my shadow now lives.

The powder has flaked off, the rouge long faded,

When twilight falls, my sorrow is greatest.

(A bout of coughing interrupts her singing. She 2 makes the "sad sleeve" gesture from plays of the khun-ch'ü type: she lifts her arm to her eyes, her head is bent, hinting at weeping.

Suddenly, with her whole body and expression, she changes the situation. She plays a little girl. The stage gradually lights up.)

She 2: Papa? Tell the servant to run to the bazaar and buy me some fruit. And get him to bring me a new china doll! I won't break it this time! I promise! Will you let him buy me some date cakes too? I'm five years old, Papa. My heart is not yet encased in a rush mat. Or in silk. It is naked and lively. Like a monkey. Because it's the Clear and Bright Festival. I'm going on a trip with you to the graves of our ancestors... Or is it already the Mid-Autumn Festival? The wind is blowing from the northern lake, from the Black Horse. I can hear shouts. Now whispers. Are they the voices of the plum leaves...? Papa?!

(The left side of the stage lights up - the space occupied by the European woman. A video projection gradually appears in the background: a large picture of a man in a suit and with a hat on his head, standing with his feet apart and smoking a cigarette.

She 1 enters, dressed in a white dress like a little girl at her confirmation. She stands facing the projected picture of the man.)

She 1: *(In awe and admiration.)* Daddy?! Will you buy me some Turkish delight and candied violets? They're sweets that look like purple flowers. Will you take me to the shooting gallery at the circus and win me a cellophane rose? I'll be good now, Daddy. I won't pick my scabs. I promise! I'll sit quietly while you play chess in the coffee bar. Quiet as a mouse. I won't kick anyone under the table any more. I won't knock the waitress's tray out of her hands with my head. I won't tell the man you're playing chess with that he stinks like a skunk. I'll be as you want me to be, Daddy... Just as you want, Daddy dear...

(The picture of the man begins to move, the "little girl" trots here and there, following his movements. Then she cries out in a terrified voice.)

She 1: Daddy! Hold my hand! Don't go so fast! They've brought the prisoners out for a walk... One of them might turn me into a wooden doll. Hide me in his tracksuit. Take me out in his cell... In the prison up there. In the castle overlooking our town. Because there are magic tricks, Daddy...

(In stroboscopic lighting she leans her head against the dividing sheet.)

(The right side of the stage is lit up.)

She 1: There are such tricks, Da...ddy...

She 2: Papa? When are you going to finish smoking that pipe? After the fish they prepared you for supper? It stinks of sea rot and the sake in your little bowl. Papa, when will they take us out on the litter? Because maybe it's the Dragon Lantern Festival. But when we get out, hold my hand. Two monks are approaching. They may smile and try to persuade you to put me in their care. Because nothing but misfortune awaits both of us. Or are they ghosts? Papa, you know that on hot afternoons the ghosts of wise men wander through the world. They're not looking for elixirs of life. They are looking for an elixir of everlasting dreams... They eat little girls!

(Stroboscopic lighting on She 1, who presses up to the sheet in terror.

Music. She 2 dances a few steps.

The left side of the stage lights up.)

She 2: They eat little girls...!

She 1: *(Calming down.)* They've gone. They laughed out loud. But the prisoner with the wild eyes didn't take me. Why didn't you hold my hand? I was frightened. I was terribly frightened! Daddy! Don't be angry with me! I won't reproach you for anything. Anyway, the prisoners had their hands in chains. And you're the best in the world. You're so good to me! Thank you for that silk dog. The one... *(The picture of the man disappears now, as if he has moved to the side of the stage and from there descended among the audience. The girl follows him with her gaze and keeps talking, her face now towards the audience.)* made of white threads. With the glass eyes. Why didn't you let me fish it out of the river when it slipped from my hand? I didn't want to drown it. Really! It had such a lovely little head. When I was in bed in the dark, I used to press it up to my cheek. It warmed me like a lamp. Because you and Mummy didn't want the light on in my room. The war was already over, but you still had to save, didn't you, Daddy? You couldn't buy me many toys, could you? When Mummy drew a chicken, she gave me the intestines to play with. They were warm. I could feel sand in them. Beautiful, shiny intestines. *(Stamps her foot crossly.)* But they were dead! Terribly dead! And I wanted live toys. *(Once more in a pampered tone.)* But at least I had those intestines, didn't I, Daddy? I played with them, pretending they were my dead ancestors. I scraped a hole in the ground for them under a bush in the garden. There were snails on the branches of that bush. They looked like my intestines wrapped up in a handkerchief. But at least the snails were alive. I pulled them off the branches. They oozed an awful lot of slime. I didn't do anything to them. Well...

just once. I put the snails in the grass. I stamped on them. Like this. They burst. My feet slipped and slid on them. That was the time when you broke all the records on the tiled floor of our room. You told Mummy you would shoot her... But you didn't. You just pushed her against the wall in the kitchen with your knee. You pulled her dress up to her tummy. It was a pity you broke them all. There was such beautiful music on those records! Do you remember? Sometimes you would pick me up in your arms. You whirled around and danced with me... We spun like a black record on the gramophone. I'd feel dizzy. I clung to your neck. And you held me tight.

Sound: Dean Martin sings a schmaltzy hit: Return to me, oh, my dear I'm so lonely. Hurry back, hurry back, oh, my love, I'm your... (The girl sings with the singer and dances as the light fades into darkness.)

Darkness. The right side of the stage lights up

She 1: *(Out of the dark.)* Like a black record on the gramophone.

She 2: Papa?! Why didn't you hold my hand? The monks had torn robes. After all, you always say that I am the most beautiful jewel in the world. Your most precious jade. That you gave away peaches when I was born and maybe even ginseng to our poor relatives. You always cuddle me when you come to the Inner Compound. You sit me on our kang and surround me with silk pillows. Buy me artificial flowers and butterflies. My servants giggle foolishly when you plait them into my hair with your own hands. As if I was big already! Like my aunts and cousins in our family's yamen. Or like my mother, who wears paper flowers in her shining hair and then the spoon for cleaning my ears that I long to have. You're so kind, Papa! You touch my forehead with yours and you say that I am as radiant as the beautiful wives of an ancient king. All that is left of his palace now is the ruins the moon shines down on. You will laugh and throw back your head with its long pigtail when I kick my servant Wild Goose in the leg for bringing me black eggs again and a bowl of cabbage. Even my dog refuses to eat it. The one you gave me. That silly white puppy doesn't even want a rice cake. I bite my tongue. My lips turn white. From pain and sorrow. Because evil spirits are preparing a sad fate for you. You don't take me out any longer. You smoke opium. The moon drops its nets over you. You have a strange laugh and you send me to bow to the Bodhisattva. The servant girl Enchanting Little Fox lets my hair down and undoes my silk jacket. She gives me my china doll, so I won't be afraid of the moon in the night. It shines through the muslin curtains. Stares

like a wild old man. Maybe a demon from the underworld has climbed up on to it. It could, couldn't it, Papa?!

(The left side of the stage lights up.)

She 2: A demon from the underworld...

She 1: *(Declaiming breathlessly.)* Daddy? It was me who once tipped the bullets out of all those little boxes you hid in the loft. I threw them into the river. But I didn't find your gun. I would have thrown that into the water too. Was that the reason why there was no more music in our house? You never danced with Mummy again. You didn't press her up against the kitchen wall and Mummy never broke the glass in the kitchen dresser with her fist again. *(Sighs.)* Mummy left us. Cleared out, just like that. But at least she didn't tell anyone whose side you were on in the war, did she, Daddy? She didn't breathe a word! She said they would have shut you up for ever in a prison like the one in the castle overlooking our town if we had told anyone what you had done to someone in the war... That's what she shouted in your face. Those were her words! But who would've been left to look after me? That was it, wasn't it? Daddy, I don't even know... Where did you hide that terrible black leather coat? It used to hang in your cupboard. Mummy took it out once and stamped on it. A good thing you never wore it. You would have looked like a sorcerer, like a vampire... And you're so good, Daddy, dear... You buy me sweets and figs and Turkish delight and ... and you bought me a doll's pram... Do you remember? That was when Olina came to live with us. She sewed me a dark school dress with a white collar and said that she would teach me to play the mandolin. She wasn't like Mummy. Mummy had brown hair with big waves. She let me brush it to make it shine... But I wasn't allowed to touch Olina's peroxide blonde hair. She would jerk her head away as if bitten by a snake. And she didn't have deep eyes like my mother. Hers popped out like a snail. Her red mouth stuck out in front, because she had long teeth. Once I dreamed that that red mouth was opening wider and wider and... and... that it was about to bite a piece of flesh from my hand. Maybe even bone and all. Da...Dad...dy?! *(In stroboscopic lighting She 2 can be seen pressing her hand towards She 1, as if she wished to calm her partner and during the following short monologue She 1 does the same.)*

(The right side of the stage lights up.)

She 1: A piece of flesh... bone and all...

She 2: Life is a horrible mess! Cold grips my heart. My bed is cold. It's freezing outside. Only a fragment is left of my soul. The rooks have gone to rest. I don't want to dream! All around there is confusion and strange voices! Maybe it is the wind outside chasing the leaves.

(Music.

For a while She 2 dances in stroboscopic lighting, in a stylised imitation of Chinese classical theatre, accompanied by music from a string instrument.

Both sides of the stage are lit up. While the Chinese woman dances, She 1 stands on a stool and plays the mandolin.)

She 1: Daddy, why did you beat Olin and kick her in the tummy? She played the mandolin so beautifully! She wanted to teach me too. Yes, she did. But then she began... do you still remember? She began to drink. She stopped dyeing her hair. Grey wires stuck out of her head. When she drank from the bottle for a long time, her red lipstick got smudged around her mouth. She looked as if she was covered in blood. Like a fox gorging on a rabbit.

(The girl jumps off the stool and begins to stamp on the mandolin. She 2 is already in the dark.)

She 1: And when you broke her mandolin, like this, Olin stopped wearing a brocade dressing-gown. She lounged on the sofa for days on end in a scruffy slip... with a torn shoulder strap.

There was a black butterfly decorated with mother-of-pearl on the mandolin. *(In a whisper.)* Daddy... you don't know about my treasure yet... In a box... the one that had Cuban cigars in before... that you once gave me for Christmas. I keep that butterfly... You know... the one from the broken mandolin. I've still got it in that box... Daddy! Promise me you won't be angry! That you won't tear my hair! Grab me by the shoulder like a rag doll. Because it makes me shake all over. My silly heart almost bursts. Well, I'll tell you. I have a bit... but only a little, a tiny little, you must believe me, well, I have a bit of Mummy's hair in there. She once cut a bit off mine when she was giving me a bath. And then she let me cut a piece off hers. Maybe there are fleas in it by now, anyway. Daddy, don't be cross! If you really want me to, I'll throw it away. Mummy's silly, flea-ridden hair. What did you say? What else have I got there? This'll make you laugh! A little glass bottle. A little aeroplane with evaporated perfume. It was you who bought me that little glass plane. Have you forgotten all about that? It was after that glider crashed and the pilot fell into a tree near our house. He was scratched

and bleeding all over when he crawled down. Mummy treated his wounds. Maybe she even licked them. She made him tea with honey. I was afraid of that pilot. I lay under the kitchen table and howled all the time. He left. I wanted that glass aeroplane. It was in the chemist's window. You bought it for me. Or... Or could it have been that pilot who bought it? When he came back to see us once with a bunch of carnations and ferny asparagus? I'm not sure now *(Hits her head wildly.)* I'm not sure about anything any more. I get everything mixed up. My head is as stupid as Olina's now. They took her away in an ambulance, covered all over with vomit. But it wasn't because of you they took her away for ever, was it? Even though you shouted that you would kick her stupid, drunken head in...

(The right side of the stage lights up.)

She 1: *(Out of the dark.)* You wouldn't do that, would you, Daddy?

She 2: Ah, let the cold moon laugh if it likes! Memories are like dreams. They belong to me alone. They can wind their way up to heaven, if I want. Even what has already been is only an illusion. A dragon lantern. It burned like a piece of waste paper! Ugh! Everything is tangled up. Like when a silkworm spins its cocoon. *(Suddenly stops with a happy smile, as if she had seen a ghost.)* Grannie, Grannie, you've come to see me. You've brought me a little bag of perfume? Are you going to make sure the servants feed the caterpillars with mulberry leaves? The sweet fruits of the mulberry tree. I use them to colour my lips. I pretend I am beautiful, like some duchess... *(Suddenly angry.)* Ah, fate decided ten thousand things beforehand. And for me a terrible world. *(In a hoarse voice she sings the song of the prostitute from the play Summer Snow:*

Thousands of gestures and words,
the thousand cloths that I weave,
will not hide the prostitute in me.

A lady powders her cheeks but lightly -
we paste it on thick
to shine really brightly!

She 2: No, no! I want to dream about a pavilion with a pearl curtain and music... *(The sound of a melody.)*

(The music comes to an end and the left side of the stage lights up.)

She 1: And then you mysteriously disappeared. Daddy! Was it because of that awful coat? Of black leather... like a devil!? Grandma was the only one who said you'd come back. She took me to her place, because Mummy had gone away with that pilot long before. Grandma was good, she sang religious songs... *(Sings in a shaky voice: Nearer to you, my Lord...)*

Sometimes she dipped bread in water and sprinkled it with granulated sugar. When I was good. Or when I went to buy her a herbal lotion. She took sips of it, because her knees hurt. And she said that you, her son, had vanished into thin air, but that at least she still had me. *(Stroboscopic illumination of the right side. She 2 now presses her whole face and palms into the white cloth.)*

She 1: And when I was irritable and scratched those scabs that kept appearing around my mouth, she gave me an infusion of poppy heads to drink. I would fall down black holes. Into dragons' throats. I jumped into a pile of clouds that had fallen to the ground from the sky, as if they were grey eiderdowns. That was to stop me killing myself when I fell. And Grandma sang and sang... that she wanted to be nearer to God, to the heavenly garden, into which our souls will fly like birds and our bodies will be just tiny lights...

(Left side of the stage lights up.)

She 2: *(Lying stretched out on the heated couch, she is covered with cushions, from which she then emerges.)* If I had dreams of Mama, I'd never want to wake up. *(Recalling.)* Mama is sitting on a warm, wide kchang. She is painting birds in a bamboo grove on silk. She is gasping for air. Her face is as white as the foam on water. *(She goes even deeper into her memories.)* My dear Little Pearl, your hair hasn't been combed again. Your father should punish your servant Wild Goose... That's what my mother is saying to me. But I am crying, I don't care about my hair. I would be happier if they unbound my feet. My toes have been pressed back under my soles. I walk on my heels. I can't sleep for the pain. Mama says that's how it must be, that I will have soles like golden lilies. They will thrill my future husband when he takes them in his palm. They say he will tremble all over from excitement. My little feet will be so tiny that I can wear the smallest shoes the merchants bring to the yamen. The merchants who supply our stores with wood, rice, spices, tea, silk and opium. But at least Mama has allowed me to lie beside her in bed at night and put my feet under her body. The blood throbs less in them then. Mama says: When I get well, dearest Little Pearl, the Heavens will make my dream come true - I shall take a boat to Peking, to the ruler's city, where there is amusing company, all kinds of people. We shall be received by the wife of a mandarin from

the imperial Academy. She will arrange for the chief eunuch to make you a companion to the secondary wives of the Son of the Heavens. Or at least to the wives of important literary men. The daughters of high dignitaries. They don't know how to paint such beautiful flowers on silk as you do by far. Or how to dance in the palace style. Lightly, even with your bound feet. *(Dances awkwardly on her heels.)* Or some prominent official who has already passed the state exams will take you for his wife. Then Mama reads to me from the Classical Books of Confucius, so I'll be educated. She doesn't want to play mah-jongg with me any longer. She doesn't want me to mix Chinese ink for her instead of her servant White Orchid, or clean her brushes and ink stone when she has finished writing characters. Later, with a tear glistening in her eye, she sadly read me the words of some poetess from a strange far-away land:

The road I must follow
leads from darkness to darkness -
Oh, Moon over the mountains,
please light my way
a little longer.

(The left half of the stage is lit up.)

She 2: The road...from darkness... to darkness...

She 1: When they had buried Grandma, they shut me up in a manor house, among many children. The house was surrounded by woods. The kind where goblins live... They roam through the forest and lie in wait for any child that escapes from the house. They give it something black to drink. The silly child forgets who it is. Then the goblins turn it into a forest child who belongs to no one. That's what the children in that big old house told me. They looked like goblins, too. They poked me and giggled. The children of lost mothers. I used to sleep in a room with seven other girls. I stopped talking. I just waited. They said you would come back, Daddy. That I was just learning discipline. It was cold there in the winter... I used to cover my head with the bedclothes and warm the space inside with my breath. Sometimes another girl would creep in beside me. She would hide under my duvet in my warmth...

(She strokes her face, shoulders, chest, crotch, legs...)

(Stroboscopic illumination of the right side of the stage.)

She 2: *(Sings a song of the prostitute Paner from the play Kuan Han-ch'ing The Temptress.)*

She 1 (*Presses herself to the sheet and listens.*)

She 2: The game of love is my game!

It's the game of the moon and the wind.

She 1: (*Left side of the stage fully lit.*) When I slept alone, I stroked my arms, my legs, everything, just everything. As if I were my own child... I told myself: my dear, dear, my pretty girl, my little girl... As if I were my own mother...

One day the warden summoned me to his room. Then several more times. Each time he unbuttoned my blouse. He spoke in a hoarse voice. He took my flannel nightdress off. Whenever he pressed his fingers into my flesh, grasped my bottom and bumped his tummy into me, I told myself that I would hide in my big toe. He couldn't reach me there. He held me in his arms like a live doll, but I was in my big toe. That's funny, isn't it, Daddy? (*With a sudden burst of anger.*) Where were you so long, damn it?! I was expecting you every morning. Before I opened my eyes, I could see you clearly coming into the hall. Where there were stuffed birds hanging on the walls, collecting the dust. I could see you standing there in the hall, lit up from behind by the sunshine. You'd have shouted that you'd kick all their stupid heads in if they didn't let me out of that prison at once. Maybe I would have broken down and cried at last. They used to say I had a horrible laugh, that I screeched like a peacock or a turkey. But I really wanted to sob out loud. That's funny, isn't it, Daddy? Really funny! Isn't it?

(*Right side of the stage lights up.*)

She 2: The road I must follow leads from darkness to darkness. Papa? I was told that Mama had already seen the contorted shadows of her dead ancestors in the sky. The doctor said that her yin pulse was beating louder than her yang pulse, which means the ch'i, the vital life force in her heart, was growing weaker. He made some medicines from the costly ginseng plant. Papa, you would have got hold of as much as two jins of it, if it could have prevented Mama from departing over the river of Death, where Paralysis and Insensibility busily ferry back and forth. You would, wouldn't you?

(*Standing in front of the mirror, she paints her eyebrows in the shape of butterfly antennae.*)

The servants were running up and down the terrace, giggling. They were chasing away the cats that kept disturbing Mama with their miaowing. Just then the thread of her breathing was broken.

They brought my other grandmother into the yamen on a litter. They ordered me to bang my head on the ground before her, but she lifted me up. She wailed in a high voice: Who will stroke my old head from now on? I was terribly afraid she would want me to, because Taoist and Buddhist monks were already sitting beside Mama in the Ceremony Hall, chanting sutras. Sacrificial money was being prepared for burning. I escaped from the Silk Pavilion. I rushed along the paths between the arbours and pagodas scattered among the rocks. Stunted pines were growing there. The leaves were turning yellow and the wind was howling. The chrysanthemums were turning brown. I just kept running on and on. Maybe I had seen a ghost, I don't know. But they caught me and brought me back to the Silk Pavilion...

I'm shaking all over, I have a fever and wild dreams. I'm not even going to walk at the head of the funeral procession. I hardly had the strength to break the precious vase beside the body of my dead mother. Grandma taught me to recite the promise that for the whole of my life I would bring sacrifices to my dead mother. They carried her in a carriage shrouded with white brocade. The procession walked along roads lined with white cloth. Through the window I heard the sounds of sad music.

(In stroboscopic light she makes a few dancing movements which in the old Chinese theatre expressed sorrow. She dances to the sound of sirens, because the scene with She 2 begins simultaneously.)

The left side of the stage lights up. She 1 enters wearing a grey overall. She is pushing a pram.)

Sound: Factory sirens. She 2 continues to dance for a while, then disappears in the darkness.)

She 1: (Walking quickly, almost running.) To the factory... from the factory... to the factory... from the factory... to the factory... from the factory... to the factory... from... Shut up in the factory. For hours on end. Days, years... Shut up in my head. Alone. Almost all the time. Walls all around, high walls...

(Suddenly shoves the pram away from her. Looks inquiringly into the auditorium, into her father's face.)

She 1: Daddy? When did you come back? Ah! I had turned into a woman by then. When I washed the dry blood stains off my clothes, I no longer felt embarrassed. Like a child, who is secretly living in a big, fleshy body with a musky smell. Yes, I came out of my big toe and I was no longer skin and bones when you came back. But my skin was no longer moist and firm either. And my hair didn't shine and send off sparks as if it was alive when I combed it. I had

already worked in the factory for years when I found you at last. *(She leans her whole body up against the sheet and rolls herself along it.)*

(The right side of the stage lights up.)

She 2: After the funeral the secondary wife wanted to take charge of the yamen. The stores and the account books. But I knew that she was setting a thousand traps. Perhaps she wished I would follow Mama to the underworld. She had a Taoist come to cure me of my illness with a medicine made of chrysanthemum pistils, plums, lotus flowers and rainwater. Only Wild Goose secretly brought me date cakes and brewed tea for me. Even so, I was sick all over the pillow embroidered with a moon and flowers. Every evening Wild Goose and Silken Thread took the bandages off my feet, washed my soles and rubbed ointment on them so they wouldn't fester. They cut the nails on my curled-up toes. Once the soles of my feet burned unbearably. I went into your room, Papa, to lie down beside you and slip my feet under you... to stop that terrible pain. It was agony. I couldn't breathe. But your secondary wife was sitting on you. Her clothes pulled up. She leapt off you as if bitten by a snake.

(She dances to express dark anger, her voice changing.)

She 2: I hope the pagoda crashes on your secondary wife and kills her! I hope it kills her two servants who make her beautiful for you! I hope those whores go through the gate of death and find themselves in the underworld of geishas and courtesans!

My face turned red and my nostrils were filled with the smell of a body not long dead. I met your secondary wife several times after she leapt off you with her tummy bare, Papa. She wasn't afraid to do wrong and drive me and my grandmother out of the Inner Compound. Because you were under her spell. You drank more and more sake and you smoked opium. You went to cockfights and dog races. Your secondary wife thought up ten thousand more intrigues. More furnaces went out in our porcelain factories. And as for me, my feet were agony. I embroidered crude flowers on silk, with butterflies flying over them. *(In a changed voice.)* I want Mama's ghost to come to me. But, Mama, powder your face with silken powder, so I won't be afraid when you appear.

(On the left side of the stage an enormous factory sewing machine is projected onto the back screen, together with a crude factory setting as seen by a seamstress bowing over her work. Sound: The amplified sound of many sewing machines.)

She 1: I found you after many, many years. Your little girl was already sewing soldiers' uniforms in a factory. Sometimes the sewing needle would pierce my nail or fingertips. (She puts her fingers in her mouth and sucks the blood). Look, Daddy, how deformed they are. *(She 2 is briefly lit up, showing her putting her fingers into her mouth, too.)* Those machines sewed at a crazy speed. You couldn't think while they were going. If you let yourself imagine something nice, in the street or the coffee bar... Ouch! You'd have spots of blood spurting right onto your forehead in no time. I had to think of nothing but army trousers and jackets. We sewed for the whole army. Purple patches appeared on my forearms from the coarse cloth. And a rash right up to my armpits. *(Cheerfully.)* But it was fun sometimes - they brought us muslin, silk, tulle and lace from the theatre workshop... We sewed skirts for ballet dancers. Yes, they said my work was very neat, the stitching precise. Well, the dozen women in the factory hall would go wild then. They had to amuse themselves somehow, otherwise the monotonous din of the machines would have driven them mad. We're going to clear our heads, they would say. They passed round the hat for a bottle of plum brandy. We would swig it down like men. We laughed. We just kept laughing. We dressed up in the army trousers, the jackets of gunners, tank crews, or whatever. I... at that time I was as slim as a wand... I used to dress up in ballet tutus. I looked like a fairy, like a sugar ring on a Christmas tree... Lord, how we all laughed! We put the radio on loud and danced around the factory hall. With each other, or by ourselves. They lifted me on to the foreman's table and I would do pirouettes and the splits...

(The woman takes off her grey overall and underneath she has a tightly-fitting, shimmering dress. She dances sensuously and passionately to one of Dean Martin's schmaltzy hits.)

She 1: All of a sudden the women scattered, like when you shoot into a crowd of sparrows. The foreman and shift leader had come back. Well, I never, my clever, little girl, how come I've never noticed you before? As shapely and juicy as a peach. Just take a bite. That's what the shift leader said to me. That hoary old man really did bite my calf. He pinched my thighs under the ballet skirt. And you didn't see your humiliated little girl. You didn't see me later, either, as a bride in a wedding dress with shirred sleeves and a flared skirt, which I secretly sewed in the factory. Because you were still missing, in hiding... from the lousy authorities and also from your little daughter with ribbons in her hair. *(For a while she dances in stroboscopic light simultaneously with the following scene.)*

(The right side of the stage lights up.)

She 2: What happened to you, Papa? Maybe your secondary wife called in a magician, who cut off a piece of your pigtail and thus stole your soul. Your secondary wife, daubed in perfume, is wasting her time trying to dance in front of you in the palace style. She waddles like a duck. She is deceiving you that she'll soon give you a son who will beat his head on the ground before you to show his respect. And that that new son will cleverly manage our porcelain manufactories... and those for cool, smooth silk as well. You have shut me up in the Inner Compound, so that no strange man can see me. But you haven't been to see me either. After all, I'm not one of the emperor's concubines, who can only talk to her father through a curtain! I wait up for you long into the night. I hear the geese cackling in the reeds. The moon is small. It watches me and says nothing. It is so quiet that I can hear the cherry blossom falling. Tomorrow I will gather their petals. I'll take them to the flower cemetery. I'll give them a funeral, I'll sing them a song...

(Chinese music.

Left side of the stage.)

She 2: *(Sings.)* Ah, they have shut me up here. The entrance is closed...

She 1: Yes, yes, Daddy. You didn't even see me with my hair cut like a boy's and dyed blonde. You didn't smell the perfumes my boyfriend used to buy me at first. Until he became my husband. You didn't see my round tummy and your first grandchild. Nor the second, nor the third, nor the fourth. My children grew like mushrooms, as quick as lightning. They were strong, they shouted and always got their way. *(Imitates a child's insistent clamour.)* Chewing guuum! I want chewing gum! I want a toy! I want lipstick! I want new shoes. I want new skates, a new bicycle, a new leather jacket...! I WANT IT! They got it. They always got everything they wanted from me. Even if I were to die of hunger myself! *(Begins to blow a whistle after each sentence she says.)*

But my daughters never knew what it was to sleep with seven strange girls. All get up at once. All wash at once. Go to eat. Study from one book. Never be alone. Always be alone... So - you didn't see us. You were always somewhere in hell. Lost. Missing. I looked for you. I wrote to you at your last known addresses. I sent you our photos. You wrote back, yes, once you did actually write back. You said you would return. That you would make up for everything. To me and my daughters. More years whizzed by. Then complete strangers wrote

to me. Telling me to come for you. I found you in a prison hospital lying stretched out flat on your back with unseeing eyes. I kept having to wipe away the dribble from your mouth. Daddy! And you couldn't even see me! But, who knows, maybe you could? And then when I brought you home to our place, maybe you saw our daughters, too?! You just couldn't tell us. You couldn't even give us a sign that you knew me. Although I begged you to. Do you remember? I told you: Daddy, if you can hear me, if you know who I am, blink three times. But you just stared at our bedroom ceiling with those glassy eyes. It was me who found you. Not you me. Not you! We could never go for a walk beside the river again. Where they took the prisoners out for an airing on a Sunday. You couldn't play chess in the old coffee bar any more. Get angry with my forgotten mother. With Olina lying drunk on the sofa. It was you who was lying down now. All the time. Without moving, without a voice. Without your very self. My husband moved out into the living room. I can't stand that living dead body in my own bedroom, he said by way of explanation. My children couldn't stand the stink you lay in before I came home and washed you. Like a new-born baby. Everything was changed. Everything a muddle. Now you were imprisoned only in your head. Like I was once in my own big toe. Maybe you were watching some film in that spooky head of yours. Over and over again. I learned to lift you quickly. To massage your sagging muscles. Rub ointment into your bed sores. I pretended to myself that I was rubbing the body of some strange man. That I was washing the withered genitals of an old man I didn't know. Ridiculous! They once begot a child. That was me. My father, who I had waited for so long, who was still far away. Near me was just some double of his with a brain that had had a stroke. A human wreck that was washed and fed by some seamstress from a factory.

(Right side of the stage lights up.)

She 2: Daddy, is it true? They say you beat your secondary wife. Do you know now that she's stealing your soul? I'm told you like to shut yourself up with a monk from a mysterious land. He's not a Buddhist or a Taoist. He's called a Jesuit. He's teaching you astronomy. He shows you maps, not of the Empire of the Centre, but of other lands. Together you draw fine lines according to someone called Euclid. I've heard that foreigner also knows a way of exercising the mind. Take me with you to that monk with the funny round eyes. Let him teach me, too. I don't want to read nothing but the stories about perfect women that Aunt Lin keeps thrusting on me. I want you beside me. That's what I want! I want *you* to take off my little shoes, hold my golden lilies in your palm and feast your eyes on them. I want you to see the peach sprig

I've painted in cobalt on a teapot. Papa, where are you? I can hear drumbeats in the southern pavilion. The moon will shine until the dawn. There are evil spirits in the bells over my door and in the muslin curtains there is only a breeze.

(The left side of the stage lights up.)

She 2: In the muslin curtains there is only a breeze.

She 1: After a long time you learned how to move your tongue in your mouth and mumble a few comprehensible sentences. And you could sit up. Then you could take a few steps.

Perhaps that was even worse. My eldest daughter began to hate you. How did you bring up your own father? Why does he keep shitting himself now he can get up? Who can stand it in this prefab cage? she shouted. Are there no homes for wretches like him? Why, he's only half human. He's wearing us all out. He's getting on our nerves, drinking our blood - like a vampire! A filthy old vampire! She banged her fists on the table and you guffawed. For some strange reason, you called your granddaughter Alice. Dribble running down your chin, you jabbered that you'd shoot a bouquet for her at the fairground range. But I combed your tangled hair and kissed you on your enormous ear. Don't be cross, Daddy! I couldn't help my daughter's thoughts, her foul mouth! You know me. I was never one to rebel. I preferred to fawn on you, just so as to stay your dear little girl. So you'd be fond of me. You are fond of me, aren't you, Daddy?! Fuck it, say so for once!

She 1 *(Imitating a man's voice.)* I am fond of you. You are my little girl with bows in your hair. My one and only, sweet as honey... I love you. I adore you.

You never said that to me. You monster! No one ever said that to me.

(The right side of the stage lights up. A loud sound of galloping horses.)

She 2: *(Her hair is dishevelled.)* I don't know, Papa, my stupid old head isn't sure about anything any more. What happened!? Why did the chief eunuch arrive in a coach one day from the Forbidden City? Why did his men search our dwelling? They found forbidden books about warfare, things to do with the borders, and above all, alas, about Sons of the Heavens of long ago. Or did that awful woman write untruths about you in Manchu, in order to ruin you? She sucked you dry! Because you stopped taking any notice of her. They said you would have to face a long trial. If you didn't tell the truth they would torture you by crushing your ankles. If you kept silent, they would crush them to pulp. Now I know that if the judge was not sure which law you had in fact broken, he resorted to a law that made it possible to do what

shouldn't have been done. But you had never provoked unrest, you didn't break any regulations, you wanted to keep the law and Sacred Edit of the Son of the Heavens. Oh, what did they do to you, Papa? Did they execute you? Did they sell you into slavery? I don't know, I don't know ANYTHING any longer! Just as you don't know that your secondary wife sold me for a couple of bars of silver to a man trading in children. But you told everyone in the yamen: *(Imitating lamenting.)* Little Pearl vanished during the Lantern Festival. I just looked away for a moment and she had gone... gone! Abducted by a child thief is what they whispered in the yamen and my servants Wild Goose and Silver Thread wanted to commit suicide.

(The left side of the stage lights up.)

She 1: My apathetic husband lay for hours on the sofa, burped, farted, drank beer and gawped at the telly. In my heart of hearts I knew that something must happen. Something must turn up. Something sweet, something for me. I found another. A lover as calm as the sea. Wild as the surf. I didn't know anything about him. Not even his name. Once I sat down on a bench in the park, because it was hot and I felt faint. He sat down next to me and said something about explosions on the Sun. First he stroked me through my dress. I don't know... it was as if I was hypnotised... maybe it was those explosions on the Sun... I went with him to his car. And then often... We went to the park at the other side of the town. Or we just stayed in the car somewhere on the grimy outskirts among deserted factories. We tore the clothes off each other in cheap hotels. You're like a tight string. Relax. He would say to me in a whisper and it seemed funny to me. It'll be just the way you want it. What do you want, he kept asking. For the first time ever my stupid head had to think what I wanted. I! I! Just me. And no one else. But who was I really? A worker with fingers pricked all over, with clamouring children, a husband like a sack of potatoes and a dribbling father with a stroke. I was a live, warm human machine. All at once I was to listen to my own body. What did it matter that it was no longer so young and beautiful? It was mine! When we were both naked, we often laughed. Just like that. For no reason. I can't remember when I last laughed out loud as I did with him. A lover without a name. Without a past. Without a future. Even though, like conspirators, we went to terrible lengths to cover up our meetings. Sometimes he would put on my blouse, whirl around in front of me and say: I want your skin, your smell, your sweat, saliva, juices, I want to massage your fingers, rub cream on them, so the needle pricks don't hurt, I want to light a cigarette for you, choose your lipstick, hold your hand in the cinema, lean you up against a street lamp. We'll have a photo taken of us together, black and white, I'll just colour in your

lips... You'll eat a whole bar of chocolate, you'll ask me for a pill, I'll see the chaos in your handbag, I'll see you to the bus-stop, you'll see me to the bus-stop, you'll say you feel like a cake, I'll feel like a coffee, we'll talk about our dead ones, their ghosts will sit on the edge of the bed, where, after making love, we shall tell each other the dreams we sometimes have at night. I chattered away like a sewing machine too: I felt good. For an eternity. It didn't matter that we couldn't spend a whole night together. I would have been jolted awake. On such a night your heart may have beaten feebly. I would have been scared to death. You would have despaired of me if you had woken up. I tried to pray it wouldn't end, that you wouldn't leave me. I tried to imagine God, his voice coming from all directions. Not to feel any sin. It can't be a sin to have an ardent heart, it's warmth after winter, no one can blame me, punish me... I was often sick. I used to breathe quickly. I avoided shops with expensive underwear. Fine stockings! I couldn't afford them. So what! I had at least food and a roof over my head. Not like those despairing wretches in the street who stretch out their grubby hands. Throw themselves on their knees. Cardboard boxes are their quilts! The world doesn't care a damn about them. I used to shrug my shoulders: my coat is threadbare, too... I've got wailing children, a father waiting for me in his own excrement... Even so... - I felt the wind on my skin. Perfumes, the smell of coffee, nicotine on the fingers of my lover, nearness, distance, a cocktail of madness from running here and there...

(The right side of the stage lights up.)

She 1: (a cocktail of madness, a cocktail of madness...)

She 2: A trader in children. Always wore a long dirty coat. It stank of fish and musty wine. He shoved me into a shack. Onto a bamboo mat. There were five other girls there! Unwashed, with tangled hair, like me. They fought over my bracelets and rings. Like hungry animals. We were shut up for days on end. Stinker fed us on a bowl of rice and dried fish. We drank disgusting, weak tea. In the evening he would pick out one of the girls. I'll teach you the art of gratifying a man. He opened his coat in front of me, too. His penis was sticking out. I burst into tears. I hid my face in my hair. Pressed it to my eyes, so I couldn't see. Stinker hissed: don't be heartless! You'll be my favourite. I'll sell you well. Not to a brothel or as a servant, but as a second concubine, he laughed, drunk on rice spirits.

(The left side of the stage lights up.

The sound of sewing machines.)

She 1: When I came back from him or from the factory, I bent over you, Daddy. I looked into your eyes. I was surprised. Your eyes were turned so far back in their sockets! Maybe you were seeing bits of your life. The same bits, over and over. Like a scratched record that's got stuck. Perhaps you were seeing yourself again and again, dressed in your check suit and your hair sleekly groomed with walnut hair oil. Standing in front of a jasmine bush with my mother. She has a green pleated skirt and a yellow mohair pullover. You're smiling at each other, holding hands. Mummy is twisting a sprig of white blossom between her fingers.

(The right side of the stage lights up.)

She 1: A sprig of jasmine.

She 2: I cried the whole of that night. An owl was hooting. The moon glared down. I whispered to it: No one will ever brew tea from fragrant leaves for me, I shall never play *wei-ch'i* or embroider on silk and when I prick myself, no servant will bandage the wound. *(She sticks her fingers into her mouth. In a flash She 1 is lit up and she makes the same gesture)*. I will no longer read books and look at paintings by Ming masters... No one will buy me a damask dress and satin jacket, embroidered slippers, a muslin veil from the merchants, my cousins and I won't show each other jewels of gold and precious stones, I won't hear my aunts' jade bracelets chinking in the Inner Compound.

That night that foul-smelling man bent over me. He roared with laughter, smeared lipstick on my mouth and pressed his lips to mine. I spat at him and scratched. He said I would be a pavilion cleaner, sweeping terraces and dusting..., and that that is worse than being in a brothel, in a house with blue curtains, where a woman feels safe. Then he sang me a coquette's song.

He repeated his promise to find me a husband. He would sell me well. To some literary man as a secondary wife. He even gave me some red trousers. A pair of embroidered shoes, bed linen and a sunshade. My eyes were swollen from sand and tears.

That night my cousin Pao came floating under my bloodshot eyelids. Once he stole into my room in our yamen. He lay down beside me, pressed up to my side and I felt that hard thing in his trousers... We giggled... He said to me: Dearest Pearl, I'd like to be a snowflake in the air, wafting down, falling on your eyelash, slipping into your shining eye and remaining there like a tear. You, with your long hair, don't wander among the rocks! They terrify me. You are a pearl in a diadem that dragons fight over, you are the pollen in a peach flower, a white heron, a pale pearl, put your arms around me... I laughed. The sweet smell of oil from his pigtail!

The hard headband scratched my cheek. Pao licked my blood. Through the window I saw the moon stuck on the tallest poplar tree. And Pao went on: cut out my heart, wear it like a piece of jade on a string in your heart, just put your arms round me, he begged. I giggled again: your servant girl, Fragrance, has rejected you, hasn't she? If you push up my clothes and press that hard thing into me, the heavens will fall! We laughed, laughed... and he stroked my water-lilies, my tiny feet. The smell of orchids wafted into the room and the wind tore the sound of the bell from the temple in the distance. It rocked us to sleep. Fragrance burst into the room, slapped Pao on the back, threatened to tell Madam Ch'ang and reproached him for what he was doing with his little cousin. Ah, Papa, why did love not go all the way then?! Even if it had hurt me, had drawn blood!

(She sings the following part in an exaggerated, comical, chilling way.)

Why didn't Pao and I die as children? Our parents would have arranged a marriage of our souls. They would have chosen a happy night for our wedding night. They would have cut Pao's likeness out of paper, dressed it in a wedding robe, sat it in his father's home and sent a perfumed litter to our house. They would have sent me, also cut out of paper, with a family tree of my ancestors, to my bridegroom's home. Our paper figures would have sat all night at a richly laid table as bride and bridegroom. On the next day they would have burned us, together with the paper servants, the litter, the money... And my spirit would have remained for ever with the spirits of dear Pao's ancestors.

(Speaking again.) That foul-smelling man gave us arrack to drink. So we wouldn't cry and fight among ourselves. He pinched us, stroked us all over. He said that coquettish whores could befuddle the brain, but that we were wasting our time dreaming of nice homes and faithful husbands. We would be whores and no one would plant a willow in the emperor's orchard. You are dejected and feeble like wilted flowers. You little hussies. You haven't earned me anything yet... He beat us with a stick. He'd get drunk on rice spirits and mutter: I'll sell you to the blue house or a flower boat. A brothel, lit up and decorated with lanterns like the emperor's palace. Anchored on the river. What more do you want? You will sit behind glass in pale blue silk, decorated with jewels, with powdered faces and perfumed bodies. You will sing verses about the deeds of great heroes to feasting men. Flute players on silk cushions will accompany your whining, ha, ha! And then - off you go, into a narrow bed to make a gentleman happy. Sometimes Stinker summoned his wife. She washed us, dressed us nicely and made us up. He would sell us at the bazaar to as many as three men at once. But then he

didn't deliver the goods. He raked in the money for us and kept selling us over and over again. In a different place each time.

We are running away in a cart drawn by a horse. It's not your scented carriage, Papa! The road. The road. The road. The rattle of carts, the screeching of birds above our heads. We are drinking arrack diluted with water. We are suppressing our tears. Mountains in the distance. The terraces of rice fields. Everything is left behind. The sun is grey. I watch the wild geese. They are flying crookedly above our heads. I can only vaguely remember how the wind softly waved the pearl veil in my room... We pass mulberry trees, rice and hemp fields. Farm labourers with hoes are going home from the fields like shadows. I can hear a strange dialect. Where has the road home disappeared to? The cart stops. We are beside a river. We look into the water at our made-up faces and the trinkets that Stinker sometimes buys us. He throws rice pancakes into each of our laps. An old woman is selling them near the walls of a strange town. Someone is playing on a bamboo pipe. If any of us refuses Stinker, he beats us with a stick.

(The left side of the stage lights up.

In stroboscopic lighting She 2 is looking in the mirror and singing.)

A lady powders her cheeks but lightly -
we paste it on thick
to shine really brightly!

She 1: *(Doing the same.)* Daddy! When it was all over, when your body was stiff and cold like leather... I looked into the mirror. I saw a horrible sight. Thinning hair, wrinkled face, flesh sagging on my belly and thighs.

(The right side of the stage lights up. The slim wrist of a woman in a kimono is projected on the back screen. It is gently waving a fan painted with peach flowers. She 2 is dressed up like an actress in a classical play of the khun-ch'ü theatre.)

She 2: *(Declaiming in a sing-song voice, with stylised body movements.)* "The sun and the moon are sources of light, the rivers and the sea are their oil. The drums beat like wind and thunder, everything between heaven and earth is a stage."

At last I got out of the cart in a strange town. Stinker told me: *(She imitates a man's voice.)* I didn't sell you for 40 bars of silver to the inspector of works in the Yangtze valley. I'll get more for your singing and dancing in the courtly style. Anyway, you growl at men like a hungry dog. But then he laughed out loud: I'll take you to the willow avenues and streets of

flowers. To the concubines in the famous entertainment and theatre district in Nanking. Those graceful beauties, those wily sirens who get by cunning whatever they want, they'll teach you the tricks of the trade. They compose verses and dance. You can do that better than they can. Ah, when they play amorous women! Their eyes! Black-framed almonds, eyebrows like the antennae of night butterflies... In Nanking Stinker disappeared once and for all. A flock of women drew me in among them, like in our yamen long ago. Concubines and actresses took off my rags. They bathed me in a hot bath. Rubbed scent into my skin. Admired my dancing and singing. They taught me to paint my face with jasmine powder, just a little carmine around my eyes and on my cheeks.

(She accompanies the following words with mimicking looks and gestures.)

Where the hand goes, the eyes follow, where the eyes go, there is the message. Where the message is, there is feeling and effect *(Demonstrates what are known as the pensive look, the angry look, the coquettish look...)* and when I had mastered all six basic positions of the hands - the orchid hand - lanshou, the hand of the lotus bud, the conciliatory hand, shunshou, the averted hand, fanshou and many other models for tan, the manageress, dear aunt Ku took me into her theatre in the town of Yang-chou. Her theatre is unusual because there are only women. Just one man. At first I couldn't even pick him out among us. He moved gracefully in women's clothing. He made himself up like the flowers on a fan. The manageress paid for someone to teach us dancing and music. He came to the theatre every day.

(The left side of the stage. A cone of blinding light appears on the wall.)

She 2: Where the hand goes, the eyes follow...

She 1: And once, Daddy, once in November... it was a cold day, the leaves were falling. Maple and all kinds of other leaves. I was dead tired. My lover had vanished long before. My husband lived in another town, my daughters had scattered. You were being eaten by worms... I turned my head upwards, to the clouds. They were enormous, thick, dark grey. Almost black. At that moment a gap appeared between them. Light began to pour through it. So much golden light that I cried out! The light almost knocked me off my feet. Daddy, I can't explain it, but somehow I felt that HE himself was looking down at me. Or SHE! What do I know, silly little fool, some... well... Great Mother. And that I'm not abandoned any more... that I'm something like God's child..., on whom HE or SHE breathes. Rocked in gigantic arms..., rocked to and from like an innocent little child. And then, Daddy, a feeling of peace and happiness came over me. Are you laughing at me, Daddy? Are you ashamed of the

nonsense I'm talking? Don't worry, I haven't told anyone about it. Mmmm. I'm tired now. Hungry. I'll make myself some buckwheat porridge and tea. I'll close my eyes. I hardly have to try and I can see a summer meadow.

(The right half of the stage lights up.)

She 1: *(Passively leaning up against the sheet with her whole body, until she is hanging in it.)*

She 2: *(Dreamily and exalted.)* What an actress I was! In theatre pavilions, in rich men's gardens. They say I danced and sang like a nymph from Heaven. A salt merchant brought me gifts every day. *(In fury, because she crosses the bridge from her imagination to the present.)* I can no longer hear the wind in the pines. I am old, Papa. They say I swig too much wine. I sit in the corner of a dark room with a brute opposite me. A tiger that laughs. Says I can't even see to paint myself and my face looks like a fan spattered with the blood of a murdered courtesan. From the play I like best... The fan with peach flowers... I am an old actress. I'll never play the role of an amorous woman in a mandarin's pavilion... because that horrible intriguing Peony, who has always envied me, keeps telling everyone in the theatre that the scene in which the emperor and his servants praise my beauty during my morning toilet can only make you laugh. She says I ought to be playing the poor woman in the street in the fourth scene, the one the emperor passes by with his courtiers and ladies in carriages and men on horseback... Papa, I'm so old my soul hurts, not just my knees. My friend Wild Nymph tells me of other intrigues against me. Apparently I'm no use even for female supporting roles! I, who when I played the wrongly executed Tchou O, whose blood after beheading didn't flow downwards, but spurted upwards onto the white silk above me, not one eye in the audience remained dry. Ah, yes. I'm wasting my time soaking my finger joints in hot water every day. They are growing stiff and can't quiver and bend like a bow. It's no use my massaging my face, my eyebrows no longer spring like snakes from a coil. My hair is straight. My eyebrows in the shape of butterfly antennae have been wiped off long ago. I am encrusted with lichen. An old tree. The goddess of sorrow will emerge in this empty room. She will watch over the piece of ice in my soul. The dim moon over the horizon. I'll drown my sorrows in liquor. The pine trees are cracking in the wind, like when Jade Beauty poisoned herself, the one who played amorous women before me. The tea room is closed. I can hear steps in the street. Someone walking in the night. A friend of the night. He knows its secrets. Ah, where is the Silken Pavilion of my childhood? The garden, the scents, the clouds, the croaking frogs. There

I would sail in a boat towards the tiny lights. They burned out long ago. The powder compact is broken, the bag of perfume torn. I shall never again hear the manageress address the public before the performance: Kind ladies, noble gentlemen...

(During her monologue in this scene she makes up her face like a tragic mask: in one hand she is holding white powder, with which she whitens her face, and in the other dark paint, which she uses to draw rings under her eyes and lines around her mouth and nose.

The screen is gradually lit up to reveal a summer meadow. Birdsong.)

She 2: *("Listens" to She 1 through the sheet.)*

She 1: So... I can see a summer meadow. I am picking harebells. Mummy is gathering balm. She rubs it between her fingers. Lets me smell it. My long lost mother. You don't stir any feelings in me any longer. Neither anger, nor longing, neither hate, nor curiosity... You are no longer the secret centre of my universe. Your daughter's navel. You planted Daddy on me, didn't you? He was to take your place. Am I talking nonsense? All right, so what. At least I can smell tea now. It's steaming hot.

(The right side lights up.)

She 1: *("Listens" to She 2 through the sheet.)*

She 2: I can no longer sleep and I talk in the dark. I'll retreat to that convent among the pines. Birds of prey shelter there for the night. There's nothing above the clouds but an empty space. They'll give me coarse clothing, fasting food and bitter tea. I shall leave this world where greed and injustice reign. The leaves in my tea are quivering. It means guests are coming. They will enter as quietly as my breath when I was ten years old. From the world of spirits. The spirit of my mother. Immersed in rain and mist. Mama's face will be painted with silken powder, so I won't be afraid. Papa will spring up on strong, healthy legs. I've already removed the little gods that stand guard at the doorway. My cousin Pao will come as well. He will want my love *(Giggles like a little girl.)* He will press up to me and I shall smell the scent of his pigtail. Someone will play on strings. The lanterns will go out. I shall fly through space. High, high up. I don't want to stop even at the end of the Heavens.

(She 1 stands in the projected picture of the meadow, so she herself seems partly transparent.)

She 1: I'll lie down on my back and try watching the clouds again. I'll try to be like a cat.
Supple, lazy, contented. I'll be like velvet. I can see the clouds. They are sailing along. On an
upside-down sea. Indifferent. Free. In a great Emptiness. I shall wait for the gap between them
and the golden light. I shall feel myself rocked in enormous arms. I shall be like a child.
Carefree, innocent... as light as light.

(The right side of the stage lights up.)

She 2: I'm so tired I could die. I cannot sleep at night. I've no appetite for the thin rice the
manageress gives me. At this age ten thousand things cease to be. Time is a draught. Nothing
but a draught.

(Sings the song of Tou-o.) Full of sorrow I am,
 I have suffered for years.
 Ah, heavens above,
 What can you know of my fears.

*(On the screens in both halves of the stage the introductory scene with the lantern is shown,
but in reverse: the lantern first lights up, then it swings in the wind. Projection also on the
sheet in the middle, through the bodies of both women. They are standing facing each other,
their palms and foreheads touching through the sheet.)*

Darkness