Wu Hsing-Kuo, left, Huang Yu-Lin and Tsao Fu-Yong in “Rashomon,” a Chinese opera presented at the Taipei Theater in Midtown.

**OPERA REVIEW**

**Three Versions of a Death, Now With Music Added**

By JAMES R. OESTREICH

“Rashomon,” Akira Kurosawa’s classic film from 1950, is a marvel of sparseness and economy. At that, it can seem frivolous and coarse, a blunt instrument, alongside its chief source, Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s brief and elegant story “In a Grove.” The author’s subtle suggestion of the lustful bandit’s mental state, for example, limned in parenthetical brush strokes (“an ironical smile,” “gloomy excitement”), gives way in the film to Toshiro Mifune’s frequent bouts of manic laughter.

Now comes a positively lavish elaboration of the tale: “Rashomon: The Musical.” Both the score, by Li Lian-Bi, and the play, adapted by Tracy Chung and Song-Si Ting, impose vaguely contemporary and Western themes on the 80-year-old Japanese tale and the centuries-old Chinese theatrical form, an amalgam of drama, choreography, acrobatics and song.

Thus, in the Woman's confession, the Man, her husband, is depicted right off as imperious and abusive, making the murder seem as much a considered blow for feminism as an impulsive act born of shocking events in the grove. All of this tends to cloud and demystify Akutagawa’s simple message that there is no accounting for human motivation and that truth in such matters is relative.

The work served here as a vehicle primarily for Wu Hsing-Kuo, the artistic director of the Contemporary Legend Theater in Taipei and perhaps Taiwan's foremost actor. On Friday evening he proved consistently compelling as the Bandit, though the character was drawn clownishly as well as menacingly.

Mr. Wu’s mastery overshadowed Tsao Fu-Yong as the Man, unduly strident not only in his singing but also in his portrayal. But Huang Yu-Lin, a young performer of great potential, was lovely, fetching and, when necessary, stouthearted, a worthy foil to the villain.

A sociological note: The small house was full, and the audience was largely English-speaking, a shift from a few years ago, when audiences were mostly Chinese. New Yorkers of all stripes have evidently been drawn to Chinese opera, in part by the Taipei Theater’s high-quality presentations over the last decade.

So it is disheartening to report that the Chinese Information and Culture Center, which runs the theater, will close it in April to cut costs. Still, when the center’s presentations move to other, bigger theaters, the dispersion, rather than diffuse the effort, may spread the good word.