A Brief Biography of Howard Rubenstein

Edited by Chudan Li and Richard Han

Howard Rubenstein was born in Chicago on June 14, 1931, to middle class parents. His father owned a dry cleaning store and his mother was a housewife. When he was 5, his mother almost died of an ectopic pregnancy; she attributed her survival to the skill of her physician. Her close call with death and her praise of her physician had a deep and lasting effect upon Rubenstein, which influenced his decision to become a doctor.

Howard Rubenstein graduated from public high school in Chicago in 1949, having taken college preparatory courses. Upon graduation, he attended Carleton College in Minnesota, where he took pre-medical courses but also French, Ancient Greek, Art History, Music Appreciation, and Literature. During college, he lived with a family in France for the summer of 1951, immersing himself in French culture. Howard remains in contact with his French "brother." After graduating magna cum laude from college in 1953, having been elected to Phi Beta Kappa (the liberal arts honor society) and Sigma Xi (the sciences honor society), and winning the prize for outstanding scholarship in Classical Greek, Howard was admitted to the Harvard Medical School and graduated in 1957 (He is planning to attend his 60th medical school reunion in Boston, June 2017). Rubenstein did an internship and residency in internal medicine at the Los Angeles County General Hospital from 1957 to 1960, whereupon he returned to Harvard to do research in Immunology. He began his research as a National Institutes of Health fellow and then was awarded the Harvard Medical School distinguished Harold C. Ernst fellowship.

In 1964 he was invited to spend the summer as a volunteer doctor at the Schweitzer Hospital (founded by Lawrence Mellon) in Haiti. During that experience, he learned about voodoo and tropical medicine. Most of the patients he treated had tetanus, tuberculosis, or malnutrition.
In 1968, he was appointed Physician and Chief of Allergy, specializing in the treatment of bronchial asthma, at the Harvard University Health Services. Also in 1968, he married Judith Ann Selig (Judy), the love of his life. They have four grown children, three of whom have become physicians and one a lawyer.

In 1984 the Chinese Medical Association under the auspices of People to People invited the first group of allergists and clinical immunologists to China. Rubenstein (along with his wife) was included in that group. He lectured (in English) at several Chinese medical schools, and observed Chinese medicine, both Western and traditional, and the Rubensteins, along with their group, were taken on a tour of China. Both Howard and his wife were enchanted with China--its people, cuisine, culture, civilization, and the natural beauty of the country. That visit made an indelible impression upon them.

Unfortunately Howard was losing his hearing and also his sense of balance, and he had to retire from the practice of clinical medicine in 1989. The Rubensteins had to move
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He then launched a new career. He had always enjoyed writing, and he became a playwright, writing original works, translations, and adaptations. He was surprised at the dearth of Chinese plays being performed in English in the USA. He knew from general knowledge as well as from personal experience that the Chinese were an ancient and brilliant people, and so, he reasoned, there must be Chinese plays. So he began to search for them in English translation. He discovered that there were many, but none being performed in America. He read as many as he could find. One he thought stood above all the rest in charm. Its title was Xi Xiang Ji. He has described elsewhere how he converted this Chinese treasure into a form that he thought would be accessible to a Western audience. But how was he going to get the musical produced? Fortunately he had a friend,
Kathleen Roche-Tansey, a leader in Sister Cities International and American Women for International Understanding, who held the key. Kathleen said I must get in touch with her friend, Dr. Lilly Cheng of the Confucius Institute of San Diego State University. Dr. Cheng will help you, Kathleen said with great authority. How right she was!

I met Dr. Cheng, and we hit it off instantly. (I did not realize I was dealing with a dynamo. Later I heard Ron Roberts, County Supervisor, refer to her as the "Empress of San Diego." How right he was!) Dr. Cheng read my manuscript and edited it. She then introduced me to a stream of Chinese scholars connected with the performing arts who passed through the Confucius Institute. One liked my work, and offered to
have it produced. And so it was. The world premiere of *Romance of the Western Chamber--a Musical* took place on September 9, 2011 at the Dongpo Theatre in Hangzhou. (That theatre has been called "the Carnegie Hall of China.") A giant banner outside the theater said this is the first performance in the English language of *Xi Xiang Ji*. Moreover the theatre credited by name both Max Lee and me. It was a gorgeous production with beautiful voices, costumes, and sets. It was especially thrilling for me to hear my English words spoken on the stage while Mandarin supertitles flashed above. The show was a great success. And I owe it all to Dr. Lilly Cheng. She rightly won the Asian Heritage prize in Performing Arts in 2011 for bridging cultures between two great nations, China and the USA.

Moving forward, how were we going to produce this show in the United States? Since our visit to China in 2011, my wife and I have been greatly involved with our grandchildren. We also moved into a retirement community, and there was that adjustment to make. Fortunately, the residents are active
and many events are planned. One day in early 2016 a playwright came to speak. I told him about Romance of the Western Chamber—a Musical, and he suggested I contact a managing (but not fund raising) producer by the name of Bob Ost. I did so. Ost asked to read the manuscript; afterwards he demurred on the grounds that he knew nothing about Chinese literature. My entreaties that this show was universal, not only Chinese, did not move him. Nonetheless, he agreed to send the script to all the directors he knew in New York. Two weeks later he wrote to me and said that an amazing thing had occurred, something that had never occurred before in his memory. 25 directors expressed interest in directing the show. He said he would narrow the 25 down to 6 finalists, and he did. He insisted that I come to New York to interview the finalists and make the final choice. Judy and I did so. While all six were excellent candidates, one Shela Xoregos was an especially good match for the show. So we selected her as our director. Romance of the Western Chamber - A Musical will be produced at the TADA! Theater, 15 W. 28th St., New York, New York 10001 this September 2017.