

AROUND TOWN

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Master of puppets

Disciples of the late Li Tien-lu, founder of the I-Wan-Jan puppet troupe, are staging a series of performances in the Taipei area this weekend to honor his legacy

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Puppet masters in Taiwan are household names, but none more so than Li Tien-lu (李天祿), founder of the I-Wan-Jan (亦宛然掌中劇團) puppet troupe. Since his passing, the troupe has fallen out of the spotlight, but it has continued to work following the principles he laid down. The 2008 Taipei International Puppet Festival (第一屆大台北國際偶戲節), which will be held this weekend at the Taipei MRT's Danshui Station (捷運淡水站) plaza, along with other smaller venues, aims to commemorate its founder and tell Taiwan that it has continued to preserve his legacy.

With Li's encouragement and blessing, I-Wan-Jan spawned many splinter groups — and not only in Taiwan. Joining the commemorative activities will be Frenchman Jean-Luc Penso, founder of Theatre du Petit Miroir (法國小宛然), and Madeleine Beresford and Margaret Moody of the Galapagos Puppet Theater (美國如宛然) from the US, all of whom studied under Li, who was known for his extraordinary generosity to his students. "Unlike many Chinese masters, he never held anything back. He would give you as much as you could take away," said Huang Chiao-wei (黃錫偉), who served as an apprentice in the troupe from age 10 and has now risen to become its artistic director and principle performer, which is now led by Li's son Li Chuan-tsan (李傳燦).

In addition to the many splinter troupes that have been formed by former students of Li and his sons, other local groups have been invited. "We don't want people to think we are keeping this event all to ourselves," Huang said, acknowledging that Li's heritage extends far beyond the "Wan-Jan" group of troupes. Sheng-Wu-Chou Puppet Troupe (台中聲五洲掌中劇團) and Ching-Hua-Ke Puppet Troupe (清華閣掌中劇團) will both be making an appearance, as will the Taiyuan Puppet Theater Company (太原偶戲團), whose principle performer is Li's eldest son Chen Hsi-huang (陳錫煌). "It is unfortunate that we could not get more local troupes to participate, but this is a busy season and they have many commitments," Huang said, adding with a wry smile, "and the financial issues are easier to resolve with the 'Wan-Jan' troupes." Two groups from China that had accepted invitations to perform failed to get visas for the trip.

I-Wan-Jan is the only puppet troupe in Taiwan to have broken away from a traditional family-based model. "We are trying to become more like a modern organization," Huang said. This involves the very unartistic tasks of training people to do administrative work. "If you can produce a good proposal that the government likes, you are more likely to get grants or subsidies. It's as simple as that," he said, recognizing that the government is a crucial paymaster if the art is to survive.

On the artistic side, Li established a very solid foundation of skills within the troupe. "The one thing he didn't do — carving puppet heads — he made his sons go off and learn," Huang said. As a result of Li's insistence on commanding all the skills necessary to his art, I-Wan-Jan has been able to produce both traditional and innovative works that retain a high level of quality. "We carve our own puppets, make the costumes ourselves and also have our own orchestra," Huang said. "This is naturally a considerable outlay, but it means we can tailor everything exactly."

Another aspect of Li's heritage is his emphasis on education, which is the reason why so many "Wan-Jan" troupes have been established. In the 1970s Li pulled back from life as a full-time professional performer to focus on teaching. He took in many disciples, rejecting the exclusivity of the family. "He always saw the success of his students as something to be proud of," Huang said.

The gathering at Danshui this weekend is a testament to his achievements, as his disciples come together to pay him respect. "When he died, many people said that I-Wan-Jan wouldn't survive," Huang said. "We have spent time looking inward, working on transmitting fundamentals ... In a sense, the incredible achievements of Li Tien-lu have made I-Wan-Jan seem less significant." With the hosting of the 2008 Taipei International Puppetry Festival, I-Wan-Jan may be coming out of its founder's shadow.



Top: I-Wan-Jan founder Li Tien-lu. Center: Taiyuan Puppet Theater puppet master Chen Hsi-huang, Li Tien-lu's eldest son. Above: A performance Hsueh-Wan-Jan, both offshoots of I-Wan-Jan.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF I-WAN-JAN PUPPET THEATER



Interview with Huang Chiao-wei

Taipei Times: What are your priorities as artistic director of I-Wan-Jan?

Huang Chiao-wei: To put it bluntly, it is to learn as much as I can while the older generation is still around to teach me. You must fill yourself up if you are going to have stuff to take out and show people in future ... There is no point doing lots of performances before the fundamentals are established. Ours is a long-term strategy, so that while people haven't noticed us much recently, they will eventually.

TT: What is the greatest challenge facing puppet theater today?

HC: The ability to promote ourselves and our art. One of Master Li Tien-lu's great strengths was that he encouraged us to innovate and use what we learned as part of the puppeteering tradition in new ways ... exploring every possibility. People don't necessarily understand traditional puppet theater, so we must find ways of drawing them in. We have collaborated with Western classical musicians and experimental artists ... But our emphasis is still on tradition — 90 percent tradition, 10 percent innovation.

TT: Language is an integral part of Taiwanese puppet theater. How does that affect performances in the modern era?

HC: Glove puppet theater is performed in Taiwanese, an older style of Taiwanese that is not used so much today. We do not use subtitles in glove puppet performances. The audiences' focus should be on the puppets, and they are too small for audiences to move from subtitles to the action and still get the full impact of the performance. Also, puppet theater has always had a strong improvisational aspect, so subtitles don't work well for that reason. We have experimented with using other characters to explain difficult language and with providing abstracts for each scene.

TT: Li Tien-lu had a strong commitment to education. Does this continue today?

HC: We do a lot of teaching, especially of children. But Taiwan has no system for ongoing training in traditional arts. It's not like studying the violin or the piano, where you can study it at university and beyond. So as a teacher, I used to find this very frustrating. You'd teach kids for three years, then they would move on to other things. It was a terrible drain on time and other resources ... A few years ago, I had become very depressed about teaching puppetry, but two years ago I came to a realization: Even if many of the students would never go on to study puppetry in later life, it would leave an impression ... it's like planting a seed in society.



Huang Chiao-wei, I-Wan-Jan's principal performer and artistic director.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES

A mid-summer night's dance

Expect a massive crowd for Cloud Gate 2's free staging of 'Oculus' tomorrow at the National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall Plaza

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

An annual rite of passage for many Taipei residents is descending on the vast tiled plaza at the National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall for Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's (雲門舞集) mid-summer outdoor performance. What could be better than enjoying the country's preeminent performing arts troupe under the stars, just you and 9,999 or more of your closest friends and neighbors? That the show is free is just icing on the cake. This is what summer should all be about.

Cloud Gate dancers will take to the stage in the plaza again tomorrow night, as part of the Cathay Life Arts Festival, starting at 7:30pm. This year, however, the honors go to the young dancers of the company's second troupe, Cloud Gate 2, who will be reprising the late Taiwanese choreographer Wu Kuo-chu's (伍國柱) masterpiece, *Oculus* (斷章).

The troupe's performance of this 70-minute piece made it one of the 15 finalists in the 6th Taishin Arts Awards (第六屆台新藝術獎) earlier this year.

They first performed the piece in the spring of 2007, as part of a double bill at the National Theater with women from the main company, who were in Akram Khan's *Lost Shadows*.

It is almost impossible to watch *Oculus* and not think of what might have been, for its creator died of leukemia just as he was making a name for himself as a choreographer. He had been diagnosed with the disease in 2004, only months after becoming artistic director of Germany's Staatstheater Kassel Dance Company.

Cloud Gate founder and artistic director Lin Hwai-min (林懷民) established CG2 in 1999 to foster young choreographers and dancers and provide education and outreach programs for schools and communities throughout the country. Under the leadership of the troupe's late director, Lo Man-fei (羅曼菲), Wu was one of those young choreographers tapped to create works for CG2.

Lin has described *Oculus* a landmark work, a meditation on the human situation. He also appreciated Wu's sensitivity to music. Lin said he planned to keep *Oculus* in CG2's repertoire, both as a way of keeping Wu's memory alive and as an inspiration to would-be choreographers of what they might be able to achieve.

Oculus explores the very human desire for love and acceptance. Wu's unique choreographic language is a mixed bag of tics, flat-footed shuffles and scurrying, hunched shoulders, clasped hands and awkward leaps — it is not the graceful, airy movements so often thought of as dance. Wu's movements, like Lin's, are more firmly rooted in the earth and draw energy from it, even as he appeals to the heavens. He set a frenetic pace for the dancers, interspersed with moments of stark stillness. The 12 sections are divided into carefully structured solos, duets and ensemble work.

The standout in last year's shows was CG2 veteran Pan Chieh-yin (潘潔尹), whose solo opens *Oculus*. But the troupe as a whole really shines in this piece.

There will be screens set up in the plaza to ensure that those in the back will be able to see the action, but even though the show doesn't begin until 7:30pm, if you want a good seat, plan on getting there a couple of hours early. Given that the Cloud Gate companies usually sell out their indoor performances, their free shows attract upwards of 10,000 or more spectators.

One caveat to parents — if you will be offended by having your young ones seeing bare breasts, take the children to see *Kung Fu Panda* instead. They will probably enjoy it more, and the grownups in the plaza will appreciate not hearing kids shouting that there are people dancing in just in their underwear.



Cloud Gate 2's *Oculus* explores the very human desire for love and acceptance.

PHOTO BY LIU CHEN-HSIANG, COURTESY OF CLOUD GATE DANCE THEATRE

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: 2008 Taipei International Puppetry Festival

WHEN AND WHERE: Taipei MRT Danshui Station plaza, today and tomorrow from 10:30am until 9:30pm and Sunday from 11am to 5pm; Cathay Financial Center (國泰金融中心), 9 Songren Rd, Taipei City (台北市松仁路9號), tomorrow from 2pm to 6pm; Hsinchuang Stadium (縣立新莊體育館), 66 Hehsing St, Hsinchuang, Taipei County (台北縣新莊市和興街66號), Sunday from 10am to 5pm

TICKETS: Admission to all events is free

ON THE NET: Visit the I-Wan-Jan Web site, www.iwj-puppet.com/ShowPage/ShowInfo.aspx?_id=44, for detailed program information in Chinese

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Cloud Gate 2, *Oculus*

WHEN: Tomorrow at 7:45pm

WHERE: National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall Plaza, Taipei City

TICKETS: Free admission

