

## AROUND TOWN

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# 'Castrated Chicken' clucks again



*Tainaner Ensemble has fused the plot of an original Taiwanese modernist play with the complex characterization of the novel on which it was based*

BY NOAH BUCHAN  
STAFF REPORTER

The original production of *Castrated Chicken* (閩雞) began inauspiciously. Midway through its first performance in 1943, faulty electrical wiring caused a blackout in the theater. But audience members were determined to see the entire play and volunteered to hold flashlights so the performance could finish. Bigger problems, however, cropped up after the curtain fell because the production included Taiwanese folk songs, which challenged the Japanese colonial administration's ban on the use of local languages. The arrival of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) perpetuated the suppression of local culture and ensured that the play remained an obscure work of modernist drama only studied in university theater departments.

Tainaner Ensemble (台南人劇團) has revived the play and given it a professional treatment for the first time in 65 years. It premieres tonight at Taipei's National Theater.

"Taiwanese theater professionals were unknown until the end of the 1980s," said Tainaner Ensemble artistic director Lu Po-shen (呂柏伸). "But with greater political and cultural freedom, scholars were able to discover the past of [modern] Taiwanese theater."

The work sees Tainaner departing from its tradition of adapting Western theater and literary classics into Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese). Based on the play of the same name written by Taiwanese playwright Lin Tuan-chiu (林燦秋), which was adapted from a novel by Chang Wen-huan (張文環), the revival combines elements from the novel that didn't appear in Lin's script.

The play opens in a Taiwanese village in the first decades of the last century. The main character's father, San-kui, receives news that the Japanese authorities are planning to build a railway through a neighboring village and initiates a plan to exchange his pharmacy for a parcel of land, owned by a man named Ching-piao. San-kui also encourages his son A-yung to marry Ching-piao's daughter, Yueh-li.

After securing the land and marrying off his daughter, San-kui obtains a loan to build new houses in the expectation that people will want to live close to the railway station. But when the construction is about to finish, the railway plan is unexpectedly cancelled. The shock causes San-kui's death and leaves A-yung with a mountain of debt. A-yung, meanwhile, is too frustrated to continue his job in the township office and quits to help Yueh-li at home. A-yung, however, is incapable of dealing with the rigors of farm work and gets sick, leaving Yueh-li alone to stoically



*Castrated Chicken* gives audiences a look at rural life during Japanese-occupied Taiwan.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAINANER ENSEMBLE

care for the household.

Lin's script ends at this point — a conclusion that, for Lu, was unsatisfying because it portrayed A-yung as a hero trying to come to terms with forces beyond his control and Yueh-li as a subservient woman.

"The novel is much better than the play," he said. "If [Yueh-li] were a real person, she would be more complicated. A-yung is weak. He cannot protect Yueh-li and always talks a lot but does nothing. If Yueh-li were a stereotypical woman, she would accept this and people would say she is a good woman. I find that ridiculous."

Tainaner's production follows the novel closely by portraying Yueh-li as a strong and complex character while leaving the play's basic plot intact.

The realism of the characters is complimented by the stage design, which recreates a pharmacy and other buildings that hark back to the period and features the actors and chorus dressed in kimonos, Chinese gowns and Western-style suits. The theater group also revised the original score of Taiwanese folk songs, which are now played by a live six-piece band.

When asked if the play marks a shift from staging Western classics to modern Taiwanese plays, Lu paused before answering.

"To be honest, no ... because *Castrated Chicken* was supposed to be the best," he said. "I'm more interested in doing the works of contemporary [Taiwanese] playwrights."

#### THEATER NOTES:

**WHAT:** Tainaner Ensemble's (台南人劇團) *Castrated Chicken* (閩雞)  
**WHERE:** National Theater, Taipei City  
**WHEN:** Today and tomorrow at 7:30pm and tomorrow and Sunday at 2:30pm  
**TICKETS:** NT\$400 to NT\$1,500 tickets, available through NTCH ticketing



# 'La Dame aux Camelias' flowers on staying power

With Nikola Marova, Michal Stipa and Alexandre Katsaprov dancing the leads to music by Taipei Symphony Orchestra, 'La Dame aux Camelias' has pedigree

BY DIANE BAKER  
STAFF REPORTER

Taiwanese dancer/choreographer Allen Yu (余能盛) must be one of the few people in the world who willingly gives up his summer vacation to spend 14-hour days (if not longer) to do what he does in his regular job: produce ballets.

Yu has returned home from his post as deputy ballet director and choreographer at the Opera House in Graz, Austria, to try to raise the barre — so to speak for — for both dancers and the ballet-going public in Taiwan. He has revived his production of *La Dame aux Camelias* (The Lady of the Camellias), first produced in Germany in 2000, for his small local company, the Chamber Ballet Taipei, along with giving a series of dance master classes and music lectures.

This is not the first time Yu has brought the ballet, which is based on Alexandre Dumas' 1868 novel about the doomed courtesan Marguerite Gautier and her young lover, Armand Duval, to Taiwan. He staged it in Taipei in 2003 and then took the production on tour to New Zealand. But he said he has drastically overhauled the show.

"I made a lot of changes from the version seen in 2003 — the group back then was much smaller, I had only five boys. This year the group is much better, the four leads are so good," Yu said.

Last time around Daniel Cimpean, a Romanian who used to be a soloist with the Darmstadt Staatstheater, danced Armand. This time around he is dancing the role of Armand's father.

"He's really good as the father, it's a big part," Yu said.

In fact, Yu has nothing but superlatives to say about his leads, who include Nikola Marova, Michal Stipa (Misha) and Alexandre Katsaprov, all principal dancers of the National Theatre in Prague, Czech Republic.

"I changed a lot for Armand and Marguerite. They [Nikola and Misha] are big stars in Prague, dance all the big roles. I changed a lot for the big pas de deux because she can do everything I want. Nikola is unbelievable, her technique, the drama ... She's absolutely perfect," he said.

The rest of the 22-member company was recruited from an open audition Yu held in Taipei in March. More than a dozen danced for



First produced in Germany in 2000, Allen Yu has reworked his production of *La Dame aux Camelias* for Taiwanese audiences.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHAMBER BALLET TAIPEI

him last year in *When Ballet Meets Tchaikovsky*. But Yu says that every year he comes back it feels like he is starting from scratch again with his Taiwanese dancers, because most don't dance every day.

"The third act is very hard for the whole company, it's 30 minutes. This year they couldn't

do it at the beginning — they were so heavy [technically], out of condition. I kept telling them they have to have class every day."

"It's also hard for the dancers this time because they have never danced with a live orchestra, but it's good," he said.

The company will perform this weekend with the Taipei Symphony Orchestra; in Tainan last weekend they danced with the Chimei Philharmonic Orchestra. The man wielding the baton is Dutch conductor Anthony Hermus, whom Yu knew from his work in Germany.

For the score, Yu has chosen to mix and match from the works of Giuseppe Verdi.

"To prepare the music was more difficult than the choreography. I used music from nine different Verdi operas, put together for 100 minutes, then worked with the conductor," Yu said.

Bringing four guest artists and a conductor from Europe, investing in new costumes and sets — none of this is cheap. But he feels it is all part of building up ballet in Taiwan. And Yu knows he can't do the job alone.

"I have been really inspired by the chairwoman of Chieftek [Precision Co], Miss

Chen (Angelika Li-fen, 陳麗芬). She has really helped a lot with the sponsorship, helped a lot in Tainan in arranging the performances. It's important in this society to have private sponsorship — she is really setting an example."

"You have to package everything if you want to be a professional company," he said. "If we don't build up the professional level, the country, the society, will never support professional theater."

#### PERFORMANCE NOTES:

**WHAT:** Chamber Ballet Taipei's *La Dame aux Camelias*  
**WHEN:** Tonight and tomorrow at 7:30pm and Sunday at 3pm  
**WHERE:** Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台), 25, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市八德路三段25號)  
**TICKETS:** NT\$400, NT\$600, NT\$800, NT\$1,000, NT\$1,200 and NT\$1,500; available online at [www.artsticket.com.tw](http://www.artsticket.com.tw)  
**OTHER PERFORMANCE:** Tuesday at 7:30pm, Cultural Affairs Bureau of Hsinchu County (新竹縣文化局演藝廳), 146 Hsiangcheng 9th Rd, Chupei City, Hsinchu County (新竹縣竹北市縣政九路146號)