

FEATURES

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[THE WEEKENDER]

‘Le Boite’: no strings attached

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW AND DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTERS

La Boite (The Box), the second performance in the Taipei Art Festival (台北藝術節) opened Friday at the Zhongshan Hall (台北市中山堂) in Taipei. The show, a collaboration between Taiwan's Taiyuan Puppet Theater Company (台原偶戲團) and Compagnie des Zonzons from France, played to an almost full house.

The story of two puppet troupes who meet, learn from each other, and then continue on their separate ways was inconsequential, but in the manner of great road movies, it is the journey of the spirit rather than reality matters. *La Boite* achieves this spiritual journey through the strength of its ensemble performance. The close relationship between actors, the puppets, the musicians and even the lighting technicians (the use of projection and shadow was integral to the production), and which they presented so joyfully to the audience, was one of the great achievements of this production.

The fact that the story, such as it was, was self-reflecting — two puppet troupes performing a play about two puppet troupes — lent the production a wonderful intimacy, and the little moments of humor and sentimentality worked well, nicely balanced between sincere sentimentality and the artificial setup of the great “puppet box” in and around which the actors and puppets performed.

The production overcame the problem of the small size of traditional Taiwan glove puppets through the use of projections. The overlaying of the projection on the same space as the actual performance worked particularly well, and was much less distracting than having separate video screens.

Taiyuan has often made use of hand puppets in its experimental performances, but this reviewer has always found the discrepancy in scale too extreme even in small venues such as the Experimental Theater to be truly effective. At a venue such as Zhongshan Hall, this discrepancy could have been disastrous — instead, through this clever use of projection, the intricately made puppets were able to project their presence across the much bigger space, without losing the immediacy of the live performance.

There was much more in *La Boite* than you'd expect, and all was very neatly combined. It did not have a big finale, which perhaps left some of the audience a little bemused, but even this seemed to fit with the whole program. After all, you often never really know when a journey has ended and another begins.

Allen Yu (余能盛) looked very happy on Saturday night, even before the curtain went up before a full house on his production of *La Dame aux Camelias*. He was right to be happy, for the production was a huge advance, both in scale and performance levels, over his shows the past two summers.

Dancing to a live orchestra clearly inspired local dancers Ho Yu-wen (何郁玟) as Nanina, Liao Yi-hsuan (廖奕璇) as Prudence Duvernay, Wang Kuo-nien (王國年) as the Joker and Chuang Yuan-tung (莊媛婷) as the Queen of Cards to dance their best. They must have also been inspired by working for several weeks with their two Czech leads, Nikola Marova and Michal Stipa. The pair's two big pas de deux, at the end of Act I and Act III, were both passionate and technically demanding.

Yu's decision to stage Act III's casino scene with the company costumed as suites of cards was very clever. I loved the bright unitard costumes, though I could have done without the feathers in the little caps. It was a scene that demanded a lot from the entire corp and they pulled it off.

The National Theater saved the best for last in its New Productions of Emerging Taiwanese Choreographers production, as the final two pieces of the program outshone the rest.

All eight dances varied so widely in terms of content and style that it was like ranking apples and oranges to compare them, but Su Shih-jian's (蘇詩堅) *The Wind Blew* — beautifully performed by Chou Meng-ping (周夢蘋) — and Huang Huai-de's (黃懷德) *A House Male* — danced by Huang, Liu Hou-chen (劉厚辰) and Chen Wei-sheng (陳偉勝) — stood out strongly both in terms of concept and execution.

Huang's piece especially — a wonderful romp on, around and over a pair of moveable ballet bars — marks the arrival of a strong new voice and was just a sheer joy to watch. More the pity then that the second weekend did not draw as many viewers as the first, at least as far as the Saturday matinees went.



La Boite pulled one out of the box.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TAIYUAN PUPPET THEATER COMPANY

Taiwan's ambassadors of rap

Kou Chou Ching enjoys a strong indie following for its brand of traditional Taiwanese hip-hop. The group has an album out and just returned from a series of gigs in Tokyo

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER

It's been a good year for Kou Chou Ching (拷秋勤), the hip-hop group known for sampling traditional Taiwanese music and rapping in Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese) and Hakka. The outfit gained mainstream recognition when its latest album was nominated for several Golden Melody Awards — Taiwan's equivalent of the Grammy Awards. The group enjoys a steady gigging schedule, and just completed a mini-tour of Tokyo rock clubs at the invitation of Japanese indie label People's Records.

I met three of Kou Chou Ching's five members, MCs Fan Chiang (范姜) and FishLin and DJ J-Chen, at a coffee shop near their studio in Shilin (士林). The mild-mannered and down-to-earth MCs, who look and dress like typical university students, quietly teased their slightly goofy DJ, who sported an obvious “hip-hop” look with his trucker's mesh hat.

Taipei Times: How did Japanese audiences respond to your music?

J-Chen: The audiences didn't understand the [language] of our music, but they were very willing to listen to the melodies, and move to the beat — this doesn't happen in Taiwan. In Taiwan, they put their hands under their arms, and mostly just look at you coldly. When we tell them to raise their hands in the air, they'll raise them but lower them right away. In Japan, they'll just dance, dance, dance.

TT: Why do Japanese audiences dance so much? Aren't they in the same position as Taiwanese audience members who don't understand Hakka, for example?

JC: That's because of the music, and not because of ...

FishLin: ... whether or not you can communicate in the language.

Fan Chiang: [The Japanese seem] to care more about whether the music sounds good or not. In Taiwan, you don't often get the feeling that people actually enjoy music for the sake of music. For example, say you're enjoying the music, you might start dancing. This is not as common in Taiwan.

TT: Why is that?

JC: Personality.

FC: The Taiwanese are generally shyer.

FL: If you're really getting into it and start dancing, people will stare at you.

JC: They'll think you're strange ... and they'll take a step back.

FC: Mainly it's because they're shy. It's like in school — when you're in class and you raise your hand when the teacher asks if there are any questions, people think you're strange/weird.

TT: But don't you think this is changing for the better?

JC: Very slowly!

FL: In Taiwan, there are some scenes that are pretty entertaining, with a [good] atmosphere — last year we went to the Taik Rock Concert (台客搖滾嘉年華) ...

JC: Everyone, even the *baimin* (白民, ordinary folks), enjoyed it.

FC: It's the same with the Ho-Hai-Yan music festival.

FL: If it's a more official event held by somebody like the Council for Hakka Affairs or the Government Information Office, not as many people come to hear music — or else they come to listen to Hakka folk music or more normal, intimate music.

As the global hip-hop phenomenon has made a clear mark on the fashion and pop music industries, Kou Chou Ching has distinguished itself by defying the genre's conventional stereotypes. There is no “gangsta” romance in their music; instead they rap about how Taiwanese kids need to avoid violence. There is little desire for bling and wealth. The group is preparing to sell its own line of hip-hop clothing, but with the profits marked for charity organizations and NGOs. Yet, the group's members do not dwell on what sets them apart; their main interest lies in all things music.

TT: What's the current state of Taiwan's hip-hop scene?

FL: In Tainan, there used to be a group of rappers that focused a lot on freestyle and rapping skills. But right now it seems like the creativity is happening in Taipei — because in Tainan, even though they did a lot of rapping, not many people were writing their own music.

They would use foreign instrumentals ... but they didn't really write their own music. What makes Taipei's scene great is more people here write their own music. Maybe it's because of the US and Japan's influence ... there are a few hip-hop jazz groups starting to come out now in Taipei ... It used to be that a lot of people wanted to learn American gangsta rap, more hardcore, tougher stuff. But now it's becoming

more diversified.

FC: But I think one problem is that there's no new generation ... Many groups out there now are already two or three years old, and even fewer new groups are coming out. This isn't just happening in hip-hop but it's also the same for indie bands ... There are fewer new bands nowadays that are making good music and have a big following.

JC: It's hard for bands in Taiwan to keep it going because of [compulsory] military service ... It often causes bands to break up.

TT: But wouldn't a band just continue on after they finish their service?

J-Chen: People then get jobs ... they give up the dream of doing music.

TT: Where's Taiwan hip-hop headed?

FC: It's moving toward many styles ... before everyone just liked gangsta rap. More groups are also releasing their own CDs.

TT: What's in store musically for Kou Chou Ching?

FL: I think that you don't only need hip-hop beats to rap ... Our beats in the future will probably include drum n' bass, house, to which we will add rap. We don't just listen to hip-hop but a lot of other music too, so we'll be trying other styles.

TT: So you're leaning towards electronic music.

FL: Electronic, but reggae too. But we will keep adding traditional [Taiwanese music samples] to electronic and maybe even reggae music. We've starting to realize that they are compatible.

TT: Where do you get your music samples?

FL: For traditional music, night markets. Some places in the countryside, temples sell their own CDs of traditional opera music.

FC: On Huaxi Street (華西街) there's a place that sells cassette tapes [of old Taiwanese songs]. We'll buy tapes there to make into samples ... I've also had this idea of recording on the street, where you sometimes see these tough old ladies bawling someone out ... the way they yell — that feeling is a lot like rap. And it's very rhythmic. We could tape that and put it to a rhythm track, make an intro to a song. I think that would be really cool.

Kou Chou Ching's next show is on Thursday, 8:30pm, at the Ilan County Stadium (宜蘭縣立體育館). Visit the group's blog at blog.roodo.com/kou/ or Web site at www.kou.com.tw for details.

[This interview has been edited and condensed.]

Kou Chou Ching, the hip-hop outfit that you could take home for tea with granny.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KOU CHOU CHING



PLANETPOP

US comedian and talk show host **Ellen DeGeneres** married her long-time partner, actress **Portia de Rossi**, at their home in Los Angeles on Saturday, according to *People*.

DeGeneres, 50, and de Rossi, 35, exchanged handwritten vows in an intimate ceremony attending by 19 guests, a representative for the couple told the magazine.

The couple have been dating for about four years and have been open about their relationship, appearing at

Amy Winehouse joins Jay-Z on the end of a tongue-lashing from Noel Gallagher.

PHOTO: AP

red carpet events in Hollywood together.

DeGeneres announced her plans to wed de Rossi, the former *Ally McBeal* actress, on her talk show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, in May after California's Supreme Court overturned a state ban on same-sex marriage.

Irish folk legend **Ronnie Drew**, a founding member of The Dubliners, died in a Dublin hospital on Saturday, his family said. He was 73 and had been suffering from throat cancer.

The Dubliners, formed in 1962, were pioneers for Irish folk music across Europe and the US. Drew was known for his gravelly-voiced renditions of rabble-rousing folk songs like *Finnegan's Wake* and *Dicey Reilly*.

In a statement, Drew's family said he died peacefully while they were at his bedside and they were “very grateful for all the letters of support and wishes during the term of Ronnie's illness.”

With his health failing, Irish music stars released a tribute song in February entitled *The*

Ballad of Ronnie Drew. Proceeds went to the Irish Cancer Society.

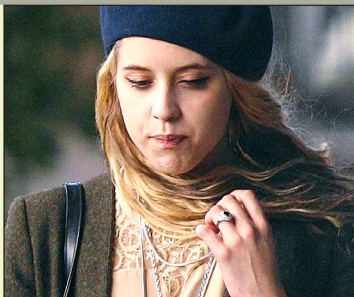
Those involved included **U2**, **Bob Geldof**, **Sinead O'Connor**, **Andrea Corr**, **Chris de Burgh**, **Ronan Keating**, **Shane MacGowan**, The Chieftains and The Dubliners.

Dorival Caymmi, one of the founders of modern Brazilian music, passed away Saturday from multiple organ failure, surrounded by family and friends at his Rio de Janeiro home, at 94 years of age, local press reported.

“We've lost the greatest professors of life,” said singer **Tom Ze**, who like Caymmi hails from the central coastal state of Bahia, where the sun-drenched lifestyle of fishing villages and sultry women inspired Caymmi's more than 50 lifetime music albums.

From his first and immediately popular song written at 16, *O que a baiana tem?*, Caymmi's rhythmic style and deep, sultry voice were adopted by Bossa Nova singers and performed by **Joao Gilberto**, **Tom Jobim** and other greats.

An indefatigable worker, Caymmi gave his last performance



Peaches Geldof is probably thankful that Noel Gallagher isn't her father.

PHOTO: AP

and cut his last record on his 90th birthday four years ago.

Booze-fuelled Oasis guitarist **Noel Gallagher** compared troubled singer **Amy Winehouse** to a “destitute horse” in a stinging rant on his fellow musicians Friday.

The surly loudmouth, known for his scathing outbursts, hit out during an interview on BBC Radio One.

The 41-year-old rocker, who was infuriated by New York rapper **Jay-Z** headlining the Glastonbury Festival, compared soul diva Winehouse, 24, to a “destitute horse.”

Mark Ronson, who remixed The Zutons' track *Valerie* for Winehouse and the Kaiser Chiefs' tune *Oh My God* for singer **Lily Allen**, also came under fire.

“He wants to write his own tunes instead of ruining everyone else's,” Gallagher said.

“Mark Ronson needs to learn three chords on the guitar and write a tune.”

He branded pop band Scouting For Girls “Scouting For Idiots” and attacked the Kaiser Chiefs, saying: “The Monkees haven't split up, they're just going under the name of the Kaiser Chiefs.”

“I did drugs for 18 years and I never got that bad as to say, ‘You know what? I think the Kaiser Chiefs are brilliant.’”

“Anybody whose drummer writes the songs are not to be trusted.”

Songwriter Gallagher also compared British celebrity **Jade Goody**'s scent to “stale urine” and suggested Live Aid supremo **Bob Geldof**'s daughter **Peaches** should be stamped on.

Goody, a former contestant on British television's *Big Brother*, is in India, reportedly to appear in a similar reality show hosted

by Bollywood star **Shilpa Shetty**, whom she was accused of racially taunting on the British version.

Gallagher joked about putting out his own aftershave, Eau de Toerag, “for the working class gentlemen.”

He said Goody's scent “smells like stale urine, and that's not the perfume.”

Of Geldof's newly-married daughter, he said: “God almighty, I have respect for Sir Bob ... stamp on her though.”

Gallagher admitted he was drunk and had had only two hours' sleep.

A BBC spokesman told the *Daily Mail* newspaper: “Noel Gallagher was very clearly briefed in advance and monitored during the live interview.”

“We have not received any complaints.”

“As ever, Noel was a lively and opinionated guest. Of course Radio One does not condone drug abuse and if we felt our guest was drunk we would not put him on air.”

— AGENCIES