

AROUND TOWN

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2008

PAGE 13

A long way home

U-Theater set out on a 12,000km walk around Taiwan to celebrate their 20th anniversary. When they returned, they had the inspiration for a new production

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER



ON Monday, March 24, the members of U-Theater (優人神鼓), along with a support team and some fans, set off on an expedition to celebrate their 20th anniversary. The acclaimed Zen drumming group spent the next 49 days walking around the island, covering 12,000km while giving more than 30 performances along the way at temples, schools and parks.

This wasn't the first long walk the company had undertaken, but it was certainly their longest and most ambitious. Now the company is taking audiences on the same journey, with their new production, titled simply *The Walk*.

Company founder and director Liu Ruo-yu (劉若瑀) didn't set off on the trip in March with the idea of producing a show from it. But after returning home, she and her husband, the company's drumming master and musical director Huang Chih-chun (黃錦群), began reflecting on what they had seen, heard and felt, and the people they had met.

"I really appreciate these 50 days. For the company, the last 10 years have been so busy. At the end of 2000 we were very busy but we decided to stop. We paid members' salaries while Adan [Huang]

went to India and I went to Matsu for three months. But now we can't do this; there are too many people [involved in the company]," she said in an interview on Tuesday.

"I need to walk. I have to walk," she said. "We used the walk to stop, to have quietness of mind."

Liu said her strongest images of the journey were the children at an elementary school in Ilan County, the volcanic clays an Aboriginal woman in Taitung County uses to dye the clothing she makes, the very strong sun, the rain, the ocean, birds singing — and rice.

"From the beginning, before Adan decided to make a piece, the very strong thing [memories] was the people, the restaurants and their food, the warmth of the people, but still the birds, the ocean, how when you are walking your brain is still thinking, the small sounds you hear," she said.

"When we were walking on the street, we heard the birds, the cars rushing by. Outside of us it was so loud, but inside it's quiet, so he decided to start from this," she said.

The show is divided into nine segments, each designed to convey a different element of the walk. The first section (風雨踐行, a farewell banquet before a journey in wind and rain) is about a big storm the night before the troupe set off, and how they felt the power of the wind and rain helped propel them on their way. The second, (千里足跡, a journey of a thousand miles) is about the 12,000km, and a short film of the walk will be projected onto a small screen on stage.

The third segment (木田蟲鳴, insects buzzing in the forests and fields) is about the children in Ilan, and features 20 students in the performing arts class at a high school in Muzha who spend half their day in school and half with U-Theater studying music, drumming, martial arts and sacred dance.

Sections four through eight respectively

cover the sun, the clays used for dyeing clothes, birds singing and "walking into light." The eighth segment is about a big rainstorm that hit as the company was passing through Miaoli. Liu said the big drum is very strong in this piece, "like a typhoon wind." The program finishes with the long-awaited homecoming (如風歸來, returning as the wind).

Liu and Huang enlisted some of the people they met along the way to help with the show, including Ama, who created the costumes using fabrics she makes and dyes near a river in the mountains by her home, and Iki Tadaw, an Aboriginal singer they met as they walked from Taroko Gorge to Hualien.

"We feel *The Walk* is a natural walk, walking with nature. There is a very strong energy, all the different elements helped the walk keep going," Liu said.

The show, however, will be nowhere near as arduous as the real journey either for the 13-member company or the armchair travelers in the audience. As animated as Liu was in recounting the trip, she admitted it had taken a toll.

"With my health, my age, it's very hard for me to walk these 50 days ... so I just concentrated on the feet. Sometimes I couldn't eat at the end of the day; I just went to sleep," she said.

The key she said was *kanzuxia* (看足下), literally "watching under your feet," or focusing on the process of moving step by step. It's a very Zen thing, she said.



"On the walk you get the chance to watch inside yourself," she said.

When she walked she wore a piece of cloth wrapped around her head to help protect her from the sun. She also pulled some of the cloth over her eyes. It didn't completely block her vision, but it helped her focus on walking. Without that strip of cloth, she said, she might not have finished the trip.

"One day we were walking in Kaohsiung, we had to go under a bridge. It was very narrow, very dangerous, a little dark. I lifted the cloth up [to see better] and I fell down," she said. "I was so tired. Once you use your brain, everything breaks down."

She felt like she couldn't move another step.

"They wanted to put me in a car to catch up with the rest of the company. But I said no," she said. "After

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: U-Theater, *The Walk*

WHEN: Tonight at 7:30pm and Sunday at 2:30pm (Hsinchu); Thursday to Sept. 21 at 7:30pm; matinees at 2:30pm on Sept. 21 and Sept. 22 (Taipei); Sept. 27 at 7:30pm (Tainan)

WHERE: Hsinchu Municipal Performance Hall (新竹市立演藝廳), 17, Tungta Rd. Sec 2, Hsinchu City (新竹市東大路二段17號); National Theater (國家戲劇院), 21-1, Zhongshan S Rd, Taipei City (台北市中山南路21-1號); Tainan Municipal Cultural Center (台南市立文化中心), 332, Chunghua E Rd. Sec 3, Tainan City (台南市中華東路三段332)

TICKETS: NT\$400 to NT\$2,500; to order, go to www.artsticket.com.tw or call 02-3393-9888

coming out [from under the bridge] I could see the members very far ahead, I pulled the cloth back down and thought, 'Watch the feet,' and I arrived [at the next destination] at the same time as they did!"

The company's next trip will be a bit easier, at least on the feet. They are heading off to the US in the middle of next month on a month-long tour to perform their 2002 work *Meeting With Vajrasattva* (金剛心). U-Theater will perform this piece for local fans at their mountain home on Laoquanshan (老泉山) in early December.