



Dutchman modernizes puppets

LIVING TRADITION: Robin Ruizendaal, who fell in love with the beauty of puppet shows from China and Taiwan, is seeking to help bring the art into the modern era

BY LOA IOK-SIN
STAFF REPORTER

Amazed by the beauty of puppet theater, Dutchman Robin Ruizendaal has devoted himself to studying Asian — particularly Taiwanese — puppet theater and is now the director of the Lin Liu-hsin Puppet Theatre Museum in Taipei.

"I've always been interested in drama in general since I was little. I wrote scripts and directed some plays when I was a university student," Ruizendaal said in Mandarin during an interview on Sept. 4 in his office at the museum.

Surrounding him were shelves of books on puppet theater, the making of puppets, drama, posters featuring puppet theater performances from different parts of the world, trophies, certificates of gratitude — and a few puppets.

"So, I've read about puppet theater in Asia long ago in books, but when I saw real-life performances in China's Fujian Province, I was totally amazed and overwhelmed by its beauty," he said.

Having received a master's degree in Sinology in his native Netherlands, Ruizendaal went on

to study Chinese at Xiamen University in China in 1986.

It was in Xiamen that Ruizendaal first saw live performances of Hokkien puppet theater, which is a close relative of Taiwan's *budaixi* (布袋戲).

Bringing home with him the interest he developed for puppet theater in China, Ruizendaal returned in 1991 to the Netherlands where he entered the doctoral program at Leiden University and specialized in Chinese marionette theater.

"Actually, besides being amazed by puppet theater performances, a key reason that motivated me to study puppet theater is that there was not a lot of research done in the area," Ruizendaal said. "Most people like operas, musicals and dramas, but not so much puppet theater, so I consider puppet theater a minority culture, and I always care more about minority cultures."

Although he made most of his discoveries about puppet theater in China, life brought him back across the Taiwan Strait to the country he visited for a few months in 1991.

"I came to Taiwan in 1993 originally to help organize a puppet

theater festival," but ended up staying in the country, Ruizendaal said.

Today, Ruizendaal is the head of a leading puppet theater museum in Taiwan and its puppet theater troupe.

The museum is suitably located on the west end of Taipei in an area known as Dadaocheng (大稻埕). With its harbor on the bank of the Tamsui River (淡水河), Dadaocheng was a busy trading port during the Qing Dynasty and Japanese colonial period.

A centuries-old temple and a busy commercial street with storefronts and houses of the country's leading traders — built during the Japanese colonial period — are found near the museum, which was founded to preserve the puppet theater culture.

"We keep over 8,000 items relating to puppet theater in the museum. Some of the puppets in our museum are over a hundred years old," Ruizendaal said.

"We often go to antique shops searching for puppets, and, as we've established our reputation,

some antique dealers would come to us when they acquire antique puppets," he said.

In fact, the museum is more than just a museum; it also has a troupe that performs Taiwanese *budaixi* around the world.

"We've been to Europe, North and Latin America and neighboring Asian countries to perform — in fact, we will be representing Taipei in a performance art festival in Seoul, South Korea," Ruizendaal said. "Such tours are great opportunities for us to exchange puppets with troupes in other countries and expand our collection."

Besides performances by the museum's troupe, it often invites other professional troupes to perform at the museum.

"On every Saturday this month, we have puppet masters from the well-respected Xiaoxiyuan (小西園) troupe to show off their amazing skill in performing kung-fu scenes with glove puppets," he said.

The museum also makes their own puppets.

On the second floor of the museum's office, there is a room with a table on which the museum's own craftsman works on the heads of puppets.

Traditional Taiwanese *budaixi*

glove puppets consist of a body made with cloth, while the head, hands and feet are made with wood.

"Here's an unfinished head of [Frederic] Chopin — we're invited to perform a story of Chopin with puppet glove," Ruizendaal said, holding an unfinished and uncolored wooden figure.

On the table, there were several print-out portraits of Chopin.

In another small room on the left of the visitor's entrance to the museum, several people were busy working on puppets' clothes using a tailor machine, scissors and sewing needles.

"I would call this an amazing success," Ruizendaal said.

"It's a success, but it would've been perfect if we were not always short of funds," he said, laughing.

At the moment, the museum runs on income from ticket sales and performances, government subsidies and corporate sponsorship.

"Corporate sponsorship is a big part of our income because we don't have that many visitors, and cultural organizations like us seem to be less favored by the government," he said. "But in any case, I think puppet theater in Taiwan has passed the endangered phase, and the development is somewhat stable now."



Lin Liu-hsin Puppet Theatre Museum director Robin Ruizendaal holds a half-finished puppet figure of Frederic Chopin on Sept. 4 at the museum in Taipei.

PHOTO: LOA IOK-SIN, TAIPEI TIMES

PIGEON POST

AIT encourages US citizens to vote in upcoming election

GOVERNMENT

The American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) is encouraging US citizens to vote in all US elections for which they are eligible. Advanced planning is crucial for overseas voters and now is the time to act. Registration deadlines are approaching fast and there is significant mailing time required for ballots. As a first step, US citizens should visit the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) interactive Web site, which was designed for overseas voters: www.fvap.gov. Voters can use the FVAP site to print a "Registration/Absentee Ballot Request" form. The FVAP site provides overseas voters with instructions on how to submit the form, as well as complete state-specific instructions, deadlines and addresses. Voters can also use the FVAP site to print out emergency write-in ballots; however, write-in ballots won't be counted unless the voter previously requested their state's regular ballot by the deadline. Voters can also write to AIT at VoteTaipei@state.gov with questions.

AIT, Mercedes-Benz co-sponsor amateur jazz competition

MUSIC

All non-professional jazz players under 26 years of age are invited to sign up for an amateur jazz band competition co-sponsored by AIT and Mercedes-Benz on Sunday, Sept. 28. The top prize includes NT\$20,000 in cash and a chance to perform at the upcoming Taichung Jazz Festival. The competition will also feature a well-known US jazz musician, Gene Aitken, to be the special judge. The maximum number of players in a band must not exceed eight. Each band will have 20 minutes on stage and must perform at least two to three songs in the first 12 minutes. The registration deadline is Sunday. For further questions, please contact Geddy Lin at geddylin@yahoo.com or visit www.ait.org.tw/en/news/programs/200809.aspx.

STAFF WRITER, WITH CNA



SMILE AND SAY 'QUESO'

Students from Latin America, Africa and Asia pose for photographs while attending orientation at National Taiwan Ocean University in Keelung last Thursday.

PHOTO: WENG YU-HUANG, TAIPEI TIMES

Vietnamese bride uses skills to do business in Taiwan

BY LEE YING
STAFF REPORTER

Chen Qiucao (陳秋草), a Vietnamese who immigrated to Taiwan after marrying a Taiwanese, has used her skills as a nail polish artist and now owns a nail salon in Yonghe City's (永和市) busy Lohua night market. Not only has her business been a success, but Chen also serves as a model for other Vietnamese brides seeking to make a living for themselves.

Chen, 28, is different from most Vietnamese brides in this country. For one, she did not marry a Taiwanese to lift herself out of poverty or to help her family financially. Tired of constantly arguing with her mother and following an introduction by a friend, she met her future husband when she was 19.

Chen said she started studying cosmetics at 14. After giving birth to her two children, she set up a small cosmetics stand in a vegetable market in Yonghe's Yuhsi Street and slowly started to make a name for herself, with her clients including Japanese and French women. For six years, Chen did a roaring trade at this stand before moving on to the nail business.

When Chen first started painting nails, her husband's family worried that working at a night market might be tricky, or that it could be a bad influence on her.

"Luckily, my husband supported me and my efforts," she said, adding that she adapted to her new environment rather quickly, picking up Mandarin and Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese).

Now, Chen said she can communicate easily with her clients, offer them the latest in nail polish design and even make a financial contribution to her husband's family.

"I love living in Taiwan, and I love my new salon," she said.



Chen Qiucao displays her latest nail polish design.

PHOTO: LEE YING, TAIPEI TIMES

'Bob the Builder' relates TES' road to development

HIGH-TECH CAMPUS: The high school on the top of Yangmingshan and the primary school in Shilin District both have state-of-the-art technology in the classrooms

BY JENNY W. HSU
STAFF REPORTER

"Eleven hundred" is usually the answer John Nixon will give when asked how many children he and his wife have.

Surrounded by students' artwork in his office, the soft-spoken British educator pointed at an exquisite oversized painting of a traditional Japanese woman hanging across from his desk.

"A Japanese student did that," he said, admiring the picture like one showing off a masterpiece by his own child.

"I think young adults today can be really pressured by their peers and by the commercial world, and not all that pressure is positive. One thing the school and I try to encourage them [to realize] is that they have the right to make the right choices for themselves," Nixon said.

The son of shipyard workers in the UK, the CEO of the Taipei European School (TES) paid tribute to his parents for instilling a thirst for knowledge in him at an early age.

Despite his family's struggle with money, Nixon considers himself lucky.

"My stepfather had always been very keen for me to go college, get an education and have the chance he did not have," he said. "My parents would buy me any books I wanted."

Young Nixon, however, had to do various odd jobs to support himself, including driving a truck to sell tea door-to-door and, after he turned 20, being hired as a window repairman for a skyscraper.

Since then, the avid mountaineer has conquered some of the world's toughest peaks, including the Himalayas and Mount Kenya.

"Sometimes you learn from jobs that you don't like. I knew I didn't want to work on a building site, but now I build schools," he chuckled.

Affectionately known as "Bob the Builder" among students because of his frequent donning of a yellow hard hat around school construction sites, in the last eight years Nixon has overseen the expansion of his school, both in size

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— John Nixon, CEO of Taipei European School

and number of students.

The high school campus at Yangmingshan was completed in 2002, while the new Swire European Primary Campus in Shilin District was inaugurated in August last year.

Both campuses are fully equipped with state-of-the-art technology that facilitates interaction between students and teachers.

The primary campus consists of three main buildings: an Infant Wing, a Junior Wing and a Central Resource Area. The school's Web site says that a sports center will be built later as part of a second phase of development.

But for the former geology teacher, the hardware found at the school is of secondary importance, with the holistic development of students the school's



raison d'être.

Nixon stresses that his main commitment is not only helping students excel academically, but also looking after the children's well-being under what he described as "pastoral care" promoting health,

social and moral education.

"Some of the students we teach will become very important leaders in the future. I want them to have a humanistic approach [and] to learn to be considerate, understanding and tolerant," he said.

Taipei European School CEO John Nixon gestures during an interview with the Taipei Times on Saturday.

PHOTO: CHANG CHA-MING, TAIPEI TIMES

Children, he said, learn better when they feel comfortable and happy.

Acknowledging that the majority of TES students are from privileged families, Nixon said the school has set up many programs to involve them in local charity work.

Many of the high school students also travel to Cambodia each year to build houses for those in need, he said.

It is Nixon's unwavering dedication to education in Taiwan that has earned him a chance to be made a Member of the Order of the British Empire last year, one of the most prestigious honors meted out by Queen Elizabeth II to recognize stellar achievements, contributions and acts of bravery by British subjects.

"I don't know and I don't think I will ever know who nominated me, but it is very special honor for me," he said.

TES is the second international school Nixon has worked at, after serving as vice-principal of a school in Qatar for 11 years.

"I don't know where I will go next after Taipei, but I do know it will be somewhere I can be challenged," he said.