

From little acorns ...

'Lil' Flora' is a full-on musical with all the bells and whistles, and well-pitched to Taiwan's media-savvy children

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Lil' Flora by Ifkids

WHEN: Today and tomorrow at 7:30pm; tomorrow and Sunday at 10:30 and 2:30pm

WHERE: Novel Hall (新舞台), 3-1 Songshou Rd, Taipei City (台北市松壽路3-1號)

TICKETS: NT\$300 to NT\$850 for tomorrow night and morning shows tomorrow and on Sunday; NT\$350 to NT\$1,000 for other performances

ON TOUR: Lil' Flora will also show at the National Taichung Library Chungsing Concert Hall (台中中興堂), 291-3 Jingwu Rd, Taichung City (台中市精武路291-3號) at 2:30pm and 7:30pm on Oct. 11 and at the Performing Arts Center of the Cultural Affairs Bureau of Hsinchu County (新竹縣文化中心演藝廳), 146 Xianzheng 9th Rd, Chubei City, Hsinchu County (新竹縣竹北市縣政九路146號) at 2:30pm and 7:30pm on Nov. 22

Lil' Flora (小花) is the story of an ordinary little girl and the importance of the ordinary things of an ordinary life. The show, primarily intended for children, is far from being an ordinary piece of children's theater, though. It is the creation of Ifkids (如果兒童劇團), which is inspired and led by comedian, actor, TV show host and playwright Chao Tzu-chiang (趙自強).

In a press statement, Chao said he was inspired to create Lil' Flora in response to the M-shaped society (M型社會), in which ordinary people are caught between poverty and the super-rich and children are exposed daily to the cult of celebrity. Chao is something of a minor star himself.

The show boasts the kind of talent and production values that many adult dramatic productions might envy. Lil' Flora's stage design is based on two rotating platforms and it stars Golden Melody winner Peggy Hsu (許哲夙) in the leading role.

The show's conception, however, is somewhat different from that of conventional children's theater. Victor Chen (陳世軍), Ifkids' public relations director, said Lil' Flora is not about creating interaction between the actors and the audience, but is intended to establish a talking point between parents and their children.

"Something that I have found over the years is that children understand much more of the world around them than we think," he said. "They might not be able to express what they feel, but they know. So our aim is always to go a little further."

At the premiere last Friday, the mood among the diminutive audience was exultant as Chao appeared on video to introduce the story in his now well-known role of Grandma Fruits (水果奶奶).

Though not a frequent attendee of children's theater, I nevertheless recognized the young audience's response: They were in the presence of a powerful brand name, and Chao's many years working in children's TV had clearly paid off.

Chao won the Golden Bell Award (金鐘獎) in 2000 and 2001 for best host of a children's program (最佳兒童節目主持人獎), and he continues to raise the bar for children's theater in Taiwan.

What followed was a full-on musical with all the bells and whistles, and one that was well-pitched to



Lil' Flora by Ifkids breaks new ground in children's theater by creating talking points between adults and children rather than preaching a tale of morality and pandering to illusions of an idealized world.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF IFKIDS

Taiwan's media-savvy children.

The ability to express complex issues in simple language is much underrated, and Lil' Flora is a showpiece of Chao's talent in this regard.

The story of a little flower girl who gets dragged into the music industry to "ghost" the voice of a newly minted celebrity for her music video and ends up transforming the people she meets with her simplicity and honesty is a very long way from either Grimms' fairy tales or Sesame Street.

The show makes allusions to reality talent shows, celebrities manufactured by the music industry, and the nefarious role of the paparazzi. Its producers seem to believe that most kids over about 4 or 5 are aware of the excesses of Next magazine even if they don't exactly come to grips with the more lurid details.

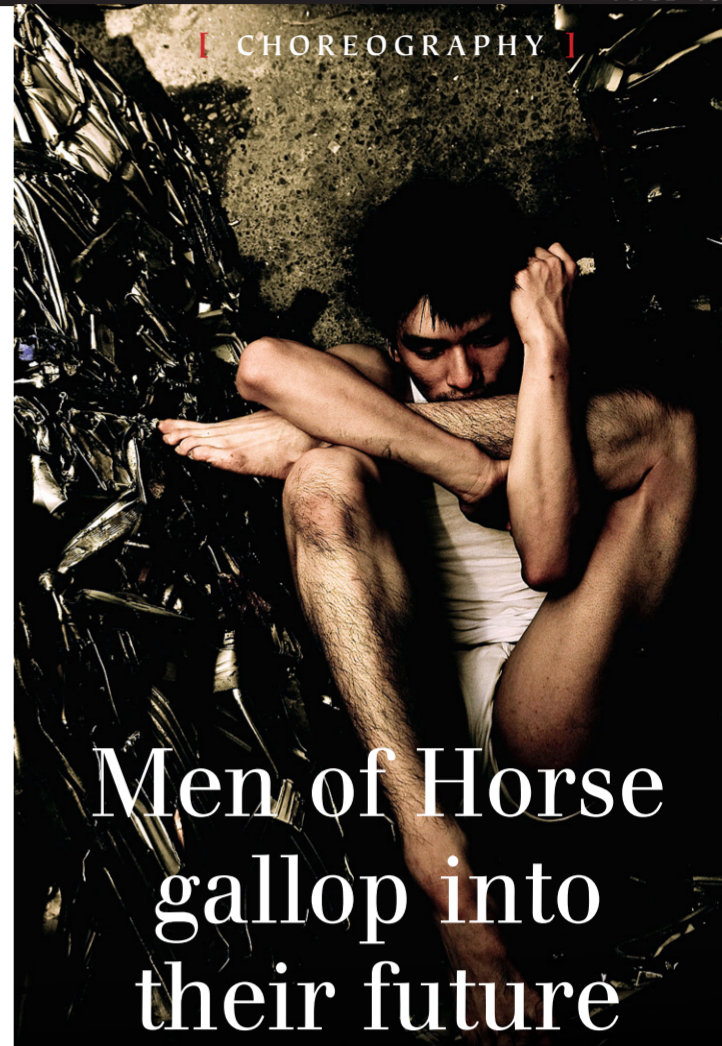
This was rather refreshing for someone who has long believed children's theater was the province of adults who condescend to children in an effort to create the illusion of a purer and more innocent world

for themselves.

There are plenty of uplifting songs about looking on the bright side, of being yourself, of celebrities being just people with plenty of human weaknesses, and so on. For good measure Lil' Flora includes a subplot and a song about the value of recycling (the heroine's father is a garbage collector). It's all nicely packaged, with catchy tunes, spirited acting, and a big concert sequence, the only fault being, perhaps, that at around two-and-a-half hours, the whole affair was a little long for some of the audience members.

Lil' Flora is unusual in being a bona-fide theatrical production that has ambitions beyond appealing to small children. "This production has 27 songs ... and the idea was to tell the story through the music," Chen said. In past productions, Ifkids had usually settled for around 15 songs for a musical production. "We are pushing the musical genre," Chen said, "regardless of whether we are talking about children's or grown-up theater."

CHOREOGRAPHY



Men of Horse gallop into their future

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

Taiwan's first all-male dance troupe, the Horse Dance Theater (驃舞劇場), is at a critical juncture in its development. The four-year old troupe has achieved a certain degree of fame at home (their performances this weekend at the Experimental Theater are all sold-out), they made a well-received trip to New York City this spring and will go again next year, and won top honors in the performance category of this year's Taishin Art Awards with the film of their last show, Velocity (速度). But their setup as a "dance cooperative" means the company has struggled to present a unified voice, while the competing demands of each member's solo career make scheduling difficult.

It is perhaps fitting then, that the theme of this year's show, Bones, is love and the unseen ties that bind people together, events together, and support them.

The ties that bind the five dancer/choreographers that make up Horse — founder and artistic director Chen Wu-kang (陳武康), Cheng Tsung-lung (鄭宗龍), Chou Shu-yi (周書毅), Su Wei-chia (蘇威嘉) and Yang Yu-min (楊育鳴) — go back at least 10 years. Chen, Cheng and Yang have known each other since junior high school. It is this friendship that unites them, even though they have taken different professional paths.

"We have trained from different stages, with different choreographers, graduated from different schools and our careers are very different. Wu-kang went to New York [where he dances with Eliot Feld's Ballet Tech], Tsung-lung went to Cloud Gate and we all do different things," Yang said in an interview at Horse's studio in Panchiao last Friday.

But he admitted that getting five determined men to agree on an idea or how to move forward can be difficult, adding "sometimes it's a 'Mission Impossible.'"

"This time for me the difficulty is that we are all very different, so how can we use the same language to the audience?" Cheng said.

Although Cheng was one of the original members of the company, he did not take part in the shows over the past two years. He said he deliberated for about two months after Chen asked him to take part in this year's show because he doesn't like to dance anymore.

"I have to push myself. I like to sit and think about choreographing ... I don't want to dance anymore; you're fighting your body everyday if you want to go on stage," Cheng said.

Su said having Cheng back with the group was good, because Cheng really pushed the rest to think about what they were doing.

"We also wanted to make the piece only about dance, about the body," he said, so they got rid of the props that featured heavily in their previous performances.

This time there will be just a white room, white floor, side walls and a back wall that looms toward the audience.

They are also moving in a different direction in terms of their score, using a soundscape created by French sound artist Yannick Dauby, whom Chou met and worked with when they both had residencies last year at Taipei Artist Village.

Dauby said it has been an interesting collaboration for him because he was asked to join the project after it was well underway.

"I couldn't do a sound universe ... so I wrote some music with more energy for the movement; all kinds of music from my own taste, from industrial music to Papua New Guinea. What was interesting to me was not to find something that would match [the movement] and provide a subtitle, but to have a dialogue between sound and the dancers," Dauby said.



Though Horse Dance Theater is making headway, as a collective its members find it difficult to form a unified voice.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHEN CHANG-CHIH

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Horse Dance Theater (驃舞劇場)

WHEN: Tonight and tomorrow at 7:30pm, tomorrow and Sunday at 2:30pm

WHERE: Experimental Theater of the National Theater (國家戲劇院實驗劇場), 21-1, Zhongshan 5 Rd, Taipei City (台北市中山南路21-1號)

TICKETS: Sold out