

AROUND TOWN

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PAGE 13

The story of *The Butterfly Lovers* (梁山伯與祝英台) occupies much the same position in Chinese culture as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* does in Western culture. It is the archetype of love stories, and so not surprisingly it has been reinterpreted in virtually every performance medium from traditional Beijing opera to Western classical music — *The Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto* (梁祝小提琴協奏曲) by He Zhanhao (何占豪) and Chen Gang (陳鋼) is one of the most famous examples of Western classical music written to a Chinese theme. This weekend, the Spring Sun Performance Arts Troupe (春禾劇團) is reviving the story in one of its most popular incarnations as a farewell before bowing out of the theatrical scene.

The Spring Sun Performing Arts Troupe, which is led by actress Ann Lang (郎祖筠) and was associated with the Spring International Digital Multimedia Group (春暉國際數位多媒體), made a big splash on the arts scene when it was first created in 2000. After a period of enormous success in straddling traditional performance and electronic media, it had become quiescent in recent years as Lang juggled numerous performance commitments. According to manager Woody He (何曜先), the troupe is now preparing to disband due to financial pressures, and this large-scale musical of a much-loved tale is both the troupe's swan song and a celebration of all it has tried to achieve.

The Butterfly Lovers is widely regarded as one of the four great Chinese love stories, along with *The Tale of the White Snake* (白蛇傳), *The Cowherd and the Weaver Maid* (牛郎織女) and *Meng Jiang Nu Cries Down the Great Wall* (孟姜女哭長城).

The version being presented by Spring Sun is based on the *huangmei* opera (黃梅調) version that was immortalized in the Shaw Brothers' now

Spring Sun says bon voyage with butterflies

Ann Lang's performance troupe is bowing out with a 'huangmei'-style musical revival of the most memorable Chinese love story

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

legendary 1963 smash hit *Love Eterne* (梁山伯與祝英台) starring Betty Loh Ti (樂蒂) and Ivy Ling (凌波), which generated an frenzy for cinematic versions of *huangmei* opera in Taiwan and is still readily available on DVD around Taipei. It tells the story of Zhu Yingtai (祝英台), a beautiful and intelligent young woman from a wealthy family who prevails upon her parents to send her to school in Hangzhou; her friendship with a fellow student, the impoverished Liang Shanbo (梁山伯), which gradually develops into love (Zhu had entered the school dressed as a man); the absolute opposition of Zhu's parents to a match; the death of Liang in the anguish of love; and Zhu's death and the transformation of the couple into butterflies. It is a tragedy but also has many comic elements, such as the gradual discovery by Liang that his best friend is a woman, and also in the interaction of Zhu's maid Yingxin and Liang's servant Sijiu.

The show's director, Shan Cheng-chu (單承矩), said the current production aims to revive the memory of the film — it contains all the music and songs from that production

— while giving it a contemporary flavor and bringing in elements from television variety shows and other modern popular entertainments into the humorous parts of the story.

Huangmei opera is by far the most easily accessible of the Chinese operatic forms, both musically and in its singing style, which is very close to vernacular Mandarin and does away with many of the vocal flourishes of Beijing opera. *Love Eterne* gave the *huangmei* opera version of *The Butterfly Lovers* the kind of cultural immortality that is utterly removed from questions of quality or taste — in this respect it is rather like *The Sound of Music*, the songs and story of which are known by people who claim never to have seen the film.

For all the contemporary additions, the mood of the production is nostalgic for what has become a

very uncool style of popular music — *huangmei* was the pop music of a previous generation, and nothing is more uncool than that. But Spring Sun seems happy enough to play with this material without any very specific agenda of creating some highbrow species of artistic fusion, and the troupe's light-hearted approach gives the music additional appeal.

Shan said that he hoped the production would give those familiar with earlier *huangmei* productions or with *Love Eterne* a chance to relive the experience of this popular classic, while providing a younger generation with a new style of Chinese musical that could be enjoyed on its own terms.

The cast is made up largely of veterans of television soap opera and variety shows, who manage the transitions between contemporary humor and romantic tragedy with considerable confidence. In addition to Lang, who leads the cast as Liang, young Beijing opera performer Huang Yu-lin (黃宇琳) is impressive as Zhu — and also shows the kind of elegance and poise that only a rigorous classical opera training provides — and Tu Shih-mei (杜詩梅), a veteran television comedienne, plays the role of Zhu's maid with energy, charm and just a hint of the salacious. The presence of a live orchestra and choir give the musical passages wonderful oomph and create an appealing contrast with the rather improvisational nature of the dialogue and stage business.

The nostalgic tone and hummable tunes are an especially appealing way for Spring Sun to say goodbye.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: *The Butterfly Lovers* (梁山伯與祝英台) by Spring Sun Performing Arts Troupe (春禾劇團)

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

WHERE: National Theater, Taipei City

TICKETS: NT\$600 to NT\$3,000, available through NTCH ticketing



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SPRING SUN PERFORMING ARTS TROUPE

[CHOREOGRAPHY]

Pilgrims' glide to climate change and financial turmoil

Liou Shaw-lu, Taipei Dance Circle's cofounder, believes modern dance and a liberal application of baby oil hold the key to many of the today's problems

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

The Taipei Dance Circle (光環舞集) cofounder and choreographer Liou Shaw-lu (劉紹維) is as concerned as everyone else about and natural disasters. He thinks the answer is for people to look inward, try to calm their spirit and go on a pilgrimage to heal their souls. He also thinks modern dance has the answers — helped along with liberal applications of baby oil.

Fascinated by frictionless motion, for more than two decades Liou has created works that require his dancers to coat themselves with baby oil and move about on a special plastic carpet. They spin, slide and glide almost like ice skaters. Walking upright, however, is more problematic.

Liou's latest creation, *Pilgrims' Dream*, is a 70-minute work about four pilgrims who set out on a dark night to cross a vast desert. The score mixes the sound of wind and waves with contemporary Indian music, the guttural chants of Buddhist monks and the dancers' own breathing.

"Most of the time we are very quiet, the music comes from inside," Liou said.

For the first time in many years, there are no women dancers in the troupe. Liou said he didn't set out to create an all-male work, it was just that over the years his female dancers have returned home to work in Ilan and Chiayi, a sign that the market for modern dance is growing in Taiwan.

Work on *Pilgrims' Dream* began back in January. Liou and the others spent four months improvising before a video camera. He ended up with 20 90-minute DVDs to review, from which he picked the best elements and then worked on creating the structure to connect them.

During a dress rehearsal in the troupe's Sanchong basement studio last Friday, the four men, clad only in flesh-colored thongs, a red dot on their foreheads and palms and soles stained red, moved through a series of solos, duets and ensemble vignettes that was fascinating to watch, though sometimes bizarre. How can you describe the sight of four men sliding around on their backs with their knees clenched to their chests?

The company began a seven-stop tour last Saturday in Miaoli that takes them to Tainan County tonight before beginning a three-night run at the National Taiwan Arts Education Center in Taipei City on Wednesday.

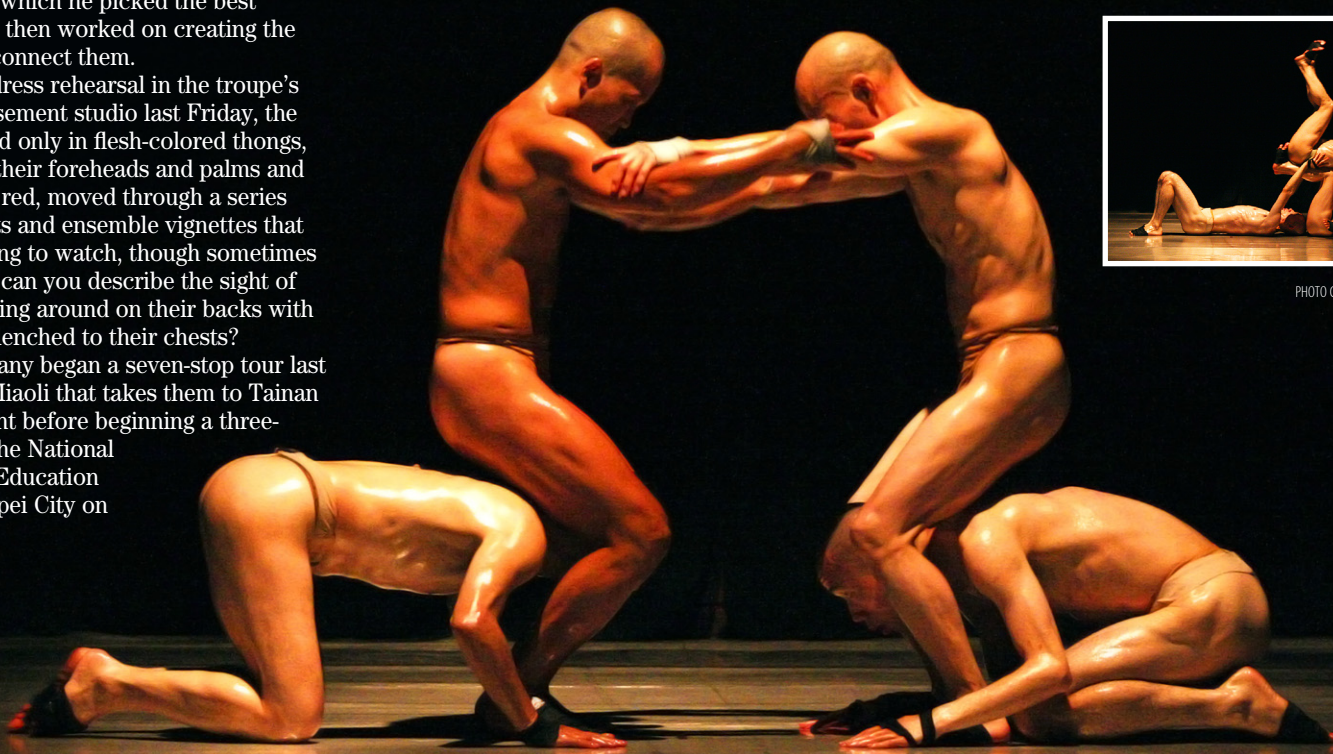


PHOTO COURTESY OF LEE MING-HSUN

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: *Pilgrims' Dream* by Taipei Dance Circle
WHERE AND WHEN: Tonight at 7:30pm, Tainan County Cultural Center (台南縣立文化中心), 23, Zhongzheng Rd, Hsining City, Tainan County (台南縣新營市中正路23號); Oct. 29 to Oct. 31 at 7:30pm, the National Taiwan Arts Education Center (國立臺灣藝術教育館), 47 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路47號); Nov. 15 at 7:30pm, Chiayi Performing Arts Center (嘉義縣表演藝術中心), 265, Jianguo Rd Sec 2, Minhsiung Township, Chiayi County (嘉義縣民雄鄉建國路二段265號); Nov. 22 at 7:30pm, Ilan Municipal Auditorium (宜蘭演藝廳), 482, Zhongshan Rd Sec 2, Ilan City (宜蘭市中山路二段482號); Nov. 29 at 7:30pm, Hsinchu Municipal Auditorium (新竹市文化局演藝廳), 17, Tungta Rd Sec 2, Hsinchu City (新竹市東大路二段17號); Dec. 6 at 7:30pm, Changhua County Yuanlin Performance Hall (彰化縣員林演藝廳), 99, Ln 2, Chungcheng Rd, Yuanlin Township, Changhua County (員林鎮中正路2巷99號)
TICKETS: NT\$300, NT\$400 and NT\$600 for Taipei; NT\$250, NT\$350 and NT\$450 for Tainan, Chiayi, Ilan and Hsinchu; NT\$200, NT\$300, NT\$500 and NT\$600 for Changhua. Available through www.artsticket.com.tw