

AROUND TOWN

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2008

PAGE 13

Baritone Thomas Meglioranza, center, plays Canadian missionary George Mackay in *Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man*, which opens on Thursday at the National Theater.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NTCH



PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man

WHEN: Nov. 27 and Nov. 29 at 7:30pm;
Nov. 30 at 2:30pm

WHERE: National Theater, Taipei City

LANGUAGES: Sung in English and Hoklo with English and Chinese subtitles

TICKETS: NT\$600 to NT\$6,000, available through NTCH ticketing



The black-bearded Canadian cometh

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Five years in the making, 'Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man' is being billed as a 'flagship production' of the National CKS Cultural Center. But will this Western-style opera sung in Hoklo by non-native speakers live up to the hype?

It might seem to be yet one more in a string of ill-fated cross-cultural trans-genre boundary-bending experiments in opera, and, in truth, *Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man* (黑鬍馬偕) has set the bar pretty high for itself. It has taken five years to bring to the stage, boasts the participation of some of the biggest names in Taiwan's opera establishment, and is being billed as a "flagship production" of the National CKS Cultural Center, Taiwan's largest and most influential arts organization.

George Mackay, a Canadian missionary who first came to Taiwan in 1872, is known to all Taiwanese for the Mackay Memorial Hospital (馬偕紀念醫院), which was created in memory of a man who helped establish a basis for modern medical practice in the country. The hospital, and much else of Mackay's legacy, is closely associated with the Presbyterian Church, which has long been a powerful political force in Taiwan. To underline the East-West bridge represented by this Hoklo-language (commonly known as Taiwanese) Western opera, it would be hard to find a more suitable hero.

Thomas Meglioranza, the baritone who plays Mackay, said that despite the opera's considerable length (it will run for more than three hours with two intervals), he hoped that it would not come over as a history lesson. "I was really impressed by his sense of adventure in the face of a lot of

discomfort and inconvenience. Just this beard, can you imagine having this beard. I'm dying today," Meglioranza said as a makeup artist removed the thick hairs from his face after rehearsals at the Huashan Cultural Park (華山文化園區) earlier this month. "[Mackay] walked around with a much thicker beard in this climate... I think maybe it was 'branding,' — he wanted people to instantly recognize him as the bearded guy."

In presenting this remarkable character of Taiwanese history, Meglioranza said: "I try to keep in mind that although he is a preacher and a religious man, that when I read his book, it is actually very funny and he seems very warm and open-hearted and like he is really enjoying getting to know the people. I try and keep that spirit of enjoyment."

Compared to many recent efforts that have sought to combine Western orchestras with Chinese opera, or contemporary musical scores with traditional singing styles, *Mackay* is really a very conventional affair. "It is pretty much in the Western opera mode," said Meglioranza. The only difference is that most of the lyrics are in Hoklo, with some in English.

Meglioranza, who has had extensive experience in performing contemporary opera, faced his greatest challenge in learning an opera in a language in which Western opera has never been sung before. "[To learn a role in a Western language], you can go to the record store and find thousands of recordings of opera singers singing in these languages, so you know what it is supposed to sound like, whereas with Taiwanese [Hoklo], you are free to make it sound like whatever you want. Sometimes you wish there was a tradition that you could fall back on," Meglioranza said.

In Taiwan for the first time to perform, Meglioranza spoke no Mandarin or Hoklo before accepting the part. Since the beginning of this year he has been learning his part through a phoneticized text and listening to readings by various

friends. He said he has also tried to learn the meaning of each word, rather than simply learning the sounds.

"I try to know every word. It takes me longer to memorize it that way, but it helps me," he said. Tang Mei-yun (唐美雲), a *gezai* opera (歌仔戲) star who is known for pushing the boundaries of Taiwanese opera, praised Meglioranza's efforts, though at least one local reporter who claimed a good knowledge of Hoklo said she could not understand the Hoklo lyrics he sang. But then, how many people understand the lyrics of the Italian operas they rave about?

The whole issue of language and Meglioranza's foreignness becomes something of a non-issue as even local soprano Chen Mei-ling (陳美玲), who plays Mackay's wife, said that she didn't speak Hoklo well and couldn't vouch for the accuracy her own renditions of the Hoklo lyrics.

Meglioranza admitted that while getting the complex tonal system of Hoklo correct in the spoken parts was a priority, "when it is set to music, the tones largely become irrelevant. Whether [the tone] is high or low, all depends on what note it is. I don't really have to think about it."

Although it is Meglioranza's first venture working in Taiwan, the show is being directed by Lukas Hemleb, who directed Han Tang Yuefu's (漢唐樂府) *The Lyric for Lo River Goddess* (洛神賦) in Taiwan in 2006, which also involved coordinating foreign and local performers. This experience should stand him in good stead with this current complex production.

Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man has been a long time in the making and this bold initiative will have its world premiere at the National Theater on Thursday. Mackay, who never compromised on the lushness of his beard in his three decades in Taiwan, managed to build bridges between Taiwan and the West that are still very much intact today. Perhaps the National CKS Cultural Center will be able to do the same in opera with this production.