

Dancing into the light

The Crescent Beauty Disabled Talent Show aims to blur the line between 'disabled' and 'able-bodied'

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Before Melly Guo (郭章齊) began performing with the Crescent Beauty (弦月之美) dance troupe, the teenager was bashful. But it was more than just stage fright. Each of Guo's arms and legs was partially amputated following an illness when she was 7. For years she asked her mother to wrap her arms in cloth every morning, afraid that people would gawk at her limbs.

But after joining Crescent Beauty last year, Guo started letting her arms go bare every day.

"I'm more outgoing now. I don't feel like I have to hide my arms anymore, and I have more self-confidence," says Guo, a 15-year-old with an impish sense of humor. During the Crescent Beauty Disabled Talent Show (身障人士才藝大展) last Sunday, the Taipei County high school student performed to an audience of about 1,000 people at Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall. In ballet and pop dances, Guo ran swiftly across the stage on her knees and performed movements that are challenging even for full-limbed people, including leaps into a full split.

Now in its 12th year, Crescent Beauty Disabled Talent Show gives disabled singers, dancers and artists from Taiwan and China an annual platform. Last Sunday's performance was punctuated throughout with dances by Crescent Beauty, a group of about 30 amputee women and men from the Fu-Li Rehabilitation Association for Teenaged Amputees, or FRATA (中華民國截肢青少年輔健勵進會), which also organized the show.

"We want to expand people's ideas of what a disabled person can accomplish," says Tseng I-shi (曾一士), who is the director of FRATA, a non-profit group that provides rehabilitation and social services for amputees throughout Taiwan, and deputy director-general of the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall.

Other performers at Sunday's show included paraplegic pop singer and dancer Ren Wen-chien (任文倩), who nimbly manipulated her wheelchair in a rapid series of turns and pops before ripping off her black evening gown to reveal a slinky, sparkly red sheath underneath; armless artist Yang An-dieng (楊恩典), who painted a traditional Chinese watercolor of a peony flower with her feet on stage; and mother and son drummers Wu Sho-zong (吳受蓉) and Wang Tien-yao (王天佑), who took up taiko drumming as part of Wang's physical therapy for hypoplasia, a genetic condition that disfigured his hands and forearms.

Crescent Beauty member Liu Chia-wen (劉家汶), who danced in the performance's opening ballet number, has participated in the talent show three times. The Taichung resident's right leg was amputated after she was trapped in rubble for more than 10 hours following the 921 earthquake. Tseng contacted her after reading a newspaper article about her plight and encouraged her to join Crescent Beauty.

"At first I thought it was going to be really embarrassing and nerve-wracking," says Liu, an outgoing 19-year-old college student who also received an award from FRATA last Sunday for her volunteer work with the organization. "But then I saw all these other amputees participating and it encouraged me to give it a try. It's been a learning experience for me because I never thought I could dance like this."

Founded 12 years ago, FRATA grew out of Tseng's research studies of handicapped students for the Ministry of Education, where he worked for more than 20 years. During that time, Tseng began to organize activities and camping retreats for the teenage amputees he met during his fieldwork. The group now has 300 members, half of whom are amputees and half of whom are volunteers.

"A lot of amputees feel that their disability is something to be ashamed of, which ends up creating an emotional block," says Tseng. "Our philosophy is that if you don't hide, then you won't become estranged from other people. We focus on working with teens because we don't want to wait until it's too late and the psychological impact has gone too deep."

FRATA, which has offices in Taipei City, Taichung County and Tainan County, provides art classes along with physical therapy and social services. "Health is the most basic thing, but we also want to lift their spirits and you need art for that," says Tseng.

Because of their physical limitations, the dance courses FRATA organized were the most challenging for the amputees who participated. The organization's volunteer teachers decided that a stage performance would give students a goal to work towards. Only three out of the original 10 dance students were willing to perform in the first talent show; the others dropped out from stage fright or fear of being gawked at. By the third year, however, 30 dancers were participating, and Crescent Beauty was launched as a bona fide dance troupe.

"We named the group after the crescent moon, because even though the crescent moon is not a full moon, it still reflects light from the sun and it is just as beautiful," says Tseng. Aside from the annual talent show, Crescent Beauty also gives outreach performances, including at prisons in northern Taiwan.

Participating in the dance classes and performances gives students a chance to meet other young amputees and become more comfortable with their bodies, says dance instructor Tina Ji (紀麗娟).

"Our goal isn't to get people dancing at a professional level. We focus on choreographing simple but interesting dances in time to beautiful music and I think it helps the teens on a spiritual level to see how gracefully they can move," says Ji.

Tseng says that attitudes toward amputees in Taiwan — and the rest of the world — have become more accepting in recent years, citing as an example the recent BBC reality show Britain's Missing Top Model, in which young female amputees vied to appear in a photoshoot for fashion magazine *Marie Claire*.

"The mentality used to be that amputated limbs should be concealed as much as possible with prosthetics or clothing, even though people are going to find out anyway. But the attitude now is that disabled people should be able to do and enjoy the same things as everyone else," says Tseng.

But Tseng adds that many amputees still feel like they must make an extra effort in school, at their jobs or socially to prove that they should not be viewed with derision or pity. "Sometimes people feel awkward around amputees and don't know how to connect with them and it ends up making them feel isolated," says Tseng.

Liu, who is in her first year of college, says she hopes that by participating in the Crescent Beauty Disabled Talent Show, she can help other amputees, including ones who, like her, were injured in the 921 earthquake.

"Participating in the show gave me the chance to walk out into the light. I want to help people like me see that they can live life like everyone else and that they don't have to hide," she says. "I also hope that other people will be able to see that on the inside we are the same as them and that our lives are filled with meaning and not that different from anyone else's."

Crescent Beauty dancers as the seven dwarves in *Snow White*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FRATA

Wang Su-chiao, left, and Deng Mei-fang of Crescent Beauty played the Evil Queen and Snow White in a pantomime during last Sunday's Crescent Beauty Disabled Talent Show.

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