

AROUND TOWN

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2008

PAGE 13

Mighty love

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: The Jester
WHEN: Today and tomorrow at 7:30pm; Sunday at 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\$500 to NT\$2,000, available through ERA ticketing

The Koo Foundation has reworked Verdi's 'Rigoletto' into a new-style Beijing opera. But can the production escape the fate of other recent East-and-West fusions that have spectacularly flopped?

Given Verdi's fascination with the exotic, it is more than probable that the prospect of seeing *Rigoletto* reworked as a Beijing opera would have delighted the composer. After three years in the making, *The Jester* (弄臣), a new-style Beijing opera described as "*Rigoletto* recomposed," takes to the stage tonight for its world premiere, starring Li Baochun (李寶春) in the title role.

This big, new opera is a production by the Koo Foundation (辜公亮文教基金會) and the brainchild of Vivien Ku (辜懷群), the foundation's executive director. It is a bad time to be presenting an innovative opera production, following as it does on the heels of a number of high-profile flops that have, Ku admitted, scared off many normally adventurous theatergoers from anything that smacks of tampering with tradition. After two decades of producing highly regarded operas, both original and traditional, Ku hopes the reputation of the foundation's productions will maintain audience loyalty. "I'm sure people will send out scouts to report back from the first night," she said.

Keeping Beijing opera fresh while not offending traditionalists is Ku's battle, and she has a very clear idea of just how far she can innovate. "Of two major productions each year, one of them is absolutely traditional," she said. *The Jester*, while it remains unequivocally within the realm of Beijing opera, has made bold changes in less ostentatious ways.

First and foremost is the adaptation, or rather appropriation, of one of Western opera's most recognized masterpieces. Ku said she had long considered writing a Beijing opera drawn from the Western operatic canon. She loves opera of all sorts and had given considerable thought to the problem of such a West-to-East transition. "The number of choices was very limited," she said. "In regard to making a Chinese opera from a Western one, I realized that the most important thing was to pick a good story. If there was lots of singing, but not much plot, then the results would be terrible ... you'd simply have to rewrite it."

With the Verdi opera deriving from the play *Le Roi S'Amuse*, by Victor Hugo, a writer whose material has met with formidable success in transformation into musical genres, Ku felt the piece was something she could work with.

"There is enough of a story in *Rigoletto* to hold the opera together [in dramatic terms]. All that is changed is the performance style ... A really good story can be a moving experience regardless of how it is told," she said.

In appearance, *The Jester* looks very different from a traditional Beijing opera with its sparse stage (which conventionally has just a table and two chairs) and hugely elaborate costumes. The set for *The Jester* is as elaborate as any you might see in a Western opera, but the costumes have been pared down and simplified, giving the actors more room to express individuality. "Beijing opera emphasizes 'character types,' but not the individual," Ku said. Although Li will sing in the style of the "old man" role at which he excels, the character he presents, shifting from the sly jester at court and the upright and loving father at home, defies established character types.

Despite these changes, Ku sees *The Jester* as lying within the conventions of Beijing opera. "The stage, the costumes, acrobatics, acting, speaking and singing — these are the elements you have to work with," she said. "We have changed the first two, but for the rest, the basics of traditional Beijing opera are all there and unchanged." Other productions, either bolder or more foolhardy, have gone further, in some cases with disastrous results. In other cases, such as Contemporary Legend Theater's (當代傳奇劇場) *Medea* (機蘭女), which opens next



week at the National Theater, they have evolved into something completely new and can no longer be described as Beijing opera.

"We have shown people that we put on some of the best traditional productions," Ku said. "This is how we keep our audience ... In modernizing, there are plenty of things you can change, but you need to manage the proportions just right." But while Ku insists that the fundamentals need to be treated seriously, she is not above a little playfulness, and inserted a few bars from *La Donna e Mobile*, one of the most popular arias in Verdi's opera, into the score.

Ku did not treat the original work with excessive awe and has felt free in her production to remedy some aspects of Verdi's opera that dissatisfied her. The most notable change is that the title character, who is sung by a baritone and utterly eclipsed by the cynical Duke (a tenor) in Verdi's opera, is now elevated into a central role. In another update, *Rigoletto's* dilemma of how to serve his master while protecting his daughter's virtue is brought fully to the forefront of the work.

Ku said that given the close adherence of *The Jester* to the story of *Rigoletto*, people familiar with the Verdi opera would easily be able to follow the action on stage. For those not so familiar, an English-language synopsis will also be available.

Li Baochun, left, as the loving father. PHOTO COURTESY OF NOVEL HALL

Above: Li Baochun as the court jester. Left: The evil Duke, played by Chung Hung-sung, sees how far he can take things.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NOVEL HALL



A really good story can be a moving experience regardless of how it is told.

— Vivien Ku, executive director of the Koo Foundation

[DANCE]

Volte-face

Last year, Lin Wen-chung swore he wouldn't start his own company. So what happened?

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER



Fourteen months ago I interviewed Lin Wen-chung (林文中), who was in Taipei with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Lin was at a crossroads, beginning his final appearances with the company he had danced with for six years and preparing to move back to Taiwan to begin a new career as a freelance choreographer.

He had one job lined up. Dance Forum Taipei was going to perform his *Evil Boy* in December last year. But other than that, Lin knew two things for sure: he wanted to create a full-length work, and he had no interest in starting his own company.

Fast-forward to a coffee shop in Tianmu on Monday, where Lin was enthusiastically describing the set for his new work, *Small*, which his company WCdance will premiere next Thursday at the Crown Theater. So, what happened?

"Once I finished *Evil Boy*, I found that most companies want to hire choreographers. You have to be passive, wait for opportunities. Meanwhile, I'm thinking I want to be more involved in the production than the choreography. I want to have more say, so when an audience leaves the theater, they are taking away what I wanted them to see ... so I have to do it all," he said.

He admitted that in some ways it would have been better to stay a freelancer.

"All the different things [a company director has to do] drove me crazy. You spend more time outside than inside the studio," he said, adding later that "if you have your own company there is no money as a choreographer."

So now he's a little more than a week away from opening night. He's really happy about the set, which is basically a 3m-by-3m plastic box made up of two three-sided plastic panels.

"The visual effects are more powerful than I thought they would be," he said.

Lin said he was inspired by the small size of the Crown Theater's stage, with its very low ceiling, which people are always complaining about.

"I thought I would just use a 3m-by-3m space, so I could take the piece anywhere, to a museum, to the beach. The stage designer asked me about using plastic to transform the stage, with the dancers as animals or people, like a display model in a store or like when we young, we had ants, fish behind glass. We can transform the dancers for the audience," he said. "We also talked about how for dance concerts people always want to expand the space; you want it bigger, grander, everything decorated. But we want to focus on people's bodies, on gentle subtle movements; like going to a museum to look at paintings up close." Asked how he recruited his dancers, he grinned again.

"It happened so quickly. I decided I needed dancers so I e-mailed everyone I knew. Five days later I held auditions. About 30 people came. For some, the timing [of rehearsals] was not right, for others the location [his Dazhi rehearsal space]."

For *Small*, Lin selected four dancers, plus himself. For the score of the 65-minute piece, he turned to childhood friend Umi Hsieh (謝宇書).

"He was a pop singer [and] pop composer. He had never done music for dance before. We tried to create something in-between classical, theater and pop. I'm pretty happy with the result. But he only did 80 percent or so. I had to say 'stop now, we can't keep going on any longer' or else we would [have] run out of time to rehearse," Lin said.

Asked what *Small* is about, Lin turned reflective.

"I think *Small* reflects my mood after I came back to Taiwan, especially with my wife still in New York [she's a dancer with the Jose Limon Company]. The piece reflects my loneliness ... It's a very moody piece because before I liked to study movement, I liked flash. But now it's deeper, more body movement, more human. In this piece I tried to simplify everything," he said.

"It's also a sharp change from my last piece. I wanted to tell the whole world how good I am," he said with a huge grin. "To say 'look at me, look at me!'"

Small runs from Thursday through Dec. 21, daily at 7:30pm, with Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2:30pm, at Crown Theater (皇冠藝文中心小劇場), B1, 50, Ln 120, Dunhua N Rd, Taipei City (台北市敦化北路120巷50號B1). Tickets are NT\$500 and are available through NTCH ticketing or online at www.artsticket.com.tw.



Small's set lives up to the performance's name. PHOTOS COURTESY OF WCDANCE