

AROUND TOWN

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2008

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Contemporary Legend Theater's 1993 classic 'Medea' has been revived in a revamped production that looks as new and cutting-edge as it did 15 years ago

Vengeance is mine



BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

“This is not Beijing opera,” is the refrain repeated by the cast and crew of Contemporary Legend Theater's production of *Medea* (樓蘭女), which opened at the National Theater last night. Director Wu Hsing-kuo (吳興國) reiterated the stance during an interview last month as the production prepared to tour Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Medea may not be Beijing opera, but it would probably not be possible without the demanding combination of physical and vocal training that is the art form's foundation. That said, the production would have been impossible without Wu's own experience outside the confines of Beijing opera.

As a graduate of a traditional opera academy, Wu entered professional life with all the skills that an aspiring Beijing opera star requires. But looking to his future, Wu saw a narrow and increasingly circumscribed career in a sector of the entertainment industry that was already struggling against a tide of falling box office takings and indifference from a younger generation.

He formed Contemporary Legend in 1986 [see interview below], and went on to create some of Taiwan's most innovative theater productions. In *Medea*, which was produced in 1993 based on a play by Euripides, Wu departed more completely than ever before from his roots in opera and created something that, in its defiance of convention, has remained fresh 15 years after it was first presented on stage.

The first production of *Medea* was directed by Wu's partner Lin Hsiu-wei (林秀偉), whose background is in contemporary dance. Her close involvement with the work created a structural foundation more akin to dance than drama, and it is on to this that the very contrary aspects of Beijing opera have been grafted.

The “dancers [in *Medea*] don't wear very much on stage and the focus is on their bodies. Beijing opera performers wear many layers of clothing,” Wu said. “[Contemporary dance] uses a very direct means of expression, but in Beijing opera, expression is veiled and indirect. These are profound differences.”

In *Medea*, the tension between two very different styles is embodied in the title role, which is played by Beijing opera diva Wei Hai-min (魏海敏). Dressed in a costume of almost

architectural complexity designed by Tim Yip (葉錦添), the multi-award winning costume and production designer for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (臥虎藏龍), *Red Cliff* (赤壁) and many other films, Wei recreates the passion and madness of *Medea* to the music of Hsu Po-yun (許博允). The score, which is based on Central Asian music, deprives Wei of the usual musical props of a conventional Beijing opera, and she is more than ever reliant on her incredible stage presence to hold the audience.

“The production would simply not be possible without Beijing opera training,” Lin said. “Simply moving around in the costume is a huge challenge.” Wei is backed up by performers who serve both as a Greek chorus and as part of the organic set designed by Lin Keh-hua (林克華). “We wanted the whole stage to come alive to reflect *Medea*'s emotions,” Lin said. While the costumes will be the same ones used in the 1993 premiere, the set has been totally reworked to give a fuller and more powerful atmosphere of the Central Asian desert, where the story of *Medea* has been transplanted.

The current production is directed by Wu, who brings a slightly different sensibility to the work, but at the core retains the powerful feminist sensibility provided by Lin in 1993.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Contemporary Legend Theater's *Medea*

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

WHERE: National Theater, Taipei City

TICKETS: NT\$400 to NT\$3,000, available through NTCH ticketing

LANGUAGE: In Mandarin with Chinese and English subtitles

Interview with Wu Hsing-kuo

Taipei Times: Why did you begin a career in Beijing opera?

Wu Hsing-kuo: My family was quite poor and as I had quite a good voice my mother decided to send me to an opera academy. The teaching methods were harsh, with much scolding and beating ... At 12 years old, I was slightly older than most new students. From the time I entered the school, I studied the role of the “martial male.” The teachers encouraged me [in my studies] but the main thing was that here we were enclosed and didn't know very much about the outside world.

TT: How did you create Contemporary Legend Theater?

Wu: In my final year at the theater academy I had the opportunity to study at the National Culture University, in their drama department. Here we studied Western literature, like Shakespeare and the Greek tragic poets. We learned about the theory of these dramas, but had no experience of actual performance. It was not until my second year that I joined Cloud Gate Theatre (雲門舞集). This was the first time I really experienced Western-style performance. To me, Cloud Gate performs very much in the Western style, it's all ballet or contemporary dance. It is certainly not traditional [Chinese opera]. But in the early days when Lin [Hwai-min, 林懷民] came back to Taiwan, he wanted to incorporate elements of Chinese traditional movement and stories [into his dance] ... He was looking for someone trained in traditional performance to work with him. This experience showed me new ways of using the stage and the space around the performer.

TT: Why did you persevere with Beijing opera?

Wu: At the time [when Wu was a young opera school graduate] there were still a few opera companies owned by the armed services, but even they were closing one by one. When I graduated, only four remained. When doing military service, I was posted to the Army [Luguang] opera troupe (陸光國劇團). [At this time, Wu met the famous opera singer Chou Cheng-rung (周正榮), who expressed a high regard for Wu's talent.] I told Chou that Beijing opera was in decline and I had decided to join Cloud Gate and become a dancer. That's where I saw my future. He kept on telling me that the real essence of beauty and skill in Chinese art was encompassed in Beijing opera ... Eventually, I decided to become his disciple and study the “mature male” role under his tutelage. The first thing he did was insist that I stop any involvement in modern dance. I remained in the Army opera troupe for 13

years. If I hadn't studied with him, I would never have been able to establish Contemporary Legend Theater.

TT: What inspired you to start innovating within Beijing opera?

Wu: As a member of the Army opera troupe, we had new opera competitions every year. We were always looking for new material. *Macbeth* (慾望城國), which was the first opera produced by Contemporary Legend Theater, was originally meant for competition. It was rejected by my superiors because it used a “foreign” story. So I said to myself, for the future of us young performers, we needed to break out [from the constraints of a hidebound opera establishment]. We would use Beijing opera, but use it to discover new potential and new directions. Only in this way would [Beijing opera] be able to draw a younger audience. I started recruiting young performers from other opera schools. We would step outside the establishment. If this production [*Macbeth*] worked, new worlds of material would be opened up to us. [*Macbeth*, was performed at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in 1991, and as they say, the rest is history.]



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CONTEMPORARY LEGEND THEATER