

## FEATURES

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PAGE 13

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## ‘Medea’ was mostly alright on the night

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW AND DIANE BAKER  
STAFF REPORTERS

Wei Hai-min reprised her role as Medea in a strong performance that was marred by technical difficulties.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CONTEMPORARY LEGEND THEATER

The premiere of Contemporary Legend Theater's (當代傳奇劇場) revamped production of *Medea* (樓蘭女) on Thursday was packed with the great and the good of the art world, eager to see, or revisit, one of Taiwan's most successful dramatic experiments. The show starred the two original leads from the 1993 production, with Beijing opera diva Wei Hai-min (魏海敏) in the title role and Contemporary Legend's founder Wu Hsing-kuo (吳興國) as Jason, the man who betrays her.

Both put on strong performances, though Wei was noticeably struggling with her costume — designed by Tim Yip (葉錦添) for the 1993 production and now inextricably associated with the show — in one scene. Sound reproduction was also an issue, with one instance of the microphones cutting out. The problem had not been fixed by the second night, according to a friend who saw the performance on Friday, a fact that reflects badly on what is generally regarded as Taiwan's foremost theater.

These technical problems aside, the production was undeniably spectacular, though it may be argued that Lin Keh-hua's (林克華) new and extravagant set muted the effect of Yip's costumes, which might have been more expressive against a starker background — a possible case of more is less.

The balance between the recorded music and the live singing might also have been altered in favor of the former, as Wei's voice, powerful as it is, seemed sometimes to be almost overwhelmed. Her struggle, it seemed, was not primarily against her violent passions, but against a mixing board that wasn't giving her the breaks.

For all the above nitpicking, the revival of *Medea*, with its startlingly original music by Hsu Po-yun (許博元) and stylized beauty of the actors, both individually and as elements within an organically conceived performance space, shows the wealth of potential that exists within Taiwanese theater.

Technology was also a major part of a much smaller production at the Experimental Theater this weekend. *The Drought Goddess* (大神蠟) by the Ethan Chen Production House (野墨坊) had plenty of good ideas and excellent work contributed by musicians, animators, calligraphers, painters and performers. Its multimedia presentation outshone many more expensive and high-profile productions, and the way it managed to play with aspects of traditional theater was really quite impressive.

A tap-dance *nanguan* (南管) aria with *pipa* (琵琶) and percussion was splendid to behold, and deserved applause — unfortunately, the audience had, by that time, been so numbed by the ponderous layering of technical effects and tortuously slow story development that they proved totally unable to respond.

The use of a made-up language combining various dialects was quite interesting for some of the musical effects it created, but after an hour or so, the device began to wear a bit thin. When the performers moved into traditional *nanguan* singing, it was not difficult to appreciate the musical sophistication of centuries of development over something that was first developed a couple of months ago.

In many aspects of presentation, *The Drought Goddess* punched well above its weight, but ultimately, lacking both a comprehensible structure and a strong directorial eye to keep things in their place, this grab-bag of good ideas dragged, sagged and spread out in all the wrong places.

Dancer/choreographer Lin Wen-chung (林文中) said in a recent interview with this paper that he wanted the debut of his self-named company Wcdance to show “the whole world how good I am.” He more than amply proved his point on Thursday night at the Crown Theater, where he attracted an overflow crowd that packed the bleachers and crowded the floor in front to see the premiere of *Small*.

The action was almost entirely contained in a 3m-by-3m space marked out by six frames of Plexiglas linked to two L-shapes to almost form a cube. A white floor and back wall, with a mirrored panel angled overhead completed the box. Within such a confined space, every move, every twitch, every slide along the floor or wall spoke as loudly as the jackhammer sounds that opened the piece. I may never look at ant farms in quite the same way again.

Lin was generous to his four dancers — Lin Xiao-yuan (林筱圓), Wu Xin-ya (吳幸亞), Chiu Yu-wen (邱鈺雯) and Lee Guo-chi (李國治) — mixing and matching pairs, trios, quartets and quintets with a solo for each.

The one word that came to mind during and after the performance was “polished.” The choreography, the score, the set and the dancing were all highly polished. Lin began rehearsing the piece early last spring and the months of work clearly paid off, a lesson that could be learned by several of the more established troupes in Taipei.

## Popster monks conquer charts

*The inhabitants of Heiligenkreuz Abbey found fame with their faith*BY VERONIKA OLEKSYN  
AP, HEILIGENKREUZ, AUSTRIA

**Working** to reach No. 1 on the charts? Try praying. That's how the monks of Heiligenkreuz Abbey found fame. Their compilation of Gregorian chants, a form of sung prayer, has stormed pop music charts worldwide.

The debut CD, *Chant: Music for Paradise*, was first released in Europe in May and spent 15 weeks at No. 1 on Britain's classical charts. The album made it to No. 7 on the country's pop charts.

It was also the top classical album in the US and Canada, where it was released as *Chant: Music for the Soul*. It led the pop charts in Belgium and Poland and reached No. 1 in the album charts in Austria. A special edition was recently released that includes chants sung during the Christmas season.

“I get the sense this music is able to fill a vacuum within a lot of people,” said the Reverend Karl Wallner, one of the Cistercian abbey's 74 monks. “It has a basic melody that obviously speaks to people in this world who suffer from stress, aggression, lack of confidence.”

As a result of the CD's success, the 875-year-old abbey, located in a sleepy hamlet about half an hour's drive from the Austrian capital, is drawing more visitors.

It was already a popular tourist attraction before the CD release, and fans are now sending e-mails saying the album helped them through hard times or changed their lives. Reservation requests at the monastery's modest guesthouse have shot up.

“When the monks sing, the chant opens our hearts,” writes Abbot Gregor Henckel Donnersmarck in the booklet accompanying the Christmas season album. “We hope it purifies our souls and helps us regain clarity, light, strength and peace.”

Many visitors stay for the prayers. It's during these sessions — held at various times during the day starting at 5:15am — that the men, many of them young, don white robes and silently slip into church to sing the simple Latin lyrics that date back thousands of years.

That daily routine includes getting up at daybreak to follow St Benedict's rules of *ora et labora* — pray and work. (The Cistercian tradition has its roots in the Rule of St Benedict.) In the evenings, silence prevails in the abbey, which sits in the Vienna woods.

The abbey came to the attention of Universal in February last year, when the monks followed the suggestion of a friend who lives in London to submit

Monks sing at the Heiligenkreuz Abbey, south of Vienna, Austria. Their compilation of Gregorian chants, a form of sung prayer, has climbed pop and classical music charts worldwide.

PHOTO AP

their music to the company, which was searching for Gregorian singers. Within weeks, the Cistercian singers had a recording deal.

Some of the monks were concerned about how their sacred songs would be marketed. A few of the younger men worried that the media would portray them as a “boy group.”

“We don't want to sell ourselves — that was important to us from the start,” said Johannes Paul Chavanne, a monk at the monastery.

However, Wallner said that Universal was sensitive to their concerns and respectful of the religious atmosphere of the abbey during recording there.

“In the monastery, everything is uncomplicated,” said Chavanne, 25, who grew up in Vienna and joined the order a little over two years ago.

The monks have some experience being the center of attention.

Pope Benedict XVI visited the abbey in September last year, and Mother Teresa had also traveled there. In late October, former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, who was in Austria for a conference on interreligious dialogue, also visited.

And the monastery is hardly cut off from the world. The monks work in about 20 parishes in the area and teach about 180 students at its theological academy.

Heiligenkreuz can also claim a Hollywood connection.

German filmmaker Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, who won an Oscar for the 2006 movie *The Lives of Others*, is the abbot's nephew and wrote the award-winning script during a stay in the monastery.

Universal declined to disclose sales figures for the CD. The proceeds are being used to support priests-in-training who come to Heiligenkreuz from developing countries.

Wallner says the monastery has resisted lucrative concert offers in places as far afield as California, Japan and Brazil. Their only stage will be in their monastery.

“We don't sing to become rich or famous, and we don't sing to sing well,” Wallner said. “We sing to praise God.”

ON THE NET: WWW.CHANTMUSICFORPARADISE.COM AND WWW.CHANTMUSICFORTHESOUL.COM

## PLANET POP

A leading Beijing newspaper has chosen actress **Zhang Ziyi** (章子怡) as the most beautiful person in China for 2008.

In a ranking of the top 50 most beautiful people on Friday, the *Beijing News* (新京報) picked Zhang, whose film credits include *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Rush Hour 2*, and *Memoirs of a Geisha*. The paper said Zhang's press conference during the Cannes film festival to raise money for the Sichuan earthquake garnered respect worldwide. The earthquake killed 70,000 people in May.

“I don't pay a lot of attention to matters of appearance,” she told the newspaper. “Beautiful women are fundamentally independent and confident.” Cannes best actor winner **Tony Leung Chiu-wai** (梁朝偉) came second in the ranking.

The mother of an 18-year-old man who

Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who in the land of China is fairest of all? Zhang Ziyi is, according to the *Beijing News*.

PHOTO AP

plans to marry Alaska Governor **Sarah Palin's** pregnant daughter, Bristol, has been arrested on drug charges, authorities said on Friday. Sherry Johnston, 42, was taken into custody at her home in Wasilla, Alaska, on Thursday after an undercover narcotics investigation, Alaska State Troopers said in a statement.

American socialite and heir **Paris Hilton** was robbed at one of her homes, Los Angeles police said, while local media reported that the burglar swiped US\$2 million worth of jewelry and other valuables.

The break-in took place around 5am on Friday at a home the young heiress owns in the Sherman Oaks area northeast of Los Angeles, police spokesman Richard French said.

“According to detectives, a man wearing a hooded sweatshirt and gloves forced entry through the front door, ransacked her bedroom and took an undisclosed amount of property and then left the scene,” said French, of the Los Angeles Police Department.

“Miss Hilton wasn't at home at the time the burglary occurred,” he said.

US actor **Ben Affleck** and Rolling Stones front man **Mick Jagger** unveiled on Wednesday a film they hope will raise awareness about refugees hit by the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The 23-minute film, *Gimme Shelter*, is directed by Affleck and features the Stones' hit, taken from their 1969 album *Let it Bleed*, the UN refugee agency said in a statement.

The film features footage shot last month in the strife-torn eastern region



The Rolling Stones' Keith Richards, and his laboratory of a body, right, reached the milestone of 65.

PHOTO AP

remarkably resilient to a lifetime of substance abuse, explained by his view that his body was a “laboratory.”

Actor **Dennis Quaid** and his wife have reached a US\$750,000 settlement with a Los Angeles hospital for a blunder which almost killed their twin babies, court documents showed on Tuesday.

The Quaid's' children Thomas Boone and Zoe Grace, born in November last year, almost died after being given 1,000 times the normal dose of anti-clotting agent Heparin by staff at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

Cedars-Sinai was not sued but the hospital was described in a court filing as a “potential defendant.” Papers filed in Los Angeles County Superior Court on Monday reflected the new settlement.

Heparin is used to flush out intravenous tubes and prevent blood clots. Babies typically receive 10 units of the drug, but Quaid's children were reportedly given 10,000 units before the alarm was raised.

Quaid, and his third wife Kimberley Buffington, are also suing pharmaceutical company Baxter over the blunder in a lawsuit that alleges labels on the bottles of 10 units of Heparin and the bottles of 10,000 units are similar.

Quaid, 54, is best known for roles in a string of hit films during the 1980s including *The Right Stuff*, *Enemy Mine* and *Innerspace*.

— AGENCIES