

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW AND NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTERS

Theater in Taipei this year has achieved some notable heights and, unfortunately, some even more notable lows. *The Jester* (弄臣), a new Beijing opera production by Vivien Ku (辜懷群) and Li Baochun (李寶春) that had its world premiere at Novel Hall (新舞台) earlier this month, won accolades from audiences for its technical mastery and solid scriptwriting. Applause and bravos started only minutes into the first act of this adaptation of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, a response that was in stark contrast to the ponderous silence and dutiful clapping that marked some recent fusion productions. People walked away at the end having been lifted up by the skill of the performance rather than being weighed down by its burden of innovation.

Far more traditional but equally successful was *Six Legends of Lan Ting* (蘭庭六詠) by Lanting Kun Opera Troupe (蘭庭崑劇團), a relative newcomer to Taiwan's traditional art scene, which played at Novel Hall in August. The main draw of this production was the outstanding performance by Wen Yuhang (溫宇航), who is best-known in the West for his starring role in the 19-hour 1999 Lincoln Center production of *The Peony Pavilion* (牡丹亭). It is performances like these that give substance to talk of a kun opera revival, especially as an international performance medium similar to Italian opera.

On the debit side of the ledger, productions such as National Taiwan College of Performing Arts' (國立臺灣戲曲學院) *The Plum Blossom Fan* (桃花扇) became a byword for how badly the integration of Western and Chinese opera can turn out. The Western-style score performed by the Taipei Philharmonic Orchestra (台北愛樂管弦樂團) under the energetic direction of conductor Liao Hsiao-ling (廖曉玲) managed to constantly trip up performers, denying them the natural rhythms of Chinese opera.

One of 2008's biggest productions was undoubtedly CKS Cultural Foundation's flagship production of *Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man* (黑鬚馬偕) that premiered at the National Theater late last month. Unfortunately, despite a sterling performance by Thomas Maglioranza in the title role, and a splendid stage design by Lukas Hemleb, the flimsy script and flaccid pacing let the production down. Looked at in the context of the many experimental operas that have been produced in recent years, one can see that the money and the high level support for *Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man* has certainly paid off in the quality of the presentation. What is missing is a creative sensibility to direct these resources to make something more satisfying than a bald narrative of a worthy life.

Tainan Ensemble's (台南人劇團) *K24 Chaos*, a six-hour, six-act whodunit play within a play that incorporates Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and employs a plotline similar to the television series *Alias*, opened to packed houses at the beginning of the year. It may seem strange to combine a love story using elements from a spy serial, but Tsai Po-chang's (蔡柏璋) script made an admirable attempt and for the first two acts he pulled it off. Both staging and acting were tight and the story intricate and intriguing. But interest began to wane in the fourth act, or "episode," as Tsai calls them, because the script tried to incorporate too many diverse plots into the story. Though the jokes and plot twists remained throughout, the production would have been better served if he had solved the mystery three hours earlier.

The Scholar and the Executioner (秀才與劊子手) demonstrated that playwright and theorist Huang Weimuo (黃維騁) is one of the top theater professionals working in the Chinese language

today. The combination of theories found in Western theater and Beijing opera fused together in a theatrical spectacle that blended classical Chinese and modern themes easily digestible by a contemporary audience.

It has been a very good year for traditional arts, with a number of outstanding exhibitions hosted by the National Palace Museum. Most notable among these was the Stunning Decorative Porcelains From the Chienlung Reign (華麗彩瓷: 乾隆洋彩特展), which opened in October and runs to August next year. As you might expect from ceramics devised especially for the admiration of one of the Qing Dynasty's (1644-1911) most powerful and artistically sophisticated emperors, the exhibits absolutely overwhelm with their artistry and ornateness.



From left to right: Stunning Decorative Porcelains from the Chienlung Reign, Mackay — The Black Bearded Bible Man and Six Legends of Lan Ting.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NPM AND NICH

The arts in 2008

(Con)fusion, plot twists and ancient traditions

At the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (台北市立美術館), one of the most interesting exhibits was Form, Ideas, Essence, Rhythm: Contemporary East Asian Ink Painting (形·意·質·韻 — 東亞當代水墨創作邀請展). This show examined the relationship between modern ink painting and traditional Chinese aesthetics and the conceptual trends that are driving a new generation of artists. The 96 works on display, by artists from Taiwan, China, Japan and South Korea, dispel any idea that ink painting is a thing of the past. Works range from the hyper-kinetic manga imagery of Mise Natsunosuke's *My God — Tiananmen* (My God — 天安門) to the ultra-minimalist calm of Yan Shanchun's (嚴善錫) *Searching for West Lake in My Dreams* (西湖尋夢).

The Taipei Biennial also featured in a big way at TFAM this year, presenting many interesting works by young contemporary artists. This year the show, which opened in September, was curated by Manray Shu (徐文瑞) and Vasif Kortun, who extended the scope of the exhibition from the museum to include locations across the city.

The use of non-museum spaces, including projects based at the Beer Brewery on Jianguo

North Road (建國啤酒廠), on the mega-digital screen at Taipei Arena (台北小巨蛋), in Taipei Art Park (中山美術公園) and at Zhongxiao Xinsheng MRT Station (捷運忠孝新生站), is an intentional effort to put art before people who might not otherwise visit a museum, and to comment on how digital media pushes artistic expression in our days.

The National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館) and its curators should be commended for producing one of the year's most outstanding exhibits. They should also be booted for mounting one of the worst.

From the arrangement of the paintings to the explanation of his works, the *Chu Teh-chun 88 Retrospective* (朱德群88回顧展) admirably revealed why Chu is regarded as one of Taiwan's pre-eminent masters of abstract expressionism. The exhibit

showed how the Western tradition of landscape painting and Chinese calligraphy informed Chu's works in a manner that didn't overburden the viewer. The explanations, which were concise and scattered throughout the gallery, provided necessary context for styles of art that are often impenetrable.

A Drop in the Ocean: Modern Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy and Painting Exhibition (滄海一粟—近現代書畫展), ought to have been an excellent opportunity to educate the public about the long and revered Chinese tradition of ink painting and calligraphy. What was presented instead was an exhibition of 300 works from as far back as the Tang Dynasty that was barely more edifying than wallpaper. Apart from a brief four-paragraph introduction, there were no explanations about the exhibit's purpose. Although a title and artist for each work were given, there were no dates or clues as to why these works were deemed worthy of viewing. The curators of this exhibit, it seems, would have benefited from walking through the exhibit on Chu Teh-chun (朱德群) before mounting their own.

private client from more public mortification, hurriedly declared to the press that Wong's period had just been a little bit late. This was despite the fact that Chen herself had announced the pregnancy earlier.

The pregnancy-obsessed media also declared a bump watch on Cecilia Cheung, the aforementioned subject of Edison Chen's nude portraiture and wife of Wong's ex Nicholas Tse (謝霆鋒). Rumors had also circulated that Cheung had suffered a miscarriage, but *Sing Tao Daily News* (星島日報) speculated that Cheung might be knocked up again after one of their intrepid reporters spotted her in a convenience store loading up on five cups of noodles, three cans of some unspecified foodstuff, two boxes of chocolates and three big bags of potato chips. Perhaps Cheung was just seeking comfort food — it must be tough when the entire world is your gynecologist (especially if they have Chen's photos for reference).

After a widely reported string of flings with mixed-race models last year, pop idol David Tao (陶喆) garnered further attention from the tabloids when he fell off the wagon. After a bender at the uber-trendy Barcode lounge in Taipei's Xinyi District to celebrate the beginning of 2008, Tao's taxi driver dropped him off at a nearby police station because the sozzled star was unable to recall where he lived.

Tao became a little too friendly with the authorities, engaging in amiable antics such as high-fiving officers, making incessant small talk, and fawning over cops who just wanted the inebriated star to stand still. The lively display of drunkenness even included addressing the *Next* magazine paparazzo who had been called to record the silly scene as "bro."

Guatemalan-Taiwanese model Liz Yang (楊莉思), one of Tao's many rumored sweethearts, promptly claimed that they were "just friends" after the farcical episode.

Finally, this year's roundup would not be complete without mentioning the Beijing Olympics, which presented an ideal venue for A-listers to show off their patriotism. Entertainment big shots including Jackie Chan (成龍), Andy Lau (劉德華), Wang Lee-hom (王力宏) Kelly Chen (陳慧琳) and Zhang Ziyi (章子怡) all expressed their support for China's authoritarian regime by bearing the Olympic torch (a ceremony invented by the Nazis for the 1936 Berlin Olympics to promote Aryan ideals) and singing songs with schmaltzy titles such as *Beijing, Beijing, I Love Beijing* (北京·北京·我愛北京) at director Zhang Yimou's (張藝謀) less-than-creative closing ceremony.

— COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW, NOAH BUCHAN, CATHERINE SHU AND HO YI

Movies

A renaissance in the making

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Could it be possible that Taiwanese cinema is set for a renaissance? This year boded well as young filmmakers delivered works diverse in content and style while polishing their storytelling competencies to attract rather than distract audiences.

In genre cinema, novice director Cheng Hsiao-tse (程孝澤) turned heads with his debut feature *Miao Miao* (渺渺), a tale of adolescent romance. Up-and-coming director Tom Shu-yu Lin (林書宇) caught the attention of both audiences and critics with his coming-of-age, autobiographic tale *Winds of September* (九降風), which is set in mid-1990s Taiwan.

A disciple of Taiwanese New Wave cinema, actor-turned-director Niu Chen-zer's (鈕承澤) award-winning debut effort *What On Earth Have I Done Wrong?!* (情非得已之生存之道), a mockumentary in which the director plays himself, won many plaudits.

Veteran filmmaker Chang Tso-chi (張作驥) returned to the director's chair after a five-year hiatus with his sober human drama *Soul of a Demon* (蜮蝶).

Female directors also produced increasingly mature works. Director Singing Chen's (陳志言) second feature *God Man Dog* (流浪神狗人) tells an allegorical tale of contemporary Taiwan and firmly establishes Chen as a name to keep an eye on.

Berlinale-winning director Zero Chou (周美玲) diverged from her usual surrealistic and metaphorical approach to storytelling and painted a realistic and earnest portrait of lesbian life in Taiwan in *Drifting Flowers* (漂浪青春).

And of course, let's not forget *Cape No. 7* (海角七號), the highest-grossing Chinese-language film ever screened in Taiwan, which as the overly sanguine media proclaims, single-handedly revived a local filmmaking industry that had been in the doldrums since the early 1990s.

In the light of the progress made last year, *Taipei Times* is abandoning the best-of-format and lists in the five most memorable (good and bad) films of the year.

The top accolade goes to *Cape No. 7*. Like all blockbusters before it, *Cape No. 7* is not an excellent work of filmmaking. The story offers nothing new and the way director Wei Te-sheng (魏德聖) chooses to tell it can be best described as adequate. But unlike most commercial directors in Taiwan, Wei is a competent storyteller who has a fine command of the vernacular and is adept at creating lifelike characters and weaving them together into a feel-good movie about ordinary people.

However, the future is not as rosy as first appears if aspiring filmmakers still have to finance their movies by digging deep into their own pockets, as Wei did before he became famous.

A view widely circulated among local directors is that to make a local hit, one's choices are either a youth drama starring pretty-faced idols or a warmhearted story about the beauty and history of Taiwan and its people, as best exemplified by last year's hit *Island Etude* (練習曲) and, to a lesser extent, *Cape No. 7*.

Blue Brave: The Legend of Formosa in 1895 (一八九五), is, however, where that sentiment goes terribly wrong. A feeble account of the Hakka militias' resistance to

Japanese troops after Qing Dynasty China ceded Taiwan to Tokyo under the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, the film's makers forgot that audience don't take kindly to history lessons that lack emotion.

Television commercial and music video director Leading Lee's (李鼎) debut feature *My So Called Love* (愛的發聲練習) unfortunately reinforces the common notion that when a music video director turns his or her eye to the big screen, the end product will likely turn out to be all looks and no content.

Beset with pretentious dialogue, an aimless story, forced plotlines and stiff performances, the film would undoubtedly take care, the Golden Raspberry Award, if Taiwan's film industry had one.

The reputation of commercial directors was eloquently restored thanks to seasoned television commercial director and cinematographer Chung Mong-hong (鍾孟宏) and his debut feature *Parking* (停車). With years of experience in making commercials behind him, Chung used richly colored tableaux and unusual camera movements and framings for a blackly comic Kafkaesque journey into the lives, pasts and memories of a mosaic of characters who seem to be trapped in a dilapidated apartment building that is frozen in time.

Last but by no means the least, award-winning playwright, novelist and director Yang Ya-che's (楊雅喆) debut feature *Orz Boyz* (囧男孩) is a reminder of how little attention has been paid to children's film in Taiwanese cinema. From a well-written script, witty dialogue and imaginative animation sequences to two amazingly lovable and talented child actors, the film has all the elements to prove that a tale about the whimsical and fantastic world of childhood can be enjoyed by children and adults alike.



From top: *Cape No. 7*, *Orz Boyz* and *My So-Called Love*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ASIS FILM PRODUCTION, 1 PRODUCTION FILM AND ZOOM-HUNT INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTIONS

Edison Chen (陳冠希) serves as a symbol of trends over the past year and, perhaps, what to expect in 2009. For those of you who have been living in outer space recently, some 1,300 explicit images were stolen from Chen's computer showing the star and at least half a dozen Hong Kong celebrities — Gillian Chung (鍾欣桐), Bobo Chan (陳文媛), Mandy Chen (陳有端), Cecilia Cheung (張柏芝) and Chiu Ching-yu (趙頌茹), to name a few — in various sexual poses and posted on the Internet. In the resulting "sex scandal," Chen fled overseas amid moralizing by the media and authorities and rumors that he is on the triad's hit list (HK\$500,000 for either hand). Predictably, the fallout of the scandal included Chen losing several endorsements and promising that he would step out of Hong Kong's entertainment industry forever.

If half a million Hong Kong dollars is the price for one of Chen's hands, in Taiwan the going rate for someone's life is NT\$3 million. At least that was the sum disgraced entertainer Hung Chi-te (洪其德) offered the family of a woman he killed in Kenting in February while driving under the influence. This marks a steep decline of NT\$5 million compared to the previous year when Shino Lin (林曉培) paid the family of the victim she ran over while wasted behind the wheel. Blame it on the global economic downturn.

Actor Ethan Ruan's (阮經天) virile member has done rather better by him despite his own propensity to flaunt it about the gossip rags. The long running saga of his rumbustious sexual marathons with the mysterious "Joanna" and his on-again, off-again relationship with "official" girlfriend Tiffany Hsu (許瑋甯) did nothing to reduce his pulling power, and the soap opera *To Love You Is My Destiny* (命中注定我愛你) in which he stars continued to achieve stellar ratings.

Pop Stop has also shown a good deal of interest in two of 2008's most high-profile weddings. The first was that of Terry Gou (郭台銘), head of Hon Hai Precision Industry Co (鴻海精密), and dancer Delia Tseng (曾馨瑩), which took place in August. Delia is something of a step down from former Gou marriage prospects, which have included the queens of the Chinese-language entertainment industry such as Carina Lau (劉嘉玲), Rosamund Kwan (關之琳), and supermodel Lin Chi-ling (林志玲), but as Tseng is nicknamed Doggy (狗狗), she may well have qualities that even *Next* magazine has avoided speculating about.

Former Gou prospect Lau decided that good looks and charm beat a bulging pocket book and settled for heartthrob Tony Leung Chiu Wai (梁朝偉). The couple were also married in August at a ceremony in Bhutan from which the press where



Celebrity scandals don't come juicier than Edison Chen's amateur photography shenanigans.

PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

Pop Stop

rigorously kept at telephoto length.

Lau's best friend Faye Wong (王菲) had less to celebrate this year. The Hong Kong media broke out into a rabid and somewhat tasteless frenzy when gossip rags reported in September that the pop chanteuse had miscarried what would have been her second child with husband Li Ya-peng (李亞鵬). Some newspapers speculated that the 39-year-old Wong's "advanced age" might have contributed to the miscarriage or that it might actually have been an induced abortion after Wong's doctor discovered that the fetus had some sort of "abnormality."

Wong's manager Chen Jia-ying (陳家瑛), in a move no doubt designed to save her notoriously

Dance

Newcomers and old masters

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

There were so many good performances in dance this year (and a handful of not so good) that it was difficult to pick one or two winners. But in looking back, it was very clear rather than one or two outstanding shows or performers, it was really two categories that came to mind in the "if you missed these you really missed out" sense: newcomer and old master.

Now the newcomers were not fresh-faced grads; some have been working on their craft professionally for more than a decade. But this year they embarked on new ventures that showed promise of even greater things to come.

The year started with a bang: dancer Sheu Fang-yi (許芳宜) and choreographer Bulareyaung Pagarlava (布拉瑞揚) launched their reconstituted company LAF& Artists with the breathtaking *37Arts* show in January. Sheu is a supernova on stage and with *37 Arts*, Bulareyaung showed he could deliver a work every bit as intense as his leading lady's performances.

In March it was the turn of 20-something choreographer Huang Yi (黃翊). His *Body, Sound* (聲音) for Cloud Gate 2 was a revelation, with its incredibly imaginative use of the dancers' own movements and amazing costumes — by designer Yang Yu-teh (楊好德) — to create the score.

Ballet lovers had the chance to see a star in the making in June when 21-year-old Daniil Simkin appeared with the 2008 International Ballet Star Gala ahead of his first season with the American Ballet Theater (having jumped from the Vienna Opera Ballet). He may look waif-like, but his outstanding technique, combined with a sense of playfulness, served to remind audiences that dance can be as exhilarating to do as it is to watch. And it's not often Taipei dance lovers get to feel that they are ahead of New York audiences.

The final newcomer provided an early Christmas treat for dance lovers, as dancer/choreographer Lin Wen-chung's (林文中) showed a highly polished jewel of a work — *Small* — for his new company WCdance.

In the second category — old master — there was really only one contender, despite a strong showing by Lin Hwai-min's (林懷民) yin-yang combination *Whisper of Flowers*, and that was the Paul Taylor Dance Company. It was a delight to see Taylor's work, through his hand-picked dancers, after so many years. The sheer physicality of his dancers and the cerebral twists and turns of Taylor's choreography were both a revelation and a reminder of what he has contributed to the dance world over the past 54 years. Let's just hope Taipei won't have to wait another 20 years to see the company again.



Cloud Gate 2's *Body Sound*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LIU CHEN-HSIANG