

AROUND TOWN

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PAGE 13

Visions of the future

Productions by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson are among the highlights of the 2009 Taiwan International Festival

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

Digital technology has become as much a part of the world of visual art as traditional tools such as paint and canvas. It isn't surprising, then, that performance art professionals would call on digital artists to supplement their work on the stage. The 2009 Taiwan International Festival conceived of this year's event to celebrate the collaboration between the older mediums with new media.

The festival begins Friday next week in the plaza between Taipei City's National Theater and National Concert Hall with a series of performances timed to celebrate the completion of renovations on the two iconic buildings. It runs until April.

The theme for this year is Vision of the Future, and the 16 Taiwanese and international performances of dance, theater and music were chosen because they fuse traditional stage elements with the latest in media technology.

Canadian theater company lemieux. pion 4d art uses virtual technology in

Norman, a work that examines the life of animator Norman McLaren. Led by multidisciplinary artists Michel Lemieux and Victor Pilon, it combines film, music and animation in a production that sees a single actor interacting with projected images.

Multimedia artist Klaus Obermaier applies similar visual elements in *Le Sacre du Printemps*, a co-production with the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO). In front of the orchestra, a small stage serves as a platform on which a dancer performs while cameras and electronic devices project the figure's virtual image on to large screens.

Italian theater company Compagnia T.P.O. combines dance, visual art, mechanical installation and stunning lighting effects in *The Japanese Garden*, an interactive children's performance that will randomly select audience members to participate in a work that transforms their dance steps into poetic audio-visual language.

Another family-oriented performance is the *The Mice War*. NSO

resident composer David Chesky uses Latin, jazz, hip-hop, funk and classical music to meditate on the absurdity of war in a collaboration with Shiny Shoes Children's Theater (鞋子兒童實驗劇團).

Festival organizers also invited some of the most innovative directors and composers working in theater today. Experimental theater director and designer Robert Wilson applies his minimalist aesthetic to Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness novel *Orlando*, which sees its much-anticipated Taiwan premiere next Saturday (see review in next Friday's *Taipei Times*). Beijing opera diva Wei Hai-ming (魏海敏) interprets both male and female roles in the solo performance.

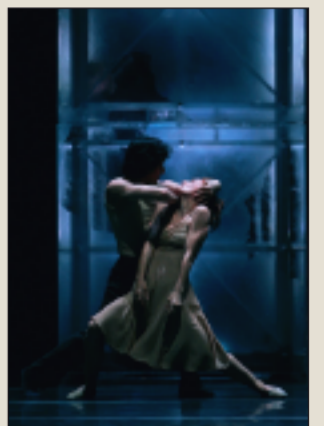
Academy Award-winning composer Philip Glass adapts the poems and paintings of Leonard Cohen into music in *Book of Longing* (to be reviewed in the March 6 edition of the *Taipei Times*), an artistic feast that features four singers and a live band mingling among projected images of Cohen's illustrations.



Left: *The Mountain Dawn* by U-Theater.



Center: *The Japanese Garden* by Compagnia T.P.O.



Right: *Alas (Wings)* by Compania Nacional de Danza.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NTCH

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: 2009 Taiwan International Festival
TICKETS: NT\$500 to NT\$8,000, available through NTCH ticketing outlets or online at www.artsticket.com.tw
ON THE NET: event.ntch.edu.tw/2009/tif/en/index.html

WHERE AND WHEN:

► National Concert Hall, Taipei City

World to Come, Feb. 28 at 7:30pm
Book of Longing, March 7 and March 8 at 7:30pm
Le Sacre du Printemps, March 28 and March 29 at 7:30pm
On the Highway 66, April 3 at 7:30pm

► National Theater, Taipei City

Orlando, Feb. 21 and Feb. 24 to Feb. 28 at 7:30pm and Feb. 22 and March 1 at 2:30pm
Alas (Wings), March 6 and March 7 at 7:30pm and March 8 at 2:30pm

Norman, March 12 to March 14 at 7:30pm and March 15 at 2:30pm
The Mountain Dawn, March 20 and March 21 at 7:30pm and March 21 and March 22 at 2:30pm
Sleeping Beauty, March 27 and March 28 at 7:30pm and March 29 at 2:30pm
Swan Lake, March 30 to April 1 at 7:30pm

► National Experimental Theater, Taipei City

The Japanese Garden, March 12 to March 14 at 7:30pm, March 13 at 5:30pm and March 14 and March 15 at 10am and 2:30pm
The Mice War, March 20 and March 21 at 7:30pm and March 21 and March 22 at 2:30pm
Tian-Bo Hall (天波樓), March 26 at 7:30pm
Meeting at Old Town (古城訓弟), March 27 at 7:30pm
Jhou-Chu Drives Away Three Monsters (周處除三害), March 28 at 2:30pm
Defeat the Flag Array (大破銅旗陣), March 28 at 7:30pm



Quintessentially Mei

The rising stars of Beijing opera, heirs to Mei Lanfang's awesome artistic heritage, are in town

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

The Beijing Beijing Opera Company (北京京劇院), founded in 1979 to reestablish a tradition of excellence in Beijing opera after the devastation of the Cultural Revolution, is back in Taiwan to participate in a joint performance with a number of Taiwan's own opera greats. On this occasion, the visit is even more significant, as the group of more than 60 performers is drawn largely from the most promising members of the company's youth troupe. While not well known at present, these are the stars of tomorrow.

Among the most highly anticipated of the guests is the rising star Hu Wenge (胡文閣), who is continuing the tradition of male specialists in female roles, and is a third-generation disciple of the great Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳), who is widely regarded as having taken the art of female impersonation in Beijing opera to its highest level of sophistication. A biopic of Mei directed by Chen Kaige (陳凱歌) has recently completed a run at major cinemas in Taipei.

Hu came to his art relatively late. He began studying dance aged 5 and quickly became enamored with the beauty of female roles. He studied operatic female roles for a while under Li Defu (李德富), who was once famous for his skill with "water sleeves," the extended sleeves of white cloth that are an integral part of the costume for female roles.

Hu became disillusioned with the future of opera and in 1987 took the bold step of staging his own drag shows. This was a time when female impersonation was not widely accepted in Chinese society, and Hu said that this move was prompted by a rebellious spirit against



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HUASHENG

the strictures of society and of operatic convention.

Subsequently, seeking greater refinement of expression and thirsting for the respect given to an artist, Hu sought out Mei Baojiu (梅葆玖), son and successor of Mei Lanfang, with the aim of reentering the world of Beijing opera. It took seven years before he was accepted as a disciple, by which time he was already 34. Hu said that he could never have achieved his success without his early training, and is much esteemed as possibly the last man to receive the direct transmission of Mei's art.

Speaking about what made the Mei school of opera so appealing to him, Hu said that it was its lack of ostentation.

"Mei's style of interpretation must not have any rough edges. The expressiveness must come from within," he said. Hu will be giving a star turn tonight in an excerpt titled *Peak of the Universe* (宇宙峰), one of Mei Lanfang's signature works.

At a rehearsal on Wednesday of *The Jewelry Pouch* (鎖麟囊), Chi Xiaoqi (遲小秋), a leading exponent of the Cheng school (程派) of performance and the leader of the youth troupe, showed off her quality in the role of Xue Xiangling (薛湘靈) with the vocal virtuosity and command of vibrato for which this school is famous. Speaking to the press last week, Chi emphasized the

range of talent represented by the youth troupe, which includes specialists in all role types, with an average age of about 25.

"We have a responsibility to carry on this great tradition," she said. "This is also a chance for young performers to begin establishing audience recognition."

Chi performed to a full house at the Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台) last night. Tickets are still available for all other performances.

Wang Yuzhen (王玉珍), director of the Beijing Beijing Opera Company, underlined that this visit was very much about passing on the torch. Many of the operas scheduled for this weekend have been

deliberately chosen for being part of a traditional, even canonical repertoire, and are intended to show off the command of fundamentals by the young performers, many of whom already have numerous awards under their belts. Stage sets are extremely conventional, with very little to distract attention from the performers. The current visit will showcase not only performers, but also the oft-neglected musicians, with young percussion virtuoso Wang Wei (王威) giving the beat and Yan Shouping (燕守平), one of the foremost exponents of the *huqin* (胡琴), joining as a special guest.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Beijing Beijing Opera Company Youth Troupe
WHEN: Today, tomorrow and Sunday at 7:30pm; tomorrow and Sunday at 2:30pm
WHERE: Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台), 25, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市八德路3段25號)
TICKETS: NT\$300 to NT\$2,000, available through NTCH ticketing or online at www.artsticket.com.tw