

AROUND TOWN

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A collaboration between opera diva Wei Hai-min and director Robert Wilson opens the Taiwan International Festival and is likely to be one of its main talking points

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW AND BRADLEY WINTERTON
STAFF REPORTER AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



O*rlando*, which opens tonight at Taipei's National Theater, is a work by celebrated US director and artist Robert Wilson based on UK author Virginia Woolf's fantasy novel of the same name, first published in 1928.

The novel and play follow the 400-year life of a man, who halfway through the story changes into a woman, from the time of England's Queen Elizabeth I to the 1920s. The original novel allowed Woolf to meditate lightheartedly on English history, but also more importantly on issues of androgyny and bisexuality, things that to some degree were reflected in her own life story. Characters in the novel, including Orlando, can even be seen as lightly veiled portraits of some of her own friends.

Wilson has already presented versions of *Orlando* in Paris and London. This weekend's Taipei staging, however, which stars Beijing opera diva Wei Hai-min (魏海敏), has been heavily reworked as a collaboration between director and performer, and is in many ways a completely new version.

For Wei, who is widely regarded as one of Taiwan's top Beijing opera performers, her participation in *Orlando* is part of a decades-long flirtation with modern theater. Most recently, she performed in the revival of Contemporary Legend Theater's (當代傳奇劇場) 1993 groundbreaking work *Medea* (樓蘭女), which welded Greek tragedy, Beijing opera and experimental theater.

At a dress rehearsal of *Orlando* on Tuesday, the stark setting and highly abstract architectural sets put this production far beyond any of her previous efforts. Wei, who endured considerable criticism from fans for her involvement with Contemporary Legend, has taken a leap into the avant-garde, and while there are plenty of operatic elements, they have been utterly transformed — whether for better or worse remains to be answered.

It is a question that will reflect on Wei not only as a performer, but also as a creative artist, for given the obstacles of language and culture faced by Wilson, who generally takes a very strong hold over the look and feel of any work he is directing, Wei has also played a significant role in realizing this new production. "I think I gave him many ideas for this production," Wei said. She has drawn much from the vocabulary of Beijing opera, to make this "very much a collaborative process."

During talks and interviews in the run-up to this new version of *Orlando*, both Wei and Wilson agreed that much of the impact of the production relies on the single performer's ability to "stand on stage," holding the audience's attention with little more than her presence. Wei's Beijing operatic training stands her in good stead. "There is the phrase: 'the drama is in every inch of your body (渾身是戲),' " Wei said, "from the top of your head to the soles of your feet, you must be performing." She has never lacked for stage presence, whether in traditional or modernized Beijing opera, but from the dress rehearsal, there is a fear, in this writer's opinion at least, that too much is being taken out of context. The clouds of pointless exoticism loom, as they have over so many recent attempts to "modernize" Chinese opera.

Wei said her operatic training was a considerable advantage in trying to achieve one of Wilson's goals, which is the disassociation of the vocal and visual. This is described by Wilson as "listening to the pictures," by which he refers to the importance of hearing the text spoken by the body independently of the voice. In addition to playing Orlando, Wei, the only performer in the nearly two-hour-long show, will also take on the roles of all the characters in the protagonist's 400-year life, giving her an opportunity

to showcase the skills that make up the foundation of traditional Chinese theater, as she flits between characters both male and female, old and young.

From the inception of the collaboration, Wei wanted to include aspects of Beijing opera. "Previous productions of *Orlando* have been 'dramatic,' with no singing. As my background is in opera, I wanted to incorporate song, and this was discussed right at the beginning," she said. That having been accepted, considerable work had to be done in adapting the text. At first, Chinese translations of the novel were considered, but the literary quality of these did not really work within an operatic context. Wei invited Wang An-chi (王安祈), the artistic director of the Guo Guang Opera Company (國光劇團) and the scriptwriter behind many experimental Beijing opera productions, to rewrite the text. "At first she was very reluctant, for she frankly found the story ridiculous," Wei said.

After Wang produced her opera script, Wei then got to work tinkering with the musicality of it, taking it away from the conventional rhythms of Beijing opera, which she said, "sounded inappropriate." She added rhyme to some of the spoken parts, drawing on

theatrical conventions that indicate the social class of a speaker. And, she said, she also made personal sacrifices for her art. At a public lecture about her involvement in the project last week, Wei said that having spent a lifetime learning to express herself through multitudinous layers of clothes and makeup, she now finds herself on stage with the simplest of costumes, and by the end, stripped down to little more than a camisole. Such a state of undress for a traditional artist is virtually unheard of.

Enormous effort has been made to meet the technical demands imposed by Wilson on this production, and Liu Chiung-shu (劉瓊淑), artistic director for the CKS Cultural Center (國立中正文化中心), which is sponsoring the production, spoke to the press about the improvements made to the rigging and lighting of the National Theater for this production.

What remains to be seen is whether a play about Western feminism in the 1930s will translate convincingly into this very new medium. Given the stature of both Wilson and Wei, there is plenty of interest in discovering if this will work. Some tickets remain, but are selling fast.

Talking to Robert Wilson

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

As an artist, Robert Wilson possesses an extraordinary range. He's created some theater shows entirely out of his own head (*Deafman Glance*), others in collaboration with contemporary composers (*Einstein on the Beach*, with Philip Glass), directed many operas, and mounted installations in some of the world's most prestigious art galleries.

Credited with bringing a sense of space and time to the previously largely social and speech-rooted art of Western theater, he can best be seen as a visual artist who has chosen to work on stages rather than on canvas. He has also brought together Eastern and Western theatrical traditions in ways previously unimagined, creating stage shows that are at times mystical and even visionary.

In this context his debut in Taiwan, in many ways a repository of the most ancient Chinese artistic traditions, couldn't be more important.

I first asked Robert Wilson what kind of a production *Orlando* would be.

"*Orlando* is a true collaboration in that it incorporates a Western vocabulary of movement and images, based on Virginia Woolf's text of *Orlando* and deriving from my background as an architect, from my life in the theater, and from my work as a visual artist.

"This work is counter-pointed and complemented by the classically trained Beijing opera star Wei Hai-min (魏海敏), which definitely brings an ancient sense of Chinese culture to the work — a culture where movement, language, the difference between spoken and sung words, are all very different from what I've inherited from my Western roots.

"I see this work as being one whole made of two opposites — the way you have two hands but one body, two sides of the brain, but one mind.

"This new Taipei production is based on earlier ones I did in Paris with Isabelle Huppert and in England with Miranda Richardson. The text and music are different, however, as well as the movement, because they are adapted to the talents of the great Wei Hai-min.

"As for the music, it will use traditional Chinese

instruments and at times very profound contemporary electronic sounds."

I mentioned to Wilson that critics had seen the influence of Japanese Zen Buddhism on some of his theater work. How did he see the difference between Japanese and Chinese culture?

"The Chinese are about 2,4,8,12,16, the Japanese about 3,5,7,11 and 15," he replied. "The Japanese are about asymmetry, the Chinese about symmetry. This, at least, is one way they're different. Look at a Chinese garden and a Japanese one, and you'll see the difference."

I next made the point that, though love was central to Virginia Woolf's original book, she seemed herself in some ways a rather a cold, sex-less figure, and some of this is apparent in the novel. What was Wilson's experience of her writing?

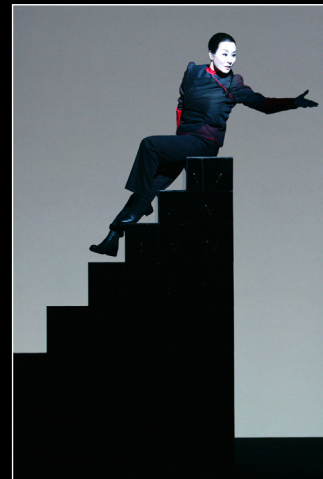
"I think Virginia Woolf is a formal writer, and her text is therefore formal as well. She is, after all, writing both about herself and about 400 years of the history of England. It is a playful, fantasy text. Yet as a formal writer she views events to some extent from a distance."

I then suggested that the East is today generally seen as the bearer of ancient traditions, often androgynous like the character Orlando, that have been battered by the influence of the West, but are still present. These traditions are both sensual and spiritual. Did Wilson view the Orient in a similar way?

"Yes," he replied, "I think great spiritual beings have no sex. They are both male and female. Virginia Woolf was known for writing standing up. I've made a high table of glass with four seahorses as legs. The seahorse is one of the few creatures on earth where both the male and female reproduce."

Wilson ended by offering an enticing prospect of further appearances in Taiwan, saying he planned to be back in Taipei in a year's time, for an exhibition and for new work.

Tonight's premier of *Orlando* promises to be an engrossing, but perhaps also controversial, experience. Wilson's theatrical minimalism can be purifying, but it also has its critics. Even so, this Taiwan debut of one of the most celebrated of theater artists cannot be anything less than a must-see event.



PHOTOS: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES AND COURTESY OF NITC

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Robert Wilson's *Orlando*, with Wei Hai-min

WHEN: Tomorrow, and Tuesday through Feb. 28 at 7:30pm; Sunday and March 1 at 2:30pm

WHERE: National Theater, Taipei City
TICKETS: NT\$600 to NT\$3,600, available through NTC ticketing or online at www.artsticket.com.tw

DETAILS: Chinese and English subtitles