

ISABELLE

WEN

Daringdoyen

Fashion designer Isabelle Wen talks about the eclectic inspirations for her collections and expanding her brand to restaurants and nightspots

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

For more than 20 years, fashion designer Isabelle Wen (溫慶珠) has shown that she is not afraid to derive inspiration from sources as diverse as Sufism, Mercury (the planet and the element) and Nancy Sinatra songs.

"I think designing things is like writing a diary and I draw on my own life for inspiration. Every season has a different mood. It is like presenting a story through clothing," says Wen.

Her label's upcoming spring/summer 2009 collection is partly inspired by the revolutionary and idealistic spirit of the 1960s. Highlights include a dress made of tiers of soft silk chiffon dyed in graduating tones of misty gray, a printed blouse whose circular pattern is echoed in discreet but richly textured round appliques, and classic boot-cut jeans offset by pockets encrusted with crystals and stones — a Wen signature, along with other unabashedly feminine flourishes like ruffles, pleated tulle and shimmery, embroidered fabrics.

Wen's background is as kaleidoscopic as her colorful dresses. Her father was a general in the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) before moving with Wen's mother to Taiwan in 1949. He served as a police chief in Tainan, but Wen describes both her parents as artists at heart who encouraged the same in their children. Wen's first forays into fashion design happened when her mother took her to tailors to have her sketches turned into clothing for Wen's own wardrobe.

But the launch of her own label in 1976 came only after Wen had taken a few detours. She studied tourism at Tamsui's Oxford College (now part of Aletheia University, 真理大學) before training to be a painter under the tutelage of renowned artist O How-nien (歐豪年) for six years. Wen still sees few boundaries between the world of fine art and fashion. Her fall/winter 2008 collection was named after Amedeo Modigliani and used many of the deep blue and gray tones that feature in the Italian painter's work.

Wen has also diligently pursued the diversification of her brand; her other ventures include a building on Renai Road (仁愛路) that contains a cafe, restaurants and a bar and the trendy East District eateries Sofa (which closed shortly after this interview), Midnight Cafe and Butterfly.

In an interview at her studio in Shilin, Wen talked about the impact of the economy on her businesses, and why, even though she's held presentations in Paris and opened stores in the US (which she has since closed), she'd rather stay within Asia than look towards Europe and the US as she expands her brand.

Taipei Times: You seem to have pursued branding beyond your fashion label pretty aggressively compared to other designers, especially with the opening of restaurants. How did you decide to do that?

Isabelle Wen: To be honest, I fell into that by accident. It wasn't that I wanted to take a particular road for my business or that I wanted to be unique. FiFi and Khaki came about because the building they are in came on the market about 10 years ago. It was a happy accident. Because the building is on Renai Road, I thought it presented a great opportunity. In fact, I actually told some of my friends about it first and encouraged them to buy it for their own ventures.

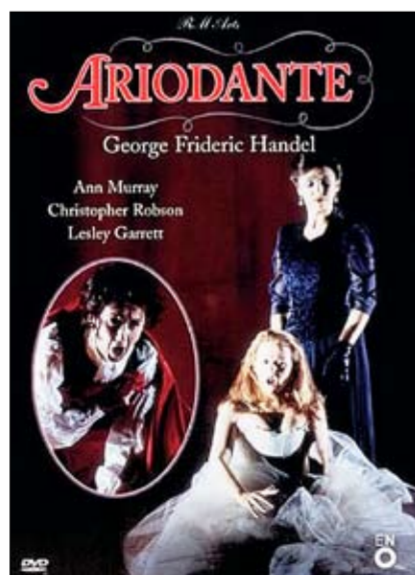
When I finally purchased it myself, I decided that I absolutely did not want the entire building to be dedicated only to fashion. I wanted it to be like a small landmark, a destination. You know, Renai Road is so boring. It's beautiful, but there was nothing. A hotel and a bunch of banks and that was about it. So what I opened had to be very interesting and since I am a fashion designer I wanted to apply some of my own aesthetic sensibility to what we created.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15



PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

[CLASSICAL DVD REVIEWS]



ARIODANTE
English National Opera
Directed by David Alden
Image 1438-923520



RODELINDA
Glyndebourne
Directed by Jean-Marie Villegier
KULTUR D 2834



TAMERLANO
Halle-Festspiele, Halle
Directed by Jonathan Miller
ArtHaus 100703



THEODORA
Glyndebourne
Directed by Peter Sellars
KULTUR D 2099

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

This year is the 250th anniversary of Handel's death, but the revival of interest in his operas is already 20 years old. Previously he'd been best known for oratorios such as *Messiah*, but opera directors had become tired of the standard repertory and, with over 40 to choose from, Handel's long-forgotten products in the field proved a gold mine. Many of the most celebrated of these resurrections are now available on DVD.

The finest of the four productions reviewed here is the 1996 *Ariodante* from the English National Opera, directed by David Alden. Stylishly innovative, sexually energetic, and with all the characters shown as being on the verge of insanity, this production hovers on the edge of brilliance. Handel's compulsive, rhythmic music is shown to be a cover for barely repressed passion. Dressed in 18th-century costume,

distraught characters perform his vocal acrobatics as the extensions of almost unbearable states of mind.

Written in Italian, it's here sung in an English version by Amanda Holden. She catches the 18th-century poetic idiom perfectly and manages at the same time to be ironic and witty, providing an ideal complement to the director's manic vision.

Ann Murray sings the errant knight Ariodante to extraordinary effect — just watch her in the long aria after she learns the king has agreed to her character's marriage to his daughter Ginevra and succession to the throne of Scotland. She writhes on the floor and stands on tables while getting her voice around an impossibly difficult vocal line. Joan Rodgers as Ginevra is also excellent, as is Christopher Robson as the ambitious and sexually devious Polinesso. Subtitles in the version most easily available in Taiwan are in

Chinese and English.

If you want to sample a Handel opera you couldn't do better than opt for this two-DVD product. It was previously listed among 27 outstanding opera DVDs in the *Taipei Times* on Dec. 22, 2005.

My second choice is the Glyndebourne Festival *Rodelinda*, dating from 1998. Jean-Marie Villegier directs this story, also featuring sexual and political rivalry, in the style of early silent movies. He sets it in the 1920s, with cocktails, military uniforms, cigarettes and newspapers, and the entire action seemingly taking place at night. The melodic and catchy score once again only half-conceals a world of lethal intrigue and obsessive rivalry.

William Christie conducts the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and subtitles are in English, German, Spanish, French, Italian and Portuguese.

Tamerlano, like *Rodelinda*, was one of Handel's early successes. The main

characteristic of the two-DVD version from Germany's 2001 Halle Festival is the large number of bonuses available — interviews with director Jonathan Miller and conductor Trevor Pinnock, and historic footage from previous Halle festivals going back to 1951 (Halle was Handel's birthplace). There's also a "score-plus" function by which you can opt to see the score with a shadowy version of the stage action just visible behind it.

Halle's Goethe-theater is small, so the production can't use elaborate scenery. It compensates for this with exotic costumes to go with the 15th-century Turkish setting, even though these actually represent an 18th-century view of imperial Ottoman styles. The cast is mostly very strong. Monica Bacelli sings the title role, and counter-tenor Graham Pushee is Andranico. Subtitles are in French, English, Spanish and Chinese. Peter Sellars' 1996 staging of

Theodora is completely different. This work wasn't originally an opera at all, but an oratorio. Consequently it's static, in English, and with a Christian theme. Set in fourth-century Antioch under Roman occupation, it tells of a Christian princess, Theodora, who resists an order by the governor that everyone worship at a pagan temple. As a result she's condemned to compulsory prostitution and, when she refuses to comply, to death, along with her beloved, the Roman Didymus, a secret convert to Christianity.

Sellars sets all this in the modern US. In the opening scene, the strongest in the production, an American president, groomed by all the tricks of the advertising industry, addresses a crowd of Coca-Cola-drinking supporters, suffers some sort of cardiac crisis, and is treated on-stage by a hi-tech medical team. He then resumes his speech to the cheers of his admirers.

The long-suffering Theodora (Dawn Upshaw) and her faithful Didymus (David Daniels) are finally executed by lethal injection.

Whether the sight of deadly chemicals sliding across computer screens is an appropriate accompaniment to Handel's early 18th-century music is open to question. But at least Sellars injects drama and occasional comedy into a work that possesses little of either. At heart, however, he's trying to teach his audiences that all very powerful men are inevitably killers into the bargain. Handel may well have agreed, but he'd never have said so. Once again, it's the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in the pit. Subtitles are in English, French and German.

With their high-pitched voices for political ruffians, their compulsive allegros and languid laments, Handel's operas offer, at the very least, engrossing and unusual entertainment.