

## AROUND TOWN

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 2009

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# OPERA

## OVERDRIVE

For Chinese opera fans, the next few weeks offer a veritable feast of outstanding performances, starting tonight with the Guoguang Opera Company's (國光劇團) *Ghostly Stunts* (鬼·窟). This will be followed on Thursday with a program of *kun* opera, or *kunqu* (昆曲), from the Taiwan Kunqu Opera Theatre (台灣昆劇團), and Kenneth Pai's (白先勇) hugely anticipated "youth production" (青春版) of *The Jade Hairpin* (玉簪記), which premieres in Taiwan on May 21.

### BACK TO FUNDAMENTALS

After working with Robert Wilson on his production of *Orlando*, which featured Beijing opera diva Wei Hai-min (魏海敏), the Guoguang Opera Company returns to traditional operatic presentations with *Ghostly Stunts*. The decision to stage a series of performances that highlight the fundamentals of Beijing opera — the combination of highly tuned musical and athletic skills — was a deliberate one, said Wang An-chi (王安祈), Guoguang Opera Company's director.

"With *Orlando*, I felt a little sad at how few of Wei's operatic talents were utilized on stage," Wang said in a telephone interview with the *Taipei Times*. "Perhaps he [Wilson] didn't know enough [about the huge range of skills that a Beijing opera star is expected to possess], and so didn't make use of them. When we watched *Orlando* take shape, we couldn't understand why he directed Wei to perform in the manner of a mere actress... There seemed no reason to make use of a performer with such a deep foundation of operatic skills."

Wang said that while Guoguang had learned much from its collaboration with Wilson, he wanted to return to *principia* and show off the enormous talents of the company's performers. *Orlando* was a one-woman production starring Wei, and Wang said that *Ghostly Stunts* would be a chance for other performers from Guoguang's ranks to demonstrate their mettle.

### MECHANISMS OF MADNESS

The program for *Ghostly Stunts* includes famous opera highlights chosen for their association with the

supernatural or delusional. Vengeful ghosts and people (often women) made mad by sorrow provide ample opportunity to showcase the art form's most demanding performance skills.

In addition to oft-seen skills like the water sleeves (水袖) move and the flourishing of hair and beards, the program includes the use of stilts (鑼工, employed to imitate the effects of bound feet), a discipline that was discontinued in China in 1949 for its depiction of a degenerate feudal custom, and the spitting of fire, a highly dangerous maneuver for singers that is a specific function of supernatural characters but now rarely seen on stage. "We've even ordered extra fire extinguishers for back stage," Wang said.

While many of the pieces have been chosen for their acrobatic content, Wang emphasized that *Ghostly Stunts* was not some sort of operatic circus. "These techniques are used to express the emotions of the characters," she said. "They are an integral part of a literary presentation, and enhance what is expressed through words and music."

Beijing opera has never been shy about the delight taken in ostentation, and *Ghostly Stunts* is likely to prove to be an exposition on all that is most eye-catching. "In a full performance, there might only be a few scenes that show off these techniques," Wang said. "We have brought them together for this program."

### TRADITION AND CONTINUITY

Following on from *Ghostly Stunts* at the Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台), the Taiwan Kunqu Opera Theatre (台灣昆劇團) presents a program that mixes some old favorites with some

rarely seen pieces that have been reworked for this revival.

Hung Wei-chu (洪惟助), a professor of Chinese literature at National Central University, is the driving force behind the troupe, which provides opportunities for local *kun* performers to take the stage and work with guest artists from China.

For the 2009 *Taiwan Kun Opera Theatre All Stars* (蘭谷名華2009崑劇名家匯演), Ji Zhenhua (計鎮華), Liang Guyin (梁谷音) and Zhang Mingrong (張銘榮) from the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe (上海崑劇團) are back after their successful visit in April last year. In addition, the program includes US-based *kun* star Wen Yuhang (溫宇航), who also appears as a guest in the *Ghostly Stunts* lineup.

In an interview with the *Taipei Times*, Hung said the Taiwan Kunqu Opera Theatre emphasizes tradition and continuity, and pointed out that all the guest artists are senior students of a previous generation of *kun* masters. He said working with them was an invaluable opportunity to consolidate the genre in Taiwan.

Hung compared the company's relatively modest output with *The Jade Hairpin*, which has considerable marketing muscle behind it and the additional allure of a young cast in expensively designed costumes. "All our performers, both guests and local stars, have decades of experience," Hung said, adding that his troupe, which grew out of ongoing efforts to create a graduate school of traditional theater at National Central University, has an academic grounding that surpasses that of other *kun* groups.

### PERFORMANCE NOTES:

**WHAT:** *Ghostly Stunts*  
**WHEN:** Today and tomorrow at 7:30pm; tomorrow and Sunday at 2:30pm  
**WHERE:** Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台), 25, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市八德路三段25號)  
**ADMISSION:** NTS\$400 to NTS\$1,500, available through ERA ticketing or online at [www.ticket.com.tw](http://www.ticket.com.tw)

**WHAT:** 2009 Taiwan Kun Opera Theatre All Stars  
**WHEN:** Daily from Thursday to May 9 at 7:30pm; May 10 at 2:30pm  
**WHERE:** Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台), 25, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市八德路三段25號)  
**ADMISSION:** NTS\$400 to NTS\$1,800, available through NTCH ticketing or online at [www.artsticket.com.tw](http://www.artsticket.com.tw)

**NOTE:** For both productions, each night features a completely different program. Check ticketing sites for details



*Tradition trumps innovation in 'Ghostly Stunts' and '2009 Taiwan Kun Opera Theatre All Stars,' two shows that showcase the highly tuned musical and athletic skills of Beijing and 'kun' opera*

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
 STAFF REPORTER



Top: The Taiwan Kunqu Opera Theatre revels in the modesty of its output, as exemplified in 2009 *Taiwan Kun Opera Theater All Stars*. Right: Guoguang Opera's latest production returns to the fundamentals of Beijing opera, and alongside commonly seen skills like the water sleeves move, it includes the highly dangerous spitting of fire stunt.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAIWAN KUNQU OPERA THEATRE AND GUOGUANG OPERA COMPANY