

AROUND TOWN

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PAGE 13

Novelist and 'kun' opera impresario Kenneth Pai has resurrected 'The Jade Hairpin' in a version aimed at young people

Kenneth Pai (白先勇) made his reputation as a novelist many decades ago with seminal works of Chinese literature such as *Taipei People* (台北人), published in 1971, inspired by James Joyce's *Dubliners*. In recent years, one of his many occupations has been as a self-described "volunteer worker for *kun* opera," and he has brought his considerable creative talents to the production of two "youth edition" *kun* operas. The second of these, *The Jade Hairpin* (玉簪記), opened at Taipei's National Theater yesterday.

The Jade Hairpin follows the enormous success of Pai's highly acclaimed version of *The Peony Pavilion* (牡丹亭), which toured successfully in Asia and the US, and proved that an ancient style of Chinese opera could form the basis of an international theatrical hit. The show's triumph — far exceeding what is usual for Chinese opera — showed that Pai was onto something with his "youth editions," which sport a young cast and a youthful aesthetic. With *The Jade Hairpin*, Pai builds on this brand, and the production has generated massive interest among young people.

Pai has a broad appeal among Chinese youths as one of the most important writers to introduce Western-style literately techniques, including the use of such devices as "stream-of-consciousness," to Chinese literature. He was also a pioneer of gay literature, and his 1983 novel *The Crystal Boys* (孽子) was made into a hugely successful television miniseries of the same name by PTS (公視) in 2003.

While none of this is directly related to *kun* opera, Pai certainly has cachet as an artistic innovator, and he has brought this very much to the fore in his opera productions.

The Jade Hairpin is an undisputed classic of Chinese opera, but, in the past, this has not been enough to earn popularity among young audiences. The story, by the Ming Dynasty playwright Gao Lian (高濂), tells the story of a young woman who finds refuge in a nunnery after being separated from her parents while escaping from an invading army. At the nunnery, she meets a young scholar, who has also taken refuge there after failing the imperial examinations. They fall in love, the affair is discovered, the young scholar gets his marching orders from the abbess, and heads back to the capital for another stab at fame and

fortune. There is a tender parting. There is separation and then finally joyful reunion.

There are plenty of opportunities in this simple story for love duets and expressions of youthful joys and sorrows. The two leads, Shen Fengying (沈豐英) and Yu Jiulin (俞玖林), in costumes specially designed for this production, look extremely fetching. The youth of the performers is a crucial aspect of Pai's vision of a youthful aesthetic. While the two leads, emerging stars from the ranks of the Suzhou Kun Opera Company (蘇州崑劇院), are certainly very talented, they are a long way from establishing their reputation as major performers. While purists might regard the performances of Shen and Yu as callow and unsophisticated compared to those presented by the many operatic masters who have visited Taiwan recently, there is something intrinsically appealing in having a young heroine played by an actor in her early 20s rather than by a mature woman in her 30s.

A comparison might be drawn with Baz Luhrmann's film *Romeo + Juliet*, that saw the then 17-year-old Claire Danes perform the role of the 14-year-old Juliet, a role which in the theater is usually reserved for an actress of greater experience. What Danes may have lacked in experience, she more than made up for in simply being very young, and closer to the romantic instincts of youth.

While Pai makes use of these young actors' youth, he has also ensured that they have taken instruction from some of the world's top *kun* performers. Shen and Yu starred in Pai's *The Peony Pavilion*, and bringing this experience to *The Jade Hairpin* is likely to produce, according to Pai, more nuanced and sophisticated performances.

In addition to the young cast, Pai has gone out of his way to enrich the production with his own sense of the beauty of Chinese culture. One of the most obvious aspects of the

new production is the beauty of the costumes and sets, which were designed by the husband and wife team of Wang Tung (王童) and Chen Yung-ni (曾詠霓). Wang is a celebrated film director, whose movies such as *Strawman* (1987, 稻草人), *Hill of No Return* (1992, 無言的山丘) and *Red Persimmon* (1996, 紅柿子) were part of a high point in Taiwan cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Wang said that his aim was to strip away the heavy and ornate designs of traditional opera costumes. "Simplification is actually very difficult," he said. "As in Chinese calligraphy, it is the really simple characters that are the hardest to perfect." The costumes are still linked with tradition, but generally are lighter, allowing smaller movements to show through and for a higher level of naturalism.

Pai has also drawn on his contacts within the Chinese artistic community to introduce other appealing elements into this production. Calligraphic designs used on the backdrop have been produced by the reclusive female calligrapher Tung Yang-tze (董陽孜) and the orchestra will include an ancient *guzheng* from the Tang dynasty. According to Li Xiangting (李祥霆), who is the only person currently permitted to handle the instrument, which is now over 1,200 years old, it is one of only 20 examples surviving from this period and has a unique timbre.

Whether it is the elegant costumes, the unique sets, the interest generated by the presence of a rarely heard instrument, or the accomplishments of the young and talented cast, Pai has ensured that there is plenty to appeal to a broad range of

tastes. In addition, he is once again working with the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation (何鴻毅家族基金) to subsidize an unprecedented number of student tickets for the Taipei premiere, and also to fund numerous campus productions around the country.

At the press conference held to announce the production, Pai emphasized the importance of bringing high quality opera productions into the universities. Not only were seats for the Taipei run of the *The Jade Hairpin* sold out over a month ago, other productions by the Suzhou Kun Opera Company through to the end of this month have proved enormously popular. According to Pai, the nearly 3,000 free tickets for three productions at the National Cheng Kung University (國立成功大學) in Tainan were all taken within half an hour of being made available. Information about the campus productions, some of which are open to the public, can be found at www.trend.org/fd/tabid/127/Default.aspx.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Kenneth Pai's New Edition of The Jade Hairpin

WHEN: Today and tomorrow at 7:30pm; Sunday at 2:30pm (Taipei); Tuesday at 7:30pm (Hsinchu)

WHERE: National Theater, Taipei City and Performance Hall of Bureau of Cultural Affairs Hsinchu City (新竹市文化局演藝廳), 17, Dongda Rd Sec 2, Hsinchu City (新竹市東大路二段17號)

TICKETS: Taipei performances are sold out; some tickets remain for the Hsinchu performance priced at NT\$100 to NT\$500, available through NTCH ticketing

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NTCH

Young at heart

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