

FEATURES

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A scene from the upcoming 90-minute production of *The Palace of Eternal Youth*.
PHOTO COURTESY OF NPM

National Palace Museum enters stage right

With the opening of the Chinese opera classic *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (長生殿) at the National Palace Museum (國立故宮博物院文會堂) on Wednesday, the institution's director, Chou Kung-shin (周功鑫), brings to fruition her vision of expanding the museum's cultural relevance and broadening its appeal.

The production takes to the stage every Wednesday for the next 12 weeks and will have English-language side-titles, which widens its accessibility.

In late 2007, the museum's Vienna Art Festival (維也納藝術季), which featured a series of concerts related to its Splendor of the Baroque and Beyond: Great Hapsburg Collectors exhibition, was well received.

The current project, titled New Melody From the National Palace Museum (故宮新韻), is a longer term undertaking that features Chinese operatic productions tailored to complement the museum's exhibits.

What makes the New Melody project particularly exciting is the very high caliber of the two groups that have so far agreed to take part.

The Palace of Eternal Youth is a 90-minute production specially created by the Lanting Kun Opera Company (蘭庭崑劇團) starring Wen Yuhang (溫宇航).

After *The Palace's* run, Beijing opera star Li Baochun (李寶春) will take the stage with his highly-acclaimed interpretation of *The Monkey*

King Makes Havoc in Heaven (孫悟空大鬧天宮).

When planning to introduce performance art to the museum, Chou said there was a strong consensus on the need for a connection between the artistic productions and the museum's exhibitions.

In the case of *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, part of the opera's story is presented in the Tang Dynasty painting *Emperor Ming-huang's Flight to Szechwan* (明皇幸蜀圖), one of the institution's great treasures.

"Visual arts express a single moment. In a good work, this moment can hint at the past, express the present, and suggest the future. Performance art is extended through time and can tell a story from beginning to end. By putting these two things together, we are using an artifact to enrich our production, while the performance can enrich [our understanding] of the artifact," said Wang Chih-ping (王志萍), Lanting Kun Opera Company's director.

Lanting won acclaim for combining the rigorous discipline of traditional opera with contemporary presentation styles. In condensing a 50-act opera that could take anything up to two days to perform into a 90-minute production required ingenuity, but Wang believes that despite the short stage time, both a narrative structure and the original's highlights have been preserved.

The Palace of Eternal Youth tells the story of the Tang Dynasty emperor Ming-huang (唐明皇) and his infatuation with the Lady Yang

The museum's cultural metamorphosis continues with operatic works that complement its exhibitions of ancient Chinese art

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

(楊貴妃), which nearly brought his rule to an inglorious end.

The painting that is paired with the opera portrays the emperor fleeing before rebel armies. Ultimately he saves himself and his dynasty by sacrificing the object of his love to the blood lust of his enemies.

The production of *The Palace* focuses on what Wang believes is the most moving section of the opera, which starts with the emperor pledging his exclusive affection to Lady Yang, and ends with his flight and the latter's death.

Wang, an art historian by training, said that she chose *Emperor Ming-huang's Flight to Szechwan* as her point of departure because of its value as an historical artifact, its acknowledged artistic merit, and its close association with one of the best-known romances in Chinese literature.

Other images, such as designs taken from Tang Dynasty bronze mirrors, of which the museum has a huge collection, have also

been incorporated into the production's stage design. Lanting created new costumes for the production, which Wang said reference Tang Dynasty-style garments, but do not transgress the limits imposed by operatic convention.

In recent years, many Chinese opera companies have worked to create their own productions of the generally long and discursive classic operas of yore, with a preference for a running time of around three hours.

Wang said the company settled on a 90-minute format out of consideration for the type of audience that the New Melody series would likely attract.

"Our audience this time is different from your regular theater-goer. They are museum-goers. They will probably be taking in the show as part of a museum visit," she said. Wang added that event organizers in Hong Kong had expressed interest in Lanting's condensed version.

Wang's production will be the first time that the museum's auditorium has been used for a full operatic production. This has been made possible by the donation of high-definition screens and projection equipment from Delta Electronics (台達電子), which allow the use of multimedia effects to highlight portions of *Emperor Ming-huang's Flight to Szechwan* at different points in the performance, and the inclusion of easy-to-read side titles in both English and Chinese.

Wang said that staging the production in a facility that had primarily been designed as a

lecture hall posed considerable problems, but the small size of the venue (around 200 seats) should allow a more intimate appreciation of the performers than is possible in all but the very best seats of a venue such as the National Theater.

The museum will hold a series of lectures on Tang Dynasty painting and *kun* opera ranging from a discussion of the portrayal of Tang Dynasty serving women in art by National Palace Museum researcher Tsai Hsiao-fen (蔡淑芬, July 17) to a talk on the different types of male roles in *kun* opera given by Wen (July 24), who plays the emperor in the opera.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (長生殿) by Lanting Kun Opera Company (蘭庭崑劇團)

WHEN: Every Wednesday (2:30pm to 4pm) from July 8 to Sept. 23

WHERE: National Palace Museum's auditorium (國立故宮博物院文會堂), 221 Zhishan Rd Sec 2, Shihlin Dist, Taipei City (台北市士林區至善路二段221號)

ADMISSION: Free. Booking for performances and lectures can be made through the NPM online booking site at tech2.npm.gov.tw/signup/frontend/index.asp. Tickets will also be available at the door. Further information in English about the production is available at www.npm.gov.tw/en/new_02.htm?docno=572&fp=true.

PLANET POP



Hundreds of millions of fans across the world will bid a final farewell to Michael Jackson tomorrow in a lavish memorial to the tragic "King of Pop" that is expected to bring America to a standstill.

An exclusive guest list of family and VIPs will be joined by around 11,000 fans crowded into the Staples Center in Los Angeles for the send-off, which Jackson once said he hoped would be "the greatest show on earth."

Precise details of the service have been kept under wraps, but some of the biggest names in show business are reportedly to perform in an event intended as a celebration of the tortured pop icon's

Vanesa Jackson holds a toy of her idol, the late pop star Michael Jackson, in Mexico City, on Saturday. The "King of Pop" will be honored tomorrow in a memorial event in Los Angeles.

PHOTO: REUTERS

life and times.

Jackson's mysterious death from an apparent cardiac arrest at the age of 50 on June 25 sent shock waves rippling around the world, triggering an avalanche of tributes from Beverly Hills to Beijing.

Thousands of fans continue to flock to Jackson's star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame in Los Angeles while a makeshift shrine of flowers, cards and toys has steadily grown outside the gates of the singer's Neverland Ranch.

Jackson sold more than 750 million albums during a glittering four-decade long career that was ultimately overshadowed by repeated allegations of child abuse, his startling physical transformation, financial troubles and eccentric behavior.

Jackson's final resting place has not been revealed.

The Jackson musical clan earlier quashed the idea of a poignant ceremony at Neverland Ranch, which posed logistical headaches due to its remote location in ritzy Santa Barbara wine country.

However, Michael's elder brother Jermaine said he would still like the pop legend to be buried at the estate, a tribute to Michael's fascination with childhood that in its heyday boasted giraffes, tigers and a private amusement park.

"I feel his presence because this is his creation," Jermaine said on Thursday. "This is where he should be rested because it's him."

Organizers of tomorrow's memorial, which gets underway at 10am, have appealed to ticketless fans to watch the event on television, fearing chaos if hundreds of thousands take to the streets to mourn.

Some 1.6 million online applications vied for only 11,000 tickets to attend the tribute at the Staples Center and another 6,500 for seats at a neighboring venue where giant screens will show the event live.

A Web site set up to manage an online lottery of the tickets received more than half a billion hits within two hours on Friday. "Potentially, this could be

enormous," said Robert Thompson, an expert in pop culture at Syracuse University in New York. "Everything that has to do with Michael Jackson was done huge, super-sized."

An autopsy on Jackson's body was carried out on June 26 but the Los Angeles County Coroner's office has said it will not issue a final cause of death until the results of exhaustive toxicology tests are known in "several weeks."

Police investigators have meanwhile zeroed in on the possible role of drugs in Michael's death.

Close friends and associates of the star have angrily alleged that Michael was surrounded by a coterie of medical professionals willing to provide him with potent prescription medication.

US media reports citing unidentified law enforcement sources say investigators found the powerful sedative Propofol, also known as Diprivan, amongst a variety of prescription medications at Jackson's home. The discovery has raised

the stakes in the probe, which widened last week as the Los Angeles Police Department enlisted the support of the federal Drug Enforcement Administration.

Police have questioned Michael's personal physician Conrad Murray but have stressed he is not suspected of criminal wrongdoing.

As the investigation into Michael's death deepens, lawyers are preparing to head to court next week to tussle over his legacy.

Jackson's 79-year-old mother Katherine was placed in temporary control of her son's assets last week and appointed guardian of the singer's three children, Prince Michael, 12, Paris, 11 and Prince Michael II, 7.

A 2002 will filed in Los Angeles Superior Court last week named Katherine Jackson as guardian, but the singer's ex-wife Debbie Rowe indicated she planned to seek custody of the children. A custody hearing originally scheduled for today has now been moved to July 13.

— AFP