

FEATURES

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Iraqi 'rap royalty' takes to the Baghdad stage

The introduction of Western music videos beamed directly into Iraqi homes has spawned a genre that rejects the patriotism of traditional Arab songs

BY MEHDI LEBOUACHERA
AFP, BAGHDAD

Top: Iraqi rap group DKZ (Danger Killer Zone) performs at the National Theater in central Baghdad on July 10.
Below: Around 150 fans attended the first major concert for the popular group DKZ, composed of rappers Mr Passion, J-Fire and Nine-Z, who rap in both Arabic and English.

A young rapper wearing a baseball cap and a large chain around his neck shouts "Raise your hands in the air! Make some noise for Mr Passion!" in a scene that could easily have been in New York. But in fact this was Baghdad, and one of Iraq's first rap concerts featuring his fellow lyricists J-Fire and Nine-Z. Together the three of them make up DKZ, or Danger Zone Killer, and they are self-labeled "Iraqi

rap royalty." Performing in the Iraqi capital's National Theater, the trio did all they could to mimic their American "gangsta" counterparts, clad in baggy jeans, bandanas and T-shirts emblazoned with the likeness of rap icon Tupac Shakur. The group, which was brought together by Mr Passion — real name Hisham Sabbah — performed for its audience in the city's central shopping district of Karrada, a frequent target of attacks and bombings by insurgents.

The 22-year-old first began rapping in 2004, a year after a coalition force dominated by the US invaded Iraq to oust former dictator Saddam Hussein. In the five years since, many Iraqi buildings have sprouted satellite dishes that were banned by the now-executed dictator, beaming the latest songs and Western music videos direct into Iraqi homes.

"We were among the first to begin rapping in Iraq," Mr Passion declared, wearing a flak jacket, a large "NY" (New York) necklace and a T-shirt bearing his stage name. "We are the real rappers of Baghdad." He added that he does not

wear the flak jacket because he fears for his personal safety or because of threats from religious extremists opposed to his music.

It has more to do with the reasoning behind the group's name: "It's because young Iraqis like violence," he said. "They love rap because it's their kind of music."

Much like their counterparts in the US or in the Parisian suburbs in the 1980s, the group's members turned to rap because they found it helped them to put across their anger, their fears and their hopes. "We want to discover a new art — the routine of other forms of music is over," said J-Fire, whose real name is Ahmed Farouq and who returned to Iraq around six months ago after living in Egypt.

"Traditional Arab music only talks about love or patriotism," the 23-year-old added. "But with rap you can talk about everything — politics, youths being kidnapped, everything."

Mr Passion's favorite song, which he wrote only recently, is called *Iraq Is the Flag*. "It talks about kidnappings, about young people being killed, about those who had to flee the country, about the sectarian violence between Iraqis," he said.

In another song, called *Take Off Your Headphones*, the trio angrily shouted: "We are the rappers of Bilad al-Rafidain!" referring to Iraq by another name in Arabic that is often used by al-Qaeda.

The lyrics then declare "*Al-takfir huwa al-khatir*," which means that to declare someone an infidel is the real danger.

In the concert hall, some 150 fans sang along to DKZ's lyrics, danced and shouted in English, "Yo, that's it, bro!" "It's great to attend a rap concert in Baghdad," said 21-year-old Mahmoud Riyadh. "The world must understand that we're no different to anyone else."

To the information technology student, rap is a "positive aspect" of the US invasion.

"It's true that the occupation has a dark side — it has destroyed a great deal. But now we have freedom, and also this art form," Riyadh said.

Asked whether he feared such concerts could become a target for Islamist extremists, he replied: "Of course, they are against this 100 percent. They say that this is something that is banned by religion."

"But I do what I want to do — nobody can tell me what to do."



[THE WEEKENDER]

Based on a true story

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

The 12-week run of the *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (長生殿), part of the National Palace Museum's New Melody (故宮新韻) program, took to the stage for the second time on Wednesday and proved that the Lanting Kun Opera Company (蘭庭崑劇團) has pulled off the difficult task of mixing and matching artwork held by the museum and the living cultural heritage of *kun* opera (崑曲).

Despite its short performance time, just over 90 minutes, Lanting's production achieved the epic quality that is essential to the grandeur of *The Palace's* theme. This was a fully realized staging, albeit on a miniature scale, and at no point did it feel like a hurried retelling of a well-known story.

The original opera, which in its full version has 50 acts, was massively reconfigured. Now narrated by the court musician Li Gui-nian (李龜年), a relatively minor character in the original, he introduces the story and its relationship to *Emperor Ming-huang's Flight to Szechwan* (明皇幸蜀圖), a painting which dates from the latter part of the Tang Dynasty that details one of the events depicted in the opera and is on display at the museum.

The connection between the story and a physical object so closely associated with the occurrences the opera describes emphasizes the historical resonance of the people involved in *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, one of Chinese opera's great tragic romances. The effect was thrilling, rather like the words "based on a true story" at the beginning of a movie. It is all too easy to forget that the tragic events of *The Palace of Eternal Youth* actually happened, and marked an important watershed in the history of the Tang Dynasty.

Playing art and history, drama and painting, off against each other to achieve a richer experience was the stated aim of the producers and this has undoubtedly been successfully achieved.

Li the musician introduces audience members to the action, talking them through the ancient painting that is projected onto the backdrop. He then turns the stage over to the performers, who recount the tale. It is not an easy transition to make, but Lanting pulls off this dramatic legerdemain with exemplary unobtrusiveness.

This production has been boiled down to the story's absolute essentials, making use, in addition to the narrator, of the eunuch Kao Li-shi's (高力士) "clown" role and two lady's maids, to fill in background and engage in some light comedy that balances the high romance that takes place in the foreground.

In the relatively small space of the National Palace Museum's auditorium (國立故宮博物院文會堂), which seats 250, nearly every audience member is able to watch the cast close up. As the production features notable performers drawn from Lanting and the Guoguang Opera Company (國光劇團), this is a rare opportunity to enjoy such top performers in intimate surroundings.

The costumes, which were specially designed for this production, managed to be ornate yet without the architectural qualities normally associated with opera outfits. This helps the performers impart the highly stylized movements and expressions of *kun* opera with a degree of naturalism that makes the romance more sensual. The sound reproduction quality was surprisingly good.

This was certainly no sideshow to an exhibition, but a bold departure for traditional theater. The 90-minute format is something that other troupes might well emulate to appeal to contemporary audiences. It also warrants a visit to the museum for people interested in an excellent introduction to *kun* opera. Admission is free and there are high-quality English side-titles.

The Palace of Eternal Youth (長生殿) will be performed from 2:30pm to 4pm every Wednesday until Sept. 23 at the National Palace Museum's auditorium (國立故宮博物院文會堂), 221, Zhishan Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市至善路二段221號). Advanced booking for performances can be made online at tech2.npm.gov.tw/signup/frontend/index.asp. Tickets are also available at the door.



In a scene from *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, the emperor, second from left, and his concubine, far left, hear that their world has been turned upside down, with tragic consequences for both.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LANTING KUN OPERA COMPANY

PLANETPOP

Hong Kong comedian **Stephen Chow** (周星馳) has salvaged a US\$1.5 million romance that was to feature **Edison Chen** (陳冠希), the Chinese-Canadian actor-singer whose career was sidelined by a sex scandal last year.

Chow's production company Star Overseas partnered with Columbia Pictures' Asia division and China's J.A. Media to make *Jump*, the story of a village girl who dreams of becoming a dancer, with



Chen in a leading role as the girl's romantic interest.

But when photos of Chen having sex with several Hong Kong female stars surfaced on the Internet last year, the production company decided to reshoot the scenes involving Chen with another actor, fearing the scandal would prompt Chinese censors to block the film.

The new version of the movie, with Chinese actor **Leon Jay Williams** (立威廉) replacing Chen, has cleared censors, according to a notice posted on the Web site of the state-run distributor China Film Group. The romance — written by Chow and directed by Hong Kong's **Stephen Fung** (馮德倫) — is tentatively scheduled for release in China and Hong Kong in early November.

In a separate sex scandal, three men have been arrested on suspicion of trying

to blackmail Germany's richest woman with footage of her steamy encounters with a con man known as the Swiss Gigolo, prosecutors said on Friday.

BMW heiress **Susanne Klatten** "received a letter in mid-June demanding US\$1.1 million and a BMW vehicle, and threatening to sell an intimate video of her encounter with Swiss Gigolo Helg Sgarbi to the Italian press if she refused to pay," spokesman Thomas Steinkraus-Koch said.

Upon receiving the letter, Klatten placed an advertisement in a local newspaper saying she was prepared to pay up and giving a contact number.

"They contacted her by phone and we could then identify them... They were arrested at the 'cash handover,'" Steinkraus-Koch said.

The new blackmail attempt comes just months after Sgarbi secretly filmed compromising footage of his affair with Klatten and tried to hoodwink the married mother-of-three out of more than US\$479 million.

According to *Forbes* magazine's latest list of billionaires, she is the world's 35th richest person, with a net worth of around US\$10 billion.

British singer **Amy Winehouse** was divorced from her estranged husband, **Blake Fielder-Civil**, in London on Thursday after two years of marriage, her spokesman said.

The 25-year-old won five Grammy awards off the back of her debut album *Back to Black* and the hit single *Rehab*, but has since been engaged in a well-documented struggle with drugs.

Fielder-Civil's spokesman said in January that the 27-year-old had begun divorce proceedings against Winehouse "on the grounds of Amy's adultery."

The pair were granted a divorce at a brief hearing at the High Court in London, which neither party attended.

The couple married in Miami in May 2007 but have had a tempestuous relationship, while Fielder-Civil spent much of last year behind bars for a vicious

attack on a pub landlord and a subsequent attempt to cover it up.

Her parents said in a television interview last month that their daughter was "in denial" about her addiction but had been recovering over the past few months while on the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia.

"For the last six months there's been a remarkable recovery," said her father, **Mitch Winehouse**, saying she was on a drug replacement program although still drinking heavily.

"A gradual recovery, which is good. With slight backward steps — not drug backward steps, more drink backward steps if you follow my drift. I think that will be the pattern of recovery."

No stranger to the demon drink, actress **Mischa Barton**, best known for her role in the hit teen television series *The OC*, has been hospitalized after being taken from her home by police, according to US media.

Police officers were first called to Barton's home on Wednesday

"for a medical issue," said Los Angeles Police Department spokesman Richard French.

"No arrests were made and no one else was involved," he said.

French declined to confirm that the 23-year-old actress was taken to the city's Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and placed in a psychiatric unit, as reported by *People* magazine.

Barton's publicist, Craig Schneider, confirmed in a statement relayed by US media that the actress "was safely transferred to medical treatment for which she remains hospitalized, as per the recommendation of her doctor."

London-born Barton was scheduled to attend the New York premiere of her film *Homecoming*, which opened in theaters on Friday. The actress, who was sentenced last year to three years of probation for drunken driving, began her film career playing a girl's ghost in *M. Night Shyamalan's The Sixth Sense* (1999).

—AGENCIES

Edison Chen's loss is Leon Jay Williams' gain. PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES