

AROUND TOWN

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Neckties & High-heeled Shoes stars impresario Luo Bei-an, right, arguably the father of the Taiwanese musical. PHOTOS: EPA AND COURTESY OF GREENRAY

Luo Bei-an's musical 'Neckties & High-heeled Shoes' popularized the genre in Taiwan. Fifteen years later, its lampooning of office culture still touches a nerve

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Take this job and

...sing!

Neckties & High-heeled Shoes — A Musical (領帶與高跟鞋), which premiered in 1994, is widely acknowledged as Taiwan's first original musical. It is making a return this week as part of the 11th Taipei Arts Festival (第十一屆台北藝術節) as a reminder, according to festival director Victoria Wang (王文儀), of the roots of what has become a major genre in Taiwan's performance arts scene.

As Luo Bei-an (羅北安), the director of Neckties and therefore arguably the father of the Taiwanese musical,

tells it, the Taiwanese musical came about as much by accident as design, the result of his own interests and an irrepressible physical energy.

"Although I've never had any proper musical training, I've always loved music, and I really enjoy using music, especially rhythm, as a way of enhancing expression," Luo said. "Music can take a story places that words can't always do."

While studying drama in New York, Luo discovered the Broadway musical, of which he is still an ardent fan. "I was delighted to discover a form that allowed me to combine drama with music and dance," Luo said. These days, he is well known for his generous proportions, but remains very light on his feet.

Deciding to create his own musical, Luo found inspiration in the world of the small office, a milieu familiar to many of his audiences. It certainly touched a nerve when first released, becoming a major commercial success, and even toured Beijing in 1996 and New York in 2001.

Neckties tells the story of the maneuverings of office staffers after the announcement that one of their senior colleagues will be retiring. This is complicated by various romantic feelings and personal rivalries, as well as by Jerry, played by Luo, the cynical time-server who cannot resist stirring things up for his own advantage.

"There are plenty of men and women working in offices [in Taiwan], the neckties and high heels of the title, and this show captures

some aspect of that office worker culture ... especially the aspect that can be best described as 'lots of monks, not much gruel' (僧多粥少). In other words, good positions are few, and everyone is fighting for the good job," Luo said.

"I took this as my theme because I wanted to explore the world of the nine-to-five office worker," Luo said. "It is a world I couldn't live in," he added, pointing to his own preferred garb of T-shirt, shorts and rubber flip-flops, "but for plenty of people in Taiwan, it is their whole existence."

So while the characters that populate Neckties are not very deeply drawn, all are easily recognizable types, and Luo believes that it is the thrill of audience members seeing themselves and their colleagues in the exaggerated world of the musical, with its catchy songs and joyful dance numbers, that is the key to its appeal.

Since making Neckties, Luo has gone on to produce numerous highly successful musicals, all drawn from Taiwanese social life. The office life of Neckties was followed by *A Dizzy Woman, I Do, I Do!* (結婚? 結婚! 一辦!), a musical about marriage, and *What's a Life!?* (黑道害我真命苦), which took criminal gangs as its inspiration. These are topics that the majority of Taiwanese are familiar with, and the combination of music, words and dance "provides a richer and more accessible theater experience," according to Luo.

"If I can use music effectively, combining music with words, this is the most powerful tool in the world ... That's why I have made so many musicals over the years," Luo said.

This current revival, the sixth for Neckties, seems particularly well timed, reflecting the anxiety of

people eager to hold onto their jobs in these economic hard times, Luo said. "I don't know if it is because of the financial crisis, but it meets the needs of today's audiences with its mixture of lighthearted entertainment and slight melancholy at the human condition." Although it was created over a decade ago, Luo has seen no need to adapt Neckties to the superficial changes that have taken place in the office environment over this time. "The externals may have changed, but the fundamental human interaction has not changed at all."

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Greenray Theater's Neckties & High-heeled Shoes

WHEN: Today and tomorrow at 8pm and Sunday at 2:30pm

WHERE: Zhongshan Hall (台北市中山堂), 98 Yanping S Rd, Taipei City (台北市延平南路98號)

ADMISSION: NT\$500 to NT\$2,000, available through NTCH ticketing or online at www.artsticket.com.tw



IFILM I

Brave new cinematic worlds

Spot — Taipei Film House's POP Cinema returns with retrospectives on Jacques Tati and Peter Brook

BY HO YI AND MARTIN WILLIAMS
STAFF REPORTERS

In its latest POP Cinema program, Spot — Taipei Film House (光點—台北之家) is offering retrospectives on British theater and film director Peter Brook and French comedic filmmaker Jacques Tati in one festival entitled Body & Space.

Brook's latest theatrical work, *Warum Warum*, will be staged at the Taipei National University of the Arts from Aug. 28 to Aug. 30, but before then the POP Cinema program features an essential list of the 84-year-old artist's films and TV productions.

Brook's lineup includes

Moderato Cantabile (1960), based on Marguerite Duras' novel of the same title and starring Jeanne Moreau and Jean-Paul Belmondo; a condensed version of the landmark TV production *The Mahabharata* (1989), which was adapted from the Indian epic of the same name; his excellent 1963 adaptation of *Lord of the Flies*; and the groundbreaking *Marat/Sade* (1967).

The Tati program includes his best-known films, *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (1953), *Mon Oncle* (1958) and *Playtime* (1967), all of

which star a timeless character, Hulot, whose clumsy and quixotic struggle with modern-day life is a hilarious commentary on the obsession with modernity and consumerism that prevailed in post-World War II France. Also included in the program are rarely screened Tati shorts dating back to the 1930s.

Monsieur Hulot's Holiday introduces Hulot, a gauche, raincoat-wearing pipe-smoker who in *Mon Oncle* has a hard time adapting when he moves from rural France to his sister's

ultramodern house in the city. In *Playtime*, the most expensive of Tati's movies (it was the biggest-budget film in French history when it was made and it nearly bankrupted its director), Hulot wanders through a cold, futuristic glass-and-steel Paris.

The festival will screen seven works from Tati's oeuvre, three shorts and six feature films. All the copies are newly restored.

"There exist two worlds in each of his films: a world of the past and the arrival of a new one. The inability to fit in with

the modern space is comically expressed through Tati's bodily clumsiness," curator Wang Pai-chang (王派彰) said.

Body & Space runs through Sept. 4 at Spot, from Sept. 8 to Sept. 13 at Taichung Wonderful Cinema (台中萬代福影城) and from Sept. 1 to Sept. 13 at Kaohsiung Municipal Film Archive (高雄市電影圖書館).

Tickets cost NT\$170 for Spot members and NT\$200 for non-members. Screenings in Taichung and Kaohsiung are free. On the Net: www.spot.org.tw.



Monsieur Hulot's Holiday, directed by Jacques Tati.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SPOT