

[ THE WEEKENDER ]

# Shakespearean silence is golden

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER

Two very different shows opened the 11th Taipei Arts Festival (第十一屆台北藝術節). Greenray Theater's *Neckties and High-Heeled Shoes* — *A Musical* (領帶與高跟鞋) played to an enthusiastic crowd at the Zhongshan Hall (台北市中山堂) on Friday, and despite the relative simplicity of its setting — musical accompaniment was provided by a single piano — the show took off with great energy and an easy confidence.

In the first third of *Neckties*, this 15-year-old production about office politics and romantic rivalry, which compares well with many of the technically more sophisticated musicals that have followed in its footsteps, seemed to have aged gracefully.

Performances by Luo Bei-an (羅北安), the show's creator and director, and Lee Ming-ze (李明澤), as a cynical time-serving office worker and the office janitor, respectively, had comic verve, even if the jokes were well-worn.

Many of the office types are still easily recognizable, which is a rather melancholy reflection on Taiwan's office culture — though much has changed, much remains the same.

There might have been sufficient life in this musical to carry it beyond its two-hour performance time if Luo had not directly explicated the musical's serious themes: the destructiveness of the rat race and the pressures that women face in Taiwanese society.

Hackneyed philosophizing took over from the more than adequate light comedy of the opening sequences, and ended with an interminable dream sequence about daring to dream your dreams, which is different from actually getting out there and chasing your dream. The section expressed a degree of fatalism that emerged as a remarkable contrast to the more assertive emotions of Western musicals.

As a return to the roots from which the glittering spectacle of the Taiwanese musical emerged, *Neckties* was undoubtedly interesting, but it fails to find a transcendent musical expression of its serious themes — one thinks of *Climb Every Mountain*, which keeps even a musical as kitschy as *The Sound of Music* alive and kicking.

In an interview with the *Taipei Times* during rehearsals for *Neckties*, Luo had lamented the lack of mainstream stage performances that also carry a serious message. Many shows are either comic froth, or inaccessible experimental theater. As an effort to fill this gap *Neckties* was commendable, but it remains very much a product of its time and place.

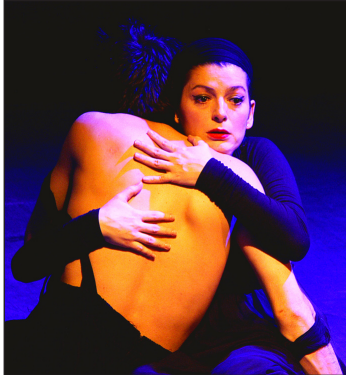
On Saturday at the Metropolitan Hall, *K. Lear*, an interesting interpretation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* by Marie Montegani, saw silence speak louder than words in a production that made extensive use of sign language. *King Lear* is a play that has much to say about the difficulties of getting across what one means and being misunderstood.

The hearing impairment of two of the main cast members drove home the themes that this production explores. Sign language contributes to the production actively, rather than being merely an aid to the hard of hearing, making the point, loud and clear, that disability, and our efforts to overcome it, can open new worlds to our understanding.

It was nevertheless unusual to have some of the most powerful of Shakespeare's passages acted in silence. Lear's "Howl, howl, ..." speech over the body of Cordelia was signed, with no other sound, to devastating effect, imparting new power to the familiar words.

Unfortunately, the silence also highlighted the audience's restlessness, especially toward the end of the 135-minute performance. The lack of an intermission proved a strain for some, but gave the play, which also dispensed with the usual divisions between scenes and acts, an attractive fluidity.

With actors communicating in French and sign language, prodigious strain was put on audience members who understood neither as they tried to keep up with the rush of subtitles on either side of the stage, while watching the complex action.



K. Lear speaks volumes through the power of sign language.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TAIPEI CULTURE FOUNDATION



## More gumption, less bling

Author Sarah Strohmeyer picks flowers at her home in Middlesex, Vermont.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

### Chick lit, which once abounded with images of luxury, has absorbed the recession

BY RUTH LA FERLA  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The triple venti lattes, Bulgari shades and Yeoward crystal — signifiers of privilege that pepper chick lit's brand-strewn landscape — could fill a tome of their own. Those totems of excess survive in the current crop of beach reads, if only to point up all that the characters stand to lose as lean times close in.

"The things that were once within reach — the private jet, the home in Aspen or even five-tiered Sylvia Weinstock cakes" are suddenly not, Tatiana Boncompagni writes in her new book, *Hedge Fund Wives*, whose beleaguered heroine must cope with the fallout from her divorce and shrinking finances.

In *Social Lives* by Wendy Walker, to be published in the fall by St Martin's Press, an affluent Connecticut matron contemplates her dwindling resources. "There was little equity in the house after the loan for the new wing they'd put on last year, and the severe drop in the housing market," she frets. "Nothing remained in the checking account beyond what was needed to pay the bills."

Bummer. But misfortune can be a fine muse, as attested by the latest wave of chick lit and its older sister, "hen lit," intended for the over-40 set. Once unabashedly focused on the perks of wealth and fame, this spate of new fiction is tackling the recession and its attendant woes.

Contrition is the new black in these dark comedies of divorce, scandal and fortunes in free fall. As marital troubles and a faltering economy Hoover their bank accounts and wreck their self-esteem, these heroines — fictional sisters in sorrow — pare down, reorder their priorities and struggle to wring some form of redemption out of straightened circumstances.

In *The Penny Pinchers Club*, a farce by Sarah Strohmeyer, published last month by Dutton, an aspiring decorator,

suspecting that her husband of 20 years is about to leave her, curbs her spendthrift ways — to the point of pumping gasoline at dawn (when it is said to be thicker) and repurposing the food she retrieves from the supermarket trash bin.

*But Not for Long*, by Michelle Wildgen, out in October from St Martin's, follows the members of a co-op residence in a Midwestern university town as they confront gasoline shortages and abandoned shops. *The Summer Kitchen*, by Karen Weinreb (St Martin's), chronicles the trials of a well-heeled heroine who is forced to open a bakery after her husband is arrested for a white-collar crime.

Such plotlines seem counterintuitive, given chick lit's first imperative: to titillate, entertain and, in the tradition of bubbly predecessors like *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Bergdorf Blondes* or *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, cater to a fascination with the bad behavior of the rich.

And yet, even the most lurid accounts of conspicuous consumption have never been entirely escapist, said Mallory Young, the editor, with Suzanne Ferriss, of *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (Routledge, 2005). "Chick lit usually responds through comedy to real situations confronting real women," Young maintains. Unlike romance novels, chick lit "recognizes and responds to the world outside," she said.

In fact, these new narratives seem steeped in an aura of inevitability. They reflect "the biggest story of the last two years," said Jonathan Segura, a deputy

editor at *Publishers Weekly*. "It would be impossible to write contemporary glitzy women's fiction without taking the recession into account."

Publishers have yet to explore fully the consequences of a hobbled economy, but Segura spies a trend in the making. "By next spring, publishing will have fully caught up," he predicted. "And by summer, you're going to see a flood of new fiction dealing specifically with the big meltdown."

Many months ago, when Jill Kargman conceived *The Ex-Mrs Hedgefund* (Dutton), the recession had yet to take its ruinous toll. Published in the spring, the book is set against a backdrop described by its heroine as "a bacchanal of the rich and obnoxious, a Falstaffian brew of hedonism and material excess." Kargman's characters, the wives of New York's hedge-fund elite, are indeed perched on the edge of a volcano, prancing oblivious, on their Vivier heels.

Kargman herself is a stranger to high finance, but it didn't take a Wharton degree to alert her that disaster loomed. Her tale was inspired by a birthday party for the child of an acquaintance. "They had sherpas carry in the child in a Cleopatra tent," she recalled. "It was so over the top."

She told her husband: "This is crazy. Something's got to give."

Her narrative follows the arc of denial, anger, bargaining and depression that has come to characterize the new recession lit. Holly Talbott, her morally ambivalent heroine, more a J. Crew than a J. Mendel

sort, feels a gnawing disenchantment with her pampered milieu, which turns to shock and rue when her ex-husband, about to remarry, cuts off her credit at Clyde's, the upscale Madison Avenue chemist. With "the spigot turned off," she learns to fend for herself, picking up the threads of a career built on her first love, rock 'n' roll.

"One of the big motifs in these books is a sort of empowerment," Segura said. "Swathed in Gucci, Prada and what not, their protagonists realign their priorities and realize, 'Oh, I don't need that Givenchy gown. I can look great in Eileen Fisher, too.'"

They can also do without that banker in the Brioni suit. Directly or obliquely, most of these books take a feminist stance. "The woman doesn't always end up with the guy at the end, but she ends up with a better sense of self," said Liate Stehlik, the senior vice president and publisher at Avon, which released *Hedge Fund Wives*. Recovering from divorce, its heroine pulls up her socks and embarks on an indie career in the world of private banking.

Framed as cautionary tales, these books introduce female characters compelled to "face facts, raise funds and watch out for themselves," said Elizabeth Beier, who edited *The Summer Kitchen*. "They're not just vicariously experiencing other women's getting and spending," she said. "They are taking charge of their own identities; they are actually doing something, and that always makes more involving fiction."

Readers appear to be responding. Based on letters and comments on author Web sites, many identify with the novel's cosseted heroine, Nora, who learns with a jolt, Beier said, that "she actually has to make money to feed her kids and figure out how they're going to be educated in a public school system." Readers, Beier added, "feel that richer connection you have with a character who is more like you."

## TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

AUG. 7 TO AUG. 13



**1** Khalil Fang (方大同) and *Timeless* (可啦思刻) with **28.91** percent of sales

**2** Compilation album *Faith Map* with **18.53%**

**3** Jam Hsiao (蕭敬騰) and *Princess* (王妃) with **8%**

**4** Shaun (永邦) and *Devil's Tears* (魔鬼的眼淚) with **5.9%**

**5** Jolin Tsai (蔡依林) and *Butterfly* (花蝴蝶) with **3.03%**

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

## PLANET POP

Poncher, who died 23 years ago aged 81, the *Los Angeles Times* reported.

But his widow is having his body moved over one spot and auctioning the site above Monroe's, hoping to earn enough to pay off her US\$1.6 million Beverly Hills home.

"Here is a once in a lifetime and into eternity opportunity to spend your eternal days directly above Marilyn Monroe," the sale advertisement on the site says. Bidding starts at US\$500,000.

Elsie Poncher, who prefers not to give her age but says she is over 70, told the *Times* that her husband, a successful businessman, bought the crypt from baseball player **Joe DiMaggio**, Monroe's ex-husband, in 1954.

Richard Poncher also bought the spot one space over, which is where Elsie plans to relocate him to open up the crypt above Monroe. For her part, the widower wants to be cremated when she dies.

Being buried close to Monroe has already proved a draw for some, with *Playboy* magazine founder **Hugh Hefner** purchasing a spot to the side of the sex-symbol's for US\$75,000 in 1992.

For those who do not have US\$500,000 to spend on the space at the cemetery, which is also the final resting

place for **Natalie Wood**, **Truman Capote** and **Farrah Fawcett**, there is still a free crypt space two spots above Monroe to the left.

The going price for that spot is a mere US\$250,000.

For the uber-flashy, there is the option of going to the grave next to Monroe wearing the shiny glove **Michael Jackson** wore during his first performance of the moonwalk, which goes on auction this November — with the current owner hoping to earn US\$40,000 to US\$60,000.

The left-handed glove was part of Jackson's outfit for the 1983 performance of *Billie Jean* during a television special marking the 25th anniversary of Motown.

It goes on the block on Nov. 21, five months after Jackson's death, at a Music Icons sale run by Julien's Auctions at the Hard Rock Cafe in New York's Times Square.

Julien's estimates fans will bid as high as US\$60,000 for an item that started life as a regular leather golf glove labeled "Made in Korea."

Unlike Jackson's usual single gloves, which he wore on the right hand, this is for the left and was hurriedly decorated with rhinestones instead of the characteristic hand-sewn crystals.

What the glove lacks in artisanal quality, it makes up for in pop history.

Jackson wore it along with a fedora during his first performance of the legendary backwards dance known as the moonwalk.

The owner, **Walter "Clyde" Orange**, was a member of the Commodores group when Jackson gave him the glove at the Motown tribute.

The glove headlines an auction featuring other Jackson memorabilia and items once belonging to **Madonna**, **Bob Dylan**, **Elvis Presley**, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and other music big names.

In news of the living, one of Asia's top film festivals will pay tribute to veteran Hong Kong director **Johnnie To** (杜琪峰), known for his stylish action thrillers like *Election* (黑社會) and *Exiled* (放逐). South Korea's Pusan International Film Festival said in a statement on Friday it will show 10 of To's films and host a master class led by the 54-year-old

**Bobby Brown**, wanted for the wrong reason. PHOTO: AP

Hong Kong filmmaker during the Oct. 8 to Oct. 16 event in the southern beach resort city. Hong Kong and South Korean film critics will also take part in a panel discussion about To's works.

To is best known for his crafty action films, but his versatile 29-year career also includes romance, comedies and lighthearted crime movies.

—AGENCIES

