

CULTURE

MONDAY, AUGUST 24, 2009

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[THE WEEKENDER]

A voyeuristic view of Hamlet's family

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW AND DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTERS

On Saturday night, Teatre Lliure's *European House — Hamlet's Prologue Without Words* proved an unexpected delight. The play takes the events just prior to the beginning of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as its subject — from the death of Hamlet's father to his uncle Claudius' moves on Queen Gertrude — and tells this story largely without dialogue. Director Alex Rigola, in giving a short introduction to the production, said that he had been inspired by the appeal of voyeurism.

The set, a cross-section of a three-story house providing views into nine separate spaces, was ingenious. The rooms were wired for sound, so though few words were spoken, every little noise within the house could be heard. This rather negated the idea of voyeurism for this reviewer, but the lack of dialogue was nevertheless intriguing. It presented a family who in the aftermath of a father's death could not find words to express their feelings.

Part of the fun was placing the characters and spotting the innumerable references to the Shakespeare play. But even simply as a portrait of a dysfunctional family, the show was remarkably effective. Action was often taking place in more than one room at a time, but despite this, the scene never seemed cluttered or confused.

The lack of dialogue never came across as overtly contrived, nor did the explicit nudity, which worked well in the context of the play. The short running time of just 60 minutes also worked well, giving the director just enough time to give his ideas full expression. Literary games and stylistic gimmicks can become labored, however witty or innovative, and keeping *European House* short also kept the enjoyment fresh.

While *European House* did not aspire to be a major work of theater, neither was it just a bit of fluff. Within the dysfunctional family many of the themes from Shakespeare's play — from Oedipal lust to alienation and the temptations of madness — are all touched on, making the show as much a contemporary domestic drama as a literary game.

Though there was a good crowd in the theater, *European House* was probably the most under-subscribed event in the Taipei Arts Festival so far. Publicity material was not particularly successful in highlighting its appeal, with many in the audience seeming to have little idea of what to expect going in. At the end of the show, the director and the cast received enthusiastic applause.

The audience knew it was in for an unconventional evening with the Taipei Chinese Orchestra (TCO, 台北市立國樂團) when guest conductor Chien Wen-pin (簡文彬) rose to take a bow after the first piece of *What a Tone!* (誰Tone!) to reveal he had had the image of a skull shaved into the back of his head. Unconventional was the definitely the word of the night on Friday at Novel Hall as the TCO paired up with Cloud Gate 2 as part of the Taipei Arts Festival.

Huang Yi (黃翊) the 25-year-old wunderkind of Taiwan's dance world, created *Red* (紅) and *TA-TA for Now*,

which could have been subtitled "fun with five dancers, five chairs and a violinist," showing both his usual flair for the offbeat and his total command of technique.

The final piece on the program, *Happiness and Music* (樂), by Cloud Gate 2's resident choreographer Cheng Tsung-lung (鄭宗龍), was a true collaboration between the two groups, as several of the TCO musicians gamely appeared on stage in the unusual role as dancers, while some of the dancers demonstrated their musical talents — and a few demonstrated their lack of playing ability. The appearance of several well-known musicians cavorting on stage delighted the orchestra's cognoscenti, who greeted each musician's initial appearance with a wave of giggles. In addition to the usual *erhu*, lutes and flutes, pots, pans, clackers and even a blow-up plastic hammer were played, while Chien conducted by waving a pot in his left hand and a deep-fryer scooper in his right.

Huang's two works and Cheng's piece are well worth seeing again. Hopefully, the TCO and Cloud Gate will find a way of doing additional performances. It would be a shame if this trio were packed away in the archives.

On Saturday night, the 3rd International Ballet Star Gala began with a bang at the National Theater as Daniil Simkin soared through Vasily Vainonen's *Flames of Paris* with partner Ashely Boudier in turns and leaps so high it took your breath away. The couple had the audience screaming — ear piercing shrieks — for more when they appeared in the next-to-the-last piece of the evening, Marius Petipa's gala warhorse *Le Corsaire*.

But every piece on the 14-work program was a delight to watch, and several were revelations, especially those by choreographers not seen before in Taipei, such as David Dawson's *Giselle Act II Pas de Deux* and Grey Area and Christopher Wheeldon's *Prokofiev Pas de Deux*. With both of the pas de deux, it was wonderful to see new life breathed into well-loved music and stories.

Isabelle Ciaravola and Alexandre Riabko also brought new passion to an excerpt from John Neumeier's *La Dame Aux Camellias*.

Just when you thought it couldn't get any better, Elisa Carrillo Cabrera and Mikhail Kaniskin, both with the Berlin Staatsballett, had audiences gasping, laughing and crying for more with the finale, Christian Spuck's *Le Grand Pas de Deux*, which glorifies the traditional duet and turns its conventions on their head, beginning with a white tutu-clad Cabrera wearing a big pair of black eyeglasses and carrying an equally large white purse.

Taiwanese ballerina Wang Tzer-shing (王澤馨) was greeted with well-earned screams and applause when she appeared for the curtain call for having pulled together such a wonderful program. The audience was reluctant to leave the theater but everyone appeared to leave with huge grins on their faces.



'Three Kingdoms' Intriguing Stratagems' makes the complex historical drama of the prelude to the Battle of Red Cliffs accessible to younger audiences by placing a child at the center of the action

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

There is nothing unusual about another new Beijing opera by the Guoguang Opera Company (國光劇團), a mainstay of Taiwan's opera scene. What makes *Three Kingdoms' Intriguing Stratagems* (三國計中計) unusual is the fact that it has been created specifically to appeal to children. This is Guoguang's fourth original production targeted at children, and ticket sales (it performed to sold-out crowds over the weekend) seem to suggest that they have been successful at appealing to their target audience.

The basis of *Three Kingdoms' Intriguing Stratagems* is the well-known Beijing Opera *Gathering of Heroes* (群英會), which focuses on the ploys and intrigues that take place in the prelude to the Battle of Red Cliffs (赤壁之戰), a major turning point in Chinese history and one which, if the storytellers are to be believed, was remarkable for the concentration of great military leaders present. The highly convoluted plot, huge cast of characters and intricate web of loyalties and rivalries might seem to make this unpromising material for young children.

According to director Wang Kuan-chiang (王冠強), the current show made use of a new device to give its young audience a greater sense of involvement in the action. Ni Chung-ji (倪中基) is a primary school kid who finds himself amid the action, befriends a young princess and uses

his knowledge of history to take a hand in proceedings of the generals, aristocrats and spies he finds himself among, rather in the fashion of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

"We introduce a school kid, we see him as around 10 years old, and he is able to respond to the action or ask questions about what is going on around him," Wang said in a telephone interview before the show opened. "He brings the child's perspective into the story."

'PLANTING A SEED'

Other modern characters include Ni's elder brother, who is obsessed with *Three Kingdoms*-themed computer games, and his grandfather, a doddering old man who is constantly humming Beijing opera arias. Scriptwriter Lin Jian-hua (林建華) said that this replicated in a simple way how stories such as those from *Gathering of Heroes* continue to pervade modern Taiwanese society.

Lin said that he and others from Guoguang's team felt great affinity for the character of Ni's granddad, neglected by his family as a senile old man constantly humming his incomprehensible opera arias. Through *Three Kingdoms' Intriguing Stratagems*, Ni gains a better understanding of his granddad's world, which he discovers is rich in stories of adventure and intrigue, and not stuffy and boring as he initially thought.

"We make use of the abstract con-



ventions of Beijing opera. This is one of the highlights of Chinese opera, something that is very traditional and also sparks children's imagination," Wang said. The language has been much simplified, though Wang said sections of singing have been preserved, often as signatures for specific characters, to give the young audience a feel for all aspects of Beijing opera. This is mixed in with ideas gleaned from such sources as children's television. "This way, though the children are watching something very ancient, they can find in it much that is familiar. It makes the opera more accessible to them, and they store this in their heads. It is planting a seed that may blossom when they grow older," Wang said.



One of these things is not like the other.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GUOGUANG OPERA COMPANY

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

AUG. 14 TO AUG. 20



1 Khalil Fang (方大同) and *Timeless* (可歌戀刻) with **17.16%** of sales

2 Compilation album *Faith Map* with **14.53%**

3 Jam Hsiao (蕭敬騰) and *Princess* (王妃) with **7.83%**

4 Lollipop (棒棒堂) and Choc7 (超克七) with *Graduation Limited Edition* (卒業紀念限定盤) with **7.69%**

5 Shaun (永邦) and *Devil's Tears* (魔鬼的眼淚) with **4.76%**

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

PLANET POP



Coming soon to a theater near you: Michael Jackson. PHOTO: AP

in recent months, too.

Meanwhile, a Los Angeles Superior Court judge approved a deal between executors of Jackson's 2002 will and concert promoter AEG Live for a traveling exhibition of Jackson memorabilia over the family's objections.

Tensions over the estate's administration have risen in recent days, in part because attorneys for the late singer's mother, Katherine Jackson, have said they could file a wrongful death lawsuit against Murray and name AEG,

which paid the doctor, as a co-defendant.

An AEG attorney called the idea of filing a wrongful death suit against the company "outrageous" and said it "has only been supportive of Michael Jackson."

In New York, city officials are looking for a larger place for director Spike Lee to hold his celebration of Michael Jackson's birthday.

The filmmaker had planned to mark the late King of Pop's birthday with a block party-style bash in Brooklyn's Fort Greene park on Saturday. But city officials and Lee are looking at other sites because crowd estimates have grown.

The event's original permit envisioned 2,000 people attending. Because of nationwide publicity, organizers now expect the crowd to exceed 10,000.

Those who still haven't had their fill of Michael Jackson news will be pleased to hear that a film built around rehearsal footage left behind after his death will be released in a limited two-week theatrical engagement worldwide.

Sony announced that the release date for *Michael Jackson: This Is It* has been moved up to Oct. 28, two days earlier than previously announced.

Further down the celebrity food chain, *One Tree Hill* actor Antwon

Tanner has pleaded guilty to selling more than a dozen federal identification numbers for US\$10,000.

Tanner told a federal judge in Brooklyn on Friday that he was a middleman, selling numbers someone else provided.

Tanner, 34, is expected to get as much as a year in prison at his sentencing, set for Nov. 20. He was charged in April with selling 16 Social Security numbers and three bogus Social Security cards.

"Octo-Mom" is in the news again. A judge ruled that an advocacy group for child actors can seek to have a guardian appointed to oversee the financial

interests for the octuplets of **Nadya Suleman**, in connection with a television show about the family.

The judge ruled that California law allows former child actor **Paul Petersen**, president of the group A Minor Consideration, to make the financial guardianship petition, even if he has no direct relation to the children.

Finally, in a follow-up to a story previously mentioned in this space, a woman found guilty of snooping at **Britney Spears'** house has been sentenced to three years of probation and 240 hours of community service.

Miranda Tozier-Robbins was arrested after deputies found her wearing camouflage, carrying camera equipment and peering into the windows of Spears' home. She said afterward that she was working on a documentary on paparazzi tactics.

Tozier-Robbins was also ordered to stay away from Spears and her home.

— AGENCIES



Britney Spears' 'stalker' was found guilty and sentenced to three years of probation. PHOTO: AFP