

# CULTURE

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[ THE WEEKENDER ]

## Cloud Gate trilogy brings Chinese characters to life

'Cursive' gives the company's dancers full rein to show off their incomparable control and articulation

BY DIANE BAKER  
STAFF REPORTER

Cloud Gate Dance Theatre (雲門舞集) opened its three-week run at National Theater last Wednesday with a masterful performance of artistic director Lin Hwai-min's (林懷民) *Cursive* (行草). Seeing the piece again was like being reunited with an old friend.

Stage and lighting designer Lin Keh-hua's (林克華) use of moving black backdrops and white screens and projections of parts of calligraphic masterpieces was stunning, yet this always served to keep the audience's eyes focused on the dancers. The sole exception to this was the one segment where a black-and-white scroll is projected onto the stage, creating a giant black box in which only glimpses could be caught of the almost-nude male dancers. But it was this segment that most created the illusion of the Chinese characters coming to life. It felt almost like the scene in the *Nutcracker* when all the toys start to move on their own.

*Cursive* gives the company's dancers full rein to show off their incomparable control and articulation. In several segments, the black-clad dancers were centered on white scroll-shaped blocks of light, gracefully folding down to the floor before jumping up and then folding down again. It brought to mind droplets, each one springing to life for a few brief seconds.

All of the dancers were wonderful, but once again it was Tsai Ming-yuan (蔡銘元) who was especially memorable with his quicksilver movements.

*Cursive II* (行草貳) opens on Wednesday and *Wild Cursive* (狂草) begins on Sept. 16.

Cloud Gate alumnus Bulareyaung Pagarlava (布拉瑞瑪) has developed a well-deserved reputation for choreographing works that pack an emotional wallop. On Saturday afternoon at the Wenshan Branch of the Taipei Cultural Center, he showed his lighter side with three short works for the company he founded two years ago with his partner, former Martha Graham and Cloud Gate principal dancer Sheu Fang-yi (許芳宜), LaFa & Artists.

On the program were *Ode to Joy, Chapter I*, which premiered in Macau in June, *Lament*, which premiered on Friday night, and *Summer Fantasia*, a version of which premiered at Jacob's Pillow in Massachusetts in July. It was a much bigger LaFa company, featuring Sheu and nine young men. Seven were newcomers, plus gymnast-turned-dancer Huang Ming-cheung (黃明正), who made such an impression in the company's 2008 debut, and Chiang Pao-shu (江保樹), who was featured in the documentary of the company, *Dancing With 37 Arts* (37ARTS 舞者紀事).

*Ode to Joy, Chapter I* begins with the rousing chorus from Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* before segueing into a lovely song



Former Martha Graham and Cloud Gate principal dancer Sheu Fang-yi. PHOTO COURTESY OF LAFA & ARTISTS

by Spaniard Jaume Sisa. Eight men, dressed like schoolboys in black socks, black shorts and white polo shirts, move through a hip-rocking drill, while Sheu sits, legs outspread, to one side like a broken doll.

That doll image proved to be correct, for after all the men but Li Tsung-hsun (李宗軒) exit the stage, he began to play with Sheu like she was a Barbie with flexible joints, posing her this way and that until he finally tires of the game and leaves. At this point the rest of the men return and begin to play with Sheu. Eventually they dress her in a black wrap-around skirt and a white shirt like theirs and she joins in the rollicking reprise of the opening chorus. It's a tribute to Sheu's strength of personality that even when she is portraying a mannequin, you can't take your eyes off of her.

The mood turned serious with the next piece, *Lament*, which opened with a film clip of Martha Graham performing her famous solo *Lamentation*. Set to the music of Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss, *Lament* is a beautiful, elegant work that is moving, but not too somber, filled with lots of lovely lifts and a wonderful duet for Sheu and Li. As with their duet in the first piece, Li proved he could more than hold his own with Sheu.

*Summer Fantasia* appeared to be simply a collection of scenes, funny though it was. It began with Huang proving his acting abilities as he used a blue-and-white striped beach towel as a prop to be a swimmer, a surfer, a catwalk model and even a mermaid. As a fish-tailed Huang wiggles off, Sheu, wearing trainers and a sports bra, jogs on, watched by three men, clad in brightly colored shirts and black pants. Sheu next returns clad in a loose yellow sundress to play at being a femme fatale for her male harem, before they all strip down to bathing suits. The music ranges from a Maria Callas aria to Dean Martin and the piece ends with a dance party reminiscent of the *Beach Blanket Bingo* films of the early 1960s.

*Summer Fantasia* left the audience in a good mood, but it was the haunting *Lament* that I would most like to see again.



## The Bard, Henan-style

Taiwan Bangzi Company premieres its Chinese-opera adaptation of 'The Merchant of Venice' this week at a conference for Shakespeare scholars in the UK

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER

Chinese opera adaptations from Shakespeare are nothing new in Taiwan. The highly successful series of performances created by Wu Hsing-kuo (吳興國) and his Contemporary Legend Theater (當代傳奇劇場) come to mind immediately, the first of these dating back to 1986. What distinguishes the Taiwan Bangzi Company's (台灣豫劇團) new production *Bond* (約/宋), an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, is that it will be presented this Friday at the 4th British Shakespeare Association Conference at the Greenwood Theater of King's College, Cambridge. It will premiere in Taiwan on Nov. 28.

This is the first time a Chinese-opera production of a Shakespeare play has been associated with so august an academic organization as the British Shakespeare Association, and this has necessarily greatly affected the nature of the production. "In the past, opera companies would take the story, some of the characters and the themes of a Shakespeare play and do with it what they wanted," said Chen Fang (陳芳), one of the adapters.

According to Chen, the production first came to the notice of the British Shakespeare Association when it heard that it would be based on a new translation of *The Merchant of Venice* by one of Taiwan's foremost Shakespeare scholars and former dean of the National Taiwan University's College of Liberal Arts,

Peng Ching-hsi (彭鏡禧).

Chen, who helped transform Peng's translation into a format suitable for Bangzi opera, otherwise known as Henan opera or Yu opera (豫劇), pointed out that because the production of *Bond* would feature at the conference, the adaptation required far more rigorous adherence to the original play than any previous productions of this sort.

This is the second time that the Taiwan Bangzi Company has taken on Western material, having adapted *Turandot* (中國公主杜蘭朵) in 2000. It has also produced numerous "new style" operas in recent years, broadening the horizons of the company. "As we are presenting this opera before many Shakespeare experts, it was particularly important to preserve the spirit of the original," said director Lu Po-shen (呂柏伸), the artistic director of the Tainan Ensemble (台南人劇團), who was brought in to create the right dramatic setting for the production. His role was to facilitate the expression of emotions through the elaborate movements and gestures that are the foundation of Chinese opera.

To achieve this, the clear distinctions between character types had to be broken down, most notably in the character of Shylock, performed by the doyen of Taiwan's Bangzi opera, Wang Hai-ling (王海玲). "Most opera performers learn one specific role type," Lu said, "but this opera requires



Let him look to his 'Bond.' PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAIWAN BANGZI COMPANY

a performer with a wider range. The character of Shylock spans the roles of *sheng* (生), or leading male, *ching* (淨), the exuberant male and that of the *chou* (丑), the clown. Wang has to shift between these role types, a task for which she has to draw on her decades-long experience of opera.

"Cross-cultural adaptation is

important in our international society and is a major topic within contemporary theater, so we wanted to create the first Bangzi adaptation of a Shakespeare play," Chen said. "We are lucky to have someone like Wang Hai-ling who is willing to take on such new challenges."

Lei Bi-chi (雷碧琦), convener of the National Taiwan University Shakespeare Forum (臺大莎士比亞論壇) to be held in Taipei from Nov. 26 to Nov. 28, underlined the importance of the current production. "This is not the first time the Taiwan Bangzi Company has toured abroad, nor is it the first time adaptations of [Western] plays have been presented. On the face of it, this production might not seem particularly unusual. But it has a special significance. This production will be part of the British Shakespeare Association Conference ... In the past, such [cross-cultural] productions have generally been part of various arts festivals, playing before people who are open to all kinds of innovation. This time, we will perform before Shakespeare scholars, people who uphold an academic tradition ... They may never have had any contact with Chinese opera. We hope that this will open their eyes."

More information about the 4th British Shakespeare Association Conference can be found at [www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/humanities/news/conferences/localglobal](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/humanities/news/conferences/localglobal).

### TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

AUG. 28 TO SEPT. 3



1 Compilation album *Faith Map* with 16.1 percent of sales

2 Jam Hsiao (蕭敬騰) and *Princess* (王妃) with 11.64%

3 Color and Color *First All Original Album* (COLOR 首張全創作專輯) with 8.68%

4 Khalil Fang (方大同) and *Timeless* (可啦思刻) with 7.88%

5 Shaun (承邦) and *Devil's Tears* (魔鬼的眼淚) with 6.12%

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

## PLANET POP

20km ride through the city. Video of the race shows Sharp struggling to keep up while Crowe zooms along unfazed.

At one point, Sharp fell off her bike. Still, Crowe gave Sharp some credit, telling her she was a better biker than Australian director Baz Luhrmann. "You're twice the man Baz is," he said.

Crowe's manager Grant Vandenberg had no comment. "I think everything's been said in the paper," he said.

Much ink is being spilled in a war of words over a "remake" of the 1992 *Harvey Keitel* film *Bad Lieutenant*.

Actor Nicolas Cage plays a deranged, drug-addicted detective in *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*, re-visiting the corrupt cop role made famous by Keitel 17 years ago.

Despite the similarity in title to Abel Ferrara's cult classic *Bad Lieutenant*, and Ferrara's obvious displeasure at the idea of a remake, Cage and German director Werner Herzog say their movie is not connected.

"It would be unfair to compare the

two movies," Cage said in an interview in Venice, where the picture is in competition at the annual film festival.

"Harvey's trajectory is really dealing with guilt and all of that, and perhaps fits more into that [Judeo-Christian] program, so to me it's a completely different story and a different cop," added the 45-year-old, who won a best actor Oscar for playing an alcoholic in *Leaving Las Vegas*.

"This is a New Orleans cop, it takes place in New Orleans, it's *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*, it's not *Bad Lieutenant*."

Ferrara has criticized the idea of a remake, and was quoted in the media as saying: "I wish these people die in hell."

Former supermodel Stephanie Seymour, who has been in relationship hell recently, has come to a closed-door agreement with a security guard who was accused of shoving her into a door at her Connecticut home.

Seymour got into a dispute with guard Joseph Babnik in June when he

was watching the Greenwich estate of her estranged husband, billionaire newsprint magnate Peter Brant.

Babnik told police Seymour had taken documents from him and he was trying to get them back. The former New York City police officer was arrested and given a misdemeanor summons on a disorderly conduct charge.

But the state's attorney on Friday declined to prosecute the case. The charge will be dismissed in a year if Babnik stays out of trouble.

Not many actresses get a career-changing chance at 68. For Julia McKenzie, already a successful stage and TV performer, it came when she was chosen as British television's new Miss Marple, Agatha Christie's famous amateur detective. The new series, first broadcast on the commercial ITV channel yesterday, has already been shown in the US, Canada and Ireland, underlining the international appeal of one of Christie's best-loved creations.

At home, though, critical attention

is likely to be at its most intense, with McKenzie seeking to fill the shoes of previous popular interpreters like

Margaret Rutherford, Joan Hickson and, most recently, Geraldine McEwan.

"It's the prize," McKenzie said of her high-profile role.

"And to come at this time in my career, which normally is tailing off," she said in a recent interview. "I would have retired, I think, because I don't want to end up saying 'The carriage awaits.'"

Actor Tom Selleck has been awarded more than US\$187,000 after a California jury found the actor was duped into buying a lame horse.

Selleck—Selleck is best known for his role on TV's *Magnum, P.I.* in the 1980s—accused equestrian Dolores Cuenca of trying to pass off a show horse with a medical condition as fit to ride in competitions.

The defense had argued that Selleck didn't check the veterinarian records of the 10-year-old Zorro.

—AGENCIES