

CULTURE

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[THE WEEKENDER]

No 'ism' means minimalism

BY DIANE BAKER AND IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTERS

Taipei dance audiences got their first look at Japanese choreographer Jo Kanamori and his Noism company this weekend at the National Theater and they liked what they saw.

Noism is a small troupe, just 10 dancers, but perfectly matched in technique and intensity. The 90-minute *NINA* was a crisply executed examination of control and submission that veered between mesmerizing and plain creepy. Although it dragged a bit towards the end, it was a good introduction to someone who is likely to be a major force in Asia dance for decades to come.

The company says its goal is to avoid any specific "ism" so they are free to draw on any and all possibilities, hence the name "No-ism." However, there was a clear "ism" in evidence on Saturday — minimalism — from the choreography to the costumes, to the staging and score.

The costumes were basic: The women wore nude leotards that exposed every muscle, every rib, every breath and stripped them of any identity. The men wore simple black suits that gave them an eerily corporate uniformity. The only thing that differed was their heights, although Sawako Iseki, a veteran of Rudra Bejart Lausanne and Netherlands Dans Theater II, did stand out a bit.

The sublimation of individuality reinforced the sexual politics of the piece. The women were nothing more than stiff, inert mannequins to be handled, dragged, lifted and spun by their male handlers. *NINA* begins with one man sitting in a chair, staring at a standing women, with the other women laying scattered around the stage in a variety of lifeless poses. The men were emotionless as they roughly positioned and then danced with the women in a variety of duets, pas de tríos and group pieces, while the women often appeared robotic.

The most animated the women got was when they lay flailing their arms and legs on the floor as their handlers lay on top of them, weighting them down until they were nothing but empty forms. But after that mock rape scene the power dynamics shifted. The men still propelled the women, but you could tell it was becoming hard to push them around. In the end, the roles were completely reversed. The women stripped the men down to flesh-toned briefs and T-shirts and then put on the men's suits. The show ends with one woman seated in a chair, another standing next to her, looking a standing man, while the rest of the men lay inert around him.

CHILD'S PLAY

Earlier this month, the New Melody From the National Palace Museum (故宮新韻) series of theatrical productions hosted by the museum commenced a new program featuring the Taipei Li-Yuan Peking Opera Theatre (台北新劇團) performing segments from *Journey to the West* (西遊記). In both format and mood, it is a very different proposition from *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (長生殿) by Lanting Kun Opera Company (蘭庭昆劇團), which launched the New Melody series in July.

Where Lanting created a highly compressed but complete production of *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, Li-Yuan has opted for a more direct educational presentation in its 12-week *New Journey to the West* (新西遊記) program, which will rotate through four separate episodes from the story of the monk Tripitaka's journey to India and the many dangers he meets on the way.

The episode on Wednesday, the second installment in the program, was that of *The Gossamer Cave* (蠶絲洞), in which Tripitaka very nearly gets eaten by a spider demon.

The program began with an introduction to the various character types that feature in Beijing opera, followed by an introduction to the various instruments used in the orchestra. Children in the audience were warned not to attempt some of the difficult acrobatic maneuvers that they saw on stage.

Then the story began. The material lent itself to a very high degree of physical showmanship, and this dominated at the expense of less showy aspects of performance. There was plenty of tumbling, juggling, acrobatics, fight scenes and comedy, which certainly delighted the audience, but provided a rather unbalanced picture of what Beijing opera is about.

Still, there was much to admire about the *New Journey to the West*, because it was both entertaining and educational. But it also takes the New Melody series in a direction that could undermine its credibility as an operatic showcase that can be enjoyed by both aficionados and casual visitors. Much will depend on the third installment of New Melody, which should begin in January.

Are scary kids' movies too scary?

BY VANESSA THORPE AND ANUSHKA ASTHANA
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Ever since the Brothers Grimm, a good scare has been a part of children's books. Now a film of Maurice Sendak's classic 'Where the Wild Things Are' has started a debate on whether it is still acceptable to frighten the youngsters

When Jess Hyde picked a copy of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* from the bedroom shelf last week, her seven-year-old son, Arthur, pointed to it and said: "That gives me nightmares."

"He had never mentioned it before," says the mother of three from Somerset in the west of England. "But it is a tricky one because the monsters are quite scary. They are not friendly pictures. It is something about the color — they are brown and gray and not very endearing." Arthur's mother, who was given the book by friends, asked her son if he wanted her to read it. "He still said yes," she laughs.

The spooky palm tree fronds and twisting vines that invade the bedroom of naughty Max in this nursery classic will soon be invading the imaginations of young children anew, as a film version of Sendak's book heads for the cinema. A modern morality tale, Sendak's story sees little Max reject his parental home for a world where he can become "king of all wild things." It has been brought to the screen this autumn by the director Spike Jonze and the writer Dave Eggers, who adapted the screenplay. Their film has won plaudits from many critics, but some parents have been troubled by the ferocity of the story, and by the power of Jonze's new interpretation. As a result, they are advising other families to stay away.

The protest, or "wild rumpus" to borrow a phrase from the book, which has greeted the release of the film echoes disquiet about the bleak message embedded in Disney/Pixar's latest animated release. Entitled *Up*, it has been viewed by many parents as anything but.

A handful of American educationalists, including Holly Willett, of Rowan



Five years in the making, Spike Jonze's version of *Where the Wild Things Are* opened in North American cities on Friday to a mixture of glowing reviews and deep reservations. PHOTOS: AGENCIES

University in New Jersey, have rushed to defend Sendak's 1963 book, but the new film stands accused of presenting unsettling images that, although popular, are likely to breed nightmares. A public debate about whether or not a child's appetite for being frightened should be indulged is now in full swing.

"This is a classic hero's story in which the protagonist undertakes a journey and returns a wiser person," Willett, an expert on children's literature, has argued in the American press. And Sendak's original tale has certainly stood the test of time. Not only is it a reliable classic on the shelves of middle-class toddlers on both sides of the Atlantic, in 1983 the composer Oliver Knussen turned it into a one-act opera that has joined the modern repertoire.

"I remember reading the Sendak book to my children and it frightened the pajamas off them," Roger McGough, the British poet, said this weekend. "But they went back to it. It is a scariness that you can control and that ends happily."

McGough has had similar problems with his own children's poem, *The Lesson*, in which a teacher inflicts cartoon-style violence on his pupils. "I was a teacher myself when I wrote it and it was a joke, but some parents now consider it

inappropriate and I can see that contexts change," said McGough. But he points out that children's stories, from *Snow White* onwards, have always contained danger and death. "It is just part of the landscape. Although I don't think a writer should set out to scare children."

The traditional fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm are packed with disturbing twists, while the appeal of Roald Dahl's work is inseparable from the dark side of his imagination. Dahl's story, *The Fantastic Mr Fox*, is the subject of another film adaptation by a cult American director this autumn. Wes Anderson's film opened the London Film Festival on Wednesday and is full of nature "red in tooth and claw." Like Dahl's book, it tells of a family of foxes besieged by the evil farmers Boggis, Bunce and Bean, who are armed with guns, industrial diggers and explosives. Anderson has defended the "adult content" in his film by saying that children in his audience should be able to ask their parents about their worries as part of their learning process.

Willet argues that a good storyteller "knows that kids have many difficult feelings, as well as feelings that adults have forgotten about," and so does not shy away from dark material.

Jonze and Eggers have fought hard for five years to retain the more troubling content in *Where The Wild Things Are*. Eggers received repeated notes from concerned producers about the screenplay. "There is a whitewashed, idealized version of childhood that is popular in movies. It has the kids sitting neatly in their chairs, talking with some adult, in a sarcastic, overly sophisticated but polite way — a concoction that bears no resemblance to an actual kid," he explains.

In defense of the new film, Michael Phillips, critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, has

argued that it is grown-ups who are more disturbed by its darkness.

"I suspect kids will go for it more than their parents; in my experience, it's parents who tend to get fussed up about material they perceive, often wrongly, as 'too dark' or difficult. There's a certain amount of pain in *Where the Wild Things Are*, but it's completely earned. The movie fills you with all sorts of feelings, and I suspect children will recognize those feelings as their own," he writes. In an article in this month's edition of the journal *The Psychologist*, psychoanalyst Richard Gottlieb argues that this book and other works by Sendak are "fascinating studies of intense emotions — disappointment, fury, even cannibalistic rage — and their transformation through creative activity."

The book of *Where the Wild Things Are*, which Sendak also illustrated, sees Max sent to bed without dinner after misbehaving. He then sails across an ocean encountering the hairy monsters of the title. When Max returns home, his dinner is waiting and is still warm. According to Gottlieb, the story tackles many common childhood fears. "In straightforward, undisguised fashion, Sendak's work has addressed problems as monumental for children as being in a rage at mother, relating to a depressed or emotionally unavailable mother, or coming to terms with a mother who cannot or will not recognize her child's concerns or state of mind," he writes. "He manages nonetheless to maintain the optimistic view that all these troubles can be tamed, even if not fully overcome, through imagination. The ultimate magic of his work resides in his presentations of imagination, dream, fantasy and — ultimately — art itself as sources of resilience, of the strength to soldier on."

PLANET POP

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

OCT. 9 TO OCT. 15



1 Elva Hsiao (蕭亞軒) and Diamond Candy (鑽石糖) with **29.45%** of sales

2 Kuo Shu-yao (郭書瑤), aka Yao-Yao (瑤瑤), and Hug of Love: Farewell to 18 (愛的抱抱：告別18歲) with **10.62%**

3 Delia, aka Ring (丁噐), and Night Cat (夜貓) with **7.43%**

4 Khalil Fong (方大同) and *Timeless* (可恥惡刻) with **4.22%**

5 Compilation album *Faith Map* (信心地圖) with **4.12%**

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

A British filmmaker duped some of the country's top tabloid newspapers into printing fake stories about celebrities, including one about **Amy Winehouse's** beehive catching fire, he said in an interview with the *Guardian* last week.

Chris Atkins and his team put in hoax calls to some of Britain's best-known newsrooms, including that one girl band singer was a physics wizard, only to see the details printed — unchecked — in the press the next day.

Among the celebrity "sightings" they invented was a tale about how troubled British singer Winehouse had been playing music with friends when the fuse blew and set fire to her hair in its trademark beehive style.

The story appeared in two major tabloid papers, before being splashed across the Internet.

"We wanted to test how much truth there is in much of the celebrity stories that now completely dominate all areas of our news media," said the director, who details the team's two-year investigations in a new movie, *Starsuckers*.

"And we specifically wanted to see how much journalists fact-checked their stories. So in order to do this, we made some stories up.

"We made up a whole range of crazy tales of celebrity mishap and tried to see how easy it would be to get these into the tabloid press.

"On no account were any of the stories we sold and were printed fact-checked in any way. They could've been fact-checked and they would have shown to be the nonsense they were within minutes."

In another incident, one of Atkins' colleagues called a best-selling newspaper pretending to be the wife of a furniture removal man who said he had helped **Sarah Harding** of British girl band Girls Aloud to move house.

She detailed how the blonde singer had lots of books on quantum physics and a telescope at home, sparking headlines that "Sarah's a boffin" and prompting a flurry of stories across the world.

Atkins insisted that despite being offered money for the stories, his team was never paid for their work — although he recommended selling fake stories to the tabloids as an easy way to make a quick buck during the recession.

None of this seemed surprising to **George Clooney** — the son of a journalist and a man who has had many column inches devoted to his life — when he



George Clooney has little time for tabloid journalism. PHOTO: EPA

was asked his opinion on the media's obsession with celebrity at the London film festival ahead of the UK premiere of his film *The Men Who Stare at Goats*.

Clooney said he was sympathetic to journalists. "I'm the son of a newsman, I grew up around news," he said. "It's a tricky thing, you have to sell papers, I get it.

"The problem is that there is so little reporting any more, somebody will write a story and it will be in 1,800 different outlets and you have

no recourse. It will be false and you'll go 'it's not true' and they'll go 'we're not saying that, we're saying a London tabloid has said it.'"

Clooney's co-star, **Kevin Spacey**, said: "I don't understand why that's of interest, to write something false. If you even bother to say 'that story has no wit of truth to it' they write that you denied that story is true, which is not the same thing as saying what we wrote was absolutely wrong."

Clooney and Spacey spoke after the *Guardian* reported on *Starsuckers*.

In other news, it was a tough week for reality star **Jon Gosselin**.

A lawyer for his wife **Kate** says her estranged husband has been ordered to return US\$180,000 in marital funds.

The divorcing stars of TLC's *Jon and Kate Plus 8* — who have eight children, including twins and sextuplets — appeared briefly in family court last week in the Philadelphia suburb of Norristown.

The reality show has been consumed in recent months by marital turmoil as the couple feuded, then filed for divorce. Kate Gosselin says her husband took US\$230,000 from a joint account.

The TLC cable TV network is also suing Jon Gosselin for breaching his

contract. The lawsuit, filed Friday, alleges that Jon Gosselin hasn't met the obligations of his contract as an exclusive employee, has appeared on other programs for pay and made unauthorized disclosures about the show.

Recently, TLC announced the show would be renamed *Kate Plus Eight*, with a reduced presence by Jon Gosselin. A TLC spokeswoman has said the show's longtime future remains in question.

The crypt above the final resting place of screen legend **Marilyn Monroe** is up for auction again, two months after a previous bid of US\$4.6 million fell through.

The new auction begins tomorrow and will end on Oct. 29. Bidding will start at US\$500,000 on eBay.

Entrepreneur Richard Poncher was buried in the tomb 23 years ago. His widow, Elise Poncher, moved his body and put the tomb up for sale so she could pay off the US\$1.6 million mortgage on her Beverly Hills house.

After the original deal fell through, a representative for Poncher contacted 11 other bidders who had offered over US\$4.5 million, but none of them were interested in actually paying that much.

— AGENCIES