

AROUND TOWN

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‘The Wilderness’ reloaded

Tianjin Renmin Yishu Juyuan is staging another version of the most complex and complicated work by China’s greatest modern playwright

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Following hard on the heels of the Beijing opera version of *The Wilderness* (原野) by Taipei Li-Yuan Peking Opera Theater (台北新劇團) at Novel Hall (新舞臺) earlier this month, another version of the same work is being staged at the same venue, this time as a dramatic production by Tianjin Renmin Yishu Juyuan (天津人民藝術劇院).

The Wilderness is widely regarded as Cao Yu’s (曹禺) most complex and controversial work. Written in the late 1930s, no definitive version of the play was produced, the final stages of writing interrupted by Japan’s invasion of China in 1937. This has allowed directors considerable leeway to find their own interpretations, and the play has been adapted many times in many different mediums.

The adaptation by the Tianjin Renmin Yishu Juyuan, which premiered in 2006, has toured China with great success. Cao, as “China’s greatest modern playwright,” is sometimes acclaimed as Asia’s Shakespeare, and his works are given the same kind of canonical adulation. While the Tianjin production claims to be utterly faithful to the spirit of the original, the producers have taken a hatchet to the original play, cutting the text down from 80,000 words to just 30,000 and incorporating modern elements such as huge puppets that serve as a Greek chorus to the action, as well as occasionally doubling as elements within the set. A cellist performs sections from Mozart’s *Requiem* throughout.

In *The Wilderness*, Cao was moving away from the social realism that had dominated his earlier works such as *Thunderstorm* (雷雨) and *Sunrise* (日出), and he had begun to dabble in expressionism and symbolism. While this departure was not popular with audiences in early productions of the work, the dilution of the rather tub-thumping socialist polemic with a deeper exploration of human nature makes *The Wilderness* probably Cao’s most accessible work for modern audiences.

The Novel Hall does not often host foreign dramatic productions, but according to Vivien Ku (華懷群), executive director of the Koo Foundation (辜公亮文教基金會), which operates the venue, the opportunity of juxtaposing two very different productions of the same work was too good to resist.

Cao’s works, with their roots in China’s socialist revolution, and with his own elevation to the position of literary doyen of the Communist establishment, were once banned in Taiwan. Now it is more a question of whether they have any relevance. In the case of *The Wilderness*, with its vast potential for re-interpretation, there is clearly much a director can do to bring a piece of China’s literary history into the 21st century.

The Tianjin Renmin Yishu Juyuan has condensed the involved melodrama of the original into something with a clearer focus. They have boiled it down and brought out the expressionist elements that Cao was still struggling to find in the 1930s. Given that drama is somewhat under-represented in the growing wave of cross-strait cultural exchanges, this is a valuable opportunity to see a first-class drama group dealing with the baggage of history.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NOVEL HALL



PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: *The Wilderness* (原野) by Tianjin Renmin Yishu Juyuan (天津人民藝術劇院)
WHEN: Today and tomorrow at 7:30pm and Sunday at 2:30pm
WHERE: Novel Hall (新舞臺), 3-1 Songshou Rd, Taipei City (台北市松壽路3-1號)
ADMISSION: NT\$500 to NT\$1,000, available through NTCH ticketing outlets, at the venue or online at www.artsticket.com.tw

[FILM]

The mariner and the mujahedin

‘Tengri — Blue Heavens’ is a deceptively simple tale of love and rebellion set amid the overwhelming vastness of mountainous Central Asia

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



Elim Kalmouratov, left, and Albina Imasheva star in *Tengri — Blue Heavens*, directed by Marie-Jaoul de Poncheville.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOINT ENTERTAINMENT INTERNATIONAL

Tengri — Blue Heavens was the official Oscar submission for Best Foreign-Language Picture from Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet republic. It was probably a little too simple in conception to make the official Oscar lineup, but that does not detract much from its cinematic virtues. What it lacks in sophistication it makes up for in the largeness of its conception and a narrative power derived from folktale motifs that date back to time immemorial.

Set in the mountain pastures of Kyrgyzstan, a grandly beautiful landscape that is terrible in its vastness, this story is ideal material for cinema, which can shift its perspective from the intimately human to the universal in the flicker of an eye. And it is in this dual aspect that we are introduced to Temur, a sailor returning to his landlocked country. He comes by bus, then continues deeper into the mountains by horse and then on foot, the camera exploring the vastness of the land, and Temur’s own unexplained history in the complex topography of his otherwise inexpressive face. He is a man who has been places, to whom bad things have happened, and now he returns to a

community in which his father, his only kin, has died some years ago. The desolation of his world, both inner and outer, is absolute.

Temur is welcomed into his father’s community, where he meets Amira, a spirited young woman who enjoys the poetry of her semi-nomadic people and tries to stand up to its often-violent patriarchy. She is drawn to Temur and his adventures in far away places, but also accepts that she belongs to Shamshi, a mujahedin fighting in Afghanistan. He returns soon after the arrival of Temur, having imbibed a harsh Islamic dogma that makes him disdainful of the lax faith of his community and unresponsive to his wife, whom he views as a threat to his Islamic virtue.

And so the story is set up as a conflict over a woman that will ultimately lead to some kind of tragedy. This is a community in which sexual transgressions, real or imagined, are settled through the death of one of the parties involved. Amira, who with her fierce love of life and a willfulness that does not easily accept the constraints that society places on a woman, is a splendidly attractive character. Although the film has clear feminist leanings, they are not intrusive, and Amira never

Film Notes

TENGRI — BLUE HEAVENS

DIRECTED BY:
MARIE-JAOUL DE PONCHEVILLE

STARRING:
TAALAI ABAZOVA (ULJAN),
ALBINA IMASHEVA (AMIRA), ELIM
KALMOURATOV (TEMUR), NIKOLAI
MAROUSITCH (EROFEI), BUSURMAN
ODURAKAEV (SHAMSHI), HELENE
PATAROT (RAISSA)

RUNNING TIME:
110 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: KYRGYZ AND FRENCH
WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

becomes an unbelievably perfect character. The portrayal of Temur is far from heroic, and he is prone, as much as his fellow males, to drown his sorrow in vodka and to walk away from problems posed by women. It is Temur’s psychological vulnerability and Amira’s mixture

of childish naivety and passion for love and life that makes *Tengri* more than a romantic potboiler.

There are a few moments when the story reaches out to the wider world, as with Shamshi’s Islamic dogma, a Russian veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war who hangs out in a ramshackle camp not far from Amira’s semi-nomadic community, and Temur’s own unhappy experience in the West as an illegal immigrant. These stories serve to underline the fact that for people from these barren places at the edge of the world, life beyond the mountains is not seen as some kind of promised land, and that hope, the freedom offered by the blue heaven of title, must be found within.

The extended sequence in which Temur and Amira attempt their escape is deftly handled, and while the climax in which the lovers find redemption shifts the tone from realism to allegory, the film has an integrity that allows it to withstand this jolt.

Although it didn’t make the final Oscar lineup, *Tengri* has done well at non-mainstream film festivals, and was named Best Film and won Best Director for Marie-Jaoul de Poncheville at the inaugural Women’s International Film & Television Showcase last year.