

POP STOP

COMPILED BY CATHERINE SHU

Popular TV host **Hu Gua** (胡瓜) and his ex-wife **Hsiu Hsiu** (秀秀) have been on frosty terms since their divorce nearly a decade ago, but the cold front may finally be dissipating.

The former couple's daughter, **Hu Ying-chen** (胡盈禎), recently celebrated her birthday at a restaurant in Taipei's East District (東區) with her mom and egregious plastic surgeon husband **Lee Chin-liang** (李進良). Hu Gua and his current love **Ting Ro-an** (丁柔安) were noticeably absent. Gossip reporters asked if the two were "afraid to show up" because of the long-standing tension between Hu Gua and Hsiu Hsiu. Hu Ying-chen explained that she planned to have dinner with her father and Ting soon. Her mother added, "if they are willing to invite me along, then I will go" — a statement *Apple Daily* called no less than "astounding."

Hu and Hsiu Hsiu divorced in 2001. He and Ting have recently been spotted dining with his daughter and her husband. But while the relationship between Hu's daughter and his girlfriend appears cordial enough, gossip rags report that tension surfaced this summer when Ying-chen allegedly tried to engineer a reunion between her mother and father. At her birthday dinner, Ying-chen let slip that she wanted to celebrate with her mother first before meeting up with her dad and Ting.

Hsiu Hsiu, however, said she'd be happy to tag along to the second dinner, adding that "it's been 10 years, what's past is past." When questioned by an *Apple* reporter, Hu Gua responded "of course" he'd be happy to see his ex-wife. Whether the reunion will come to fruition or if the two former spouses will just continue to play a game of telephone via gossip reporters remains to be seen.

While the focus this week was on the thawing of the cold war between Hu Ying-chen's parents, *Apple* couldn't help poking fun at husband Lee, who is currently on an enforced three-month sabbatical after being found guilty of illegally inserting silicone breast implants into a patient. Lee, who is also rumored to be a serial philanderer, looked a bit "high" at the party, the newspaper reported, with bright red, glazed-over eyes. When someone asked him how often he "fries rice" (炒飯), a euphemism for sex (presumably just with his wife), he replied giggling "twice a week!"

Far less open to publicity than the Hu family is **Ady Ann** (安以軒). The actress and singer once

enjoyed a reputation for being a buttoned-down daddy's girl, but has "unfolded like a peach blossom" with a series of alleged affairs, our sister newspaper the *Liberty Times* noted. Ann has been romantically linked to F4 member and actor **Vanness Wu** (吳建豪) and H. Brothers Media (華誼兄弟) head **Wang Zhonglei** (王中磊).

Two months ago, Ann was spotted strolling to a hot pot restaurant in heavy rain with a tall man who held an umbrella over her the entire way. A reporter saw the duo again last week while they were out shopping. "On closer inspection, it appears that Ann's new boyfriend is Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Legislator **Hsieh Kuo-liang's** (謝國樑) former aide, **Chang Po-chin** (張卜今)," wrote the *Liberty Times*. Upon learning that Chang's identity had been uncovered, Ann wailed over the telephone to a reporter, "I'm going to cry now!"

"We really are just friends. In the future, we might do business together," she added through what the *Liberty Times* wrote sounded like tearful sniffing.

In addition to his political activities, Hsieh is known for his six-year relationship with Breeze Center (微風廣場) art director, **Michelle Liao** (廖曉喬), the sister of the luxury mall's owner, and was recently photographed going home with a "hot chick" (辣妹) to "watch a DVD." But Chang's record now tops that of his former boss, the *Liberty Times* remarked. He is rumored to have had an affair with children's television host and singer **Momo Chu** (朱安禹) while still a player with the Super Basketball League's Yulon Dinos (裕隆恐龍).

Hu Gua can choose his friends ...
PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES



BY ANDREW C.C. HUANG



Godot Theatre Company's production of *The 39 Steps*, takes a light-hearted approach to espionage. PHOTO COURTESY OF NTCH

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Godot Theatre Company, *The 39 Steps* (步步驚笑)
WHEN: Tonight and tomorrow at 7:30pm, tomorrow and Sunday at 2:30pm, Monday to Dec. 19 at 7:30pm, Dec. 19 and Dec. 20 at 2:30pm
WHERE: Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台), 25, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市八德路三段25號)
ADMISSION: NT\$500 to NT\$2,500, available through NTCH ticketing or online at www.artsticket.com.tw
ON THE NET: www.godot.org.tw
DETAILS: Additional performances in Chungli (Dec. 26 and 27), Taichung (Jan. 9 and Jan. 10), Tainan (Jan. 16 and Jan. 17), Hsinchu (Jan. 23 and Jan. 24) and Kaohsiung (Jan. 30 and Jan. 31). For a complete schedule, go to blog.xuite.net/godot2009/the39steps?st=c&p=1&w=1933439

OPERA

To boldly go where no 'gezai' opera has gone before

Over the past couple of years, Taiwan has produced a number of intriguing collaborations that have brought traditional Chinese opera styles into collision with Italian opera, avant-garde theater, Western orchestral music, contemporary dance and every imaginable type of multimedia. *Mazu's Bodyguards* (海神家族), which premieres today at the National Theater, brings together theater director and writer Jade Chen (陳玉慧) with *gezai* opera (歌仔戲) diva Sun Tsui-feng (孫翠鳳), founder of Ming Hwa Yuan Taiwanese Opera Company (明華園歌仔戲團), to create what is described as a New Age *gezai* opera.

Mazu's Bodyguards is written and directed by Chen and based on her hugely popular novel of the same name published in 2004. The novel won the Jury Prize at the inaugural Dream of the Red Chamber Award (第一屆紅樓夢獎) for Chinese literature in 2006 and picked up the prize for Best Novel in the Taiwan Literature Awards (台灣文學獎) in 2007.

Chen said that she had been encouraged to adapt the book for the stage following the passionate response elicited by the work from readers around the world. Drawing on her own family history, Chen looks back over the social and political upheavals experienced by Chinese people in modern times, as a result of which many of whom, like herself, are now dispersed across the world. At a rehearsal on Wednesday, Chen, who has spent much

of her professional life in Europe and the US, said that this work was a gift to Taiwan for all it has given her.

With *Mazu's Bodyguards*, Chen is making a return to the Taiwan stage for the first time in 20 years, though her work has had a constant presence here, reaching a new height of popularity with the success of *The Personals* (微婚啓事, 1998), a film starring Rene Liu (劉若英), based on a book by Chen.

Mazu's Bodyguards is a hugely ambitious work that aims to deconstruct *gezai* opera and build it again from the ground up as a medium for contemporary theater. This is a distinctly unsettling experience, as the traditional Chinese orchestra has been replaced by a fusion of contemporary classical and electronic music, removing the musical punctuation of drums and cymbals that are central to Chinese opera. Sun, whose Ming Hwa Yuan Taiwanese Opera Company is a leading innovator in *gezai* opera, said that this new work presented unique challenges for the artists. It also challenges the expectations of audiences.

Chen, who has never shied away from throwing down the artistic gauntlet to audiences, said that she believed this new dramatic work was an important step in bringing *gezai* opera into the modern world. "Traditional theater needs to be modernized," Chen said. "There are many obstacles to this process. This is just one step in a process that many



Mazu's Bodyguards is based Jane Chen's hugely popular novel of the same name. PHOTO COURTESY OF NTCH

people are working on."

Boldly experimental productions of traditional Chinese opera have had a mixed reception in recent years, and violent tampering with the musical structure of Chinese opera has produced some rather unhappy results.

Chen did not stop with the introduction of a new type of music for this New Age *gezai* opera. She also uses multimedia projections, contemporary dance and experimental theater

DRAMA

The fugitive

Godot Theatre Company is back with another adaptation of a Western classic, *The 39 Steps* (步步驚笑), a comedic espionage thriller that made its Taiwan debut on Thursday at Taipei's Metropolitan Hall.

Adapted from the novel of the same title by John Buchan, which inspired Alfred Hitchcock's classic film, the play is a theatrical spoof of the original story and has won two Tony Awards and a Laurence Olivier Award for Best Comedy.

This Chinese-language version was translated and is directed by former Hong Kong Repertory Theatre Artistic Director and Bauhinia Star winner Daniel S. P. Yang (楊世彭). This month two shows will run simultaneously in Shanghai and Taipei. The production then embarks on a country-wide tour here through the end of next month.

The show also marks the first time a major Broadway production has been licensed in Chinese while the original continues to run in New York and London.

"This is theatricalism and minimalism at its best," said Yang in a phone interview last week. "There is laughter in every step," and "plenty of tongue-in-cheek that will thrill the audience."

Following the original script written by British playwright Patrick



Barlow, the Chinese version features four actors who will portray a total of 48 characters. Chin Shih-chieh (金士傑), a veteran thespian and winner at this year's National Arts Awards, will play the lead character Mr Hanny, who unwittingly becomes entangled in an espionage conspiracy. Screen siren and tabloid darling Tien Hsin (天心) will portray three different women. Theater actors Pu Hsueh-liang (卜學亮) and Renzo Liu (劉亮佐) will each tackle more than 20 roles.

The story of *The 39 Steps* unfolds as Mr Hanny stumbles onto an enemy spy ring and a mysterious woman dies in his home. On the run, he finds himself knee-deep in a conspiracy that threatens both his life and the nation's safety.

"This is an early version of the James Bond story," said Yang. "It's a production for audiences from 9 years old to 90 years old."

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

techniques to build up her story of a doomed romance that crosses national and ideological lines. The cast also crosses gender and relationship lines, with Sun playing the lead male role and her daughter, Chen Shao-ting (陳昭婷), playing her lover. This rather facile transgression, along with the jarring juxtaposition of sharply contrasting musical styles, all seems to suggest that here is yet another story that will suffer through a too determined insistence on stylistic innovation.

Given the number of boundaries that Chen tries to straddle in *Mazu's Bodyguards*, there is a clear effort to make this production strikingly modern, with all the attendant dangers of pushing limits further than they have been pushed before.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: *Mazu's Bodyguards* (海神家族)
WHEN: Today and tomorrow at 7:30pm, Sunday at 2:30pm
WHERE: National Theater, Taipei City
ADMISSION: NT\$500 to NT\$2,000, available through NTCH ticketing or online at www.artsticket.com.tw
LANGUAGE: In Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese), Mandarin, Japanese and German with Chinese subtitles

RESTAURANTS

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Lumama (魯媽媽雲南擺夷料理)

Address: 210-2-1, Renhe Rd, Datong Village, Renai Township, Nantou County (南投縣仁愛鄉大同村仁和路210-2-1號) **Telephone:** (049) 280-3876 **Open:** 11am to 9pm (kitchen closes at 8pm) **Average meal:** NT\$400 per person **Details:** Chinese menu with pictures; credit cards not accepted

Although its official address is one of those vague rural addresses that can often be hellishly difficult to locate, it is almost impossible to miss Lumama (魯媽媽雲南擺夷料理), which sits just off the No. 14 Jia Provincial Highway (省道台14甲線) above the mountain resort of Cingjing Farm (清境農場).

In the crazily eclectic style of the area, Lumama, which serves up some of the best Yunnan/Shan food this side of the Thai border, is housed in a kind of Swiss chalet. While the restaurant boasts a lovely view of the Central Mountain Range, it is not set up as a scenic restaurant, and the focus is most definitely on the food with its bold flavors and liberal use of fragrant herbs and spices.

A must-try at Lumama's is the natural mung bean cake (天然豌豆粉, NT\$100), a firm green jelly served with cucumber, coriander, ground peanut and a thick sweet hot sauce. The restaurant's version of this often-bland starter was extraordinarily vibrant, and while the topping was pungent, the natural flavor of the bean jelly managed somehow to shine through. It is the sort of dish that you order again on the way out to snack on later.

Somewhat more controversial

but equally welcome was the beef soup (牛肉扒呼湯, NT\$350). Rich and gamy, it is made from offal and the beef is cooked to the edge of disintegration. The flavor of the soup can be enhanced by a selection of spices, and the beef itself eaten separately, flavored with a mint dipping sauce. This beef soup is not for the carnivorously challenged, for while the offal is not physically present in the soup, the flavor of organ meats cannot be missed.

A popular Shan dish that can be found at many local restaurants is gin sa (錦灑, NT\$200), a mix of minced pork and herbs wrapped in raw locally grown cabbage leaves. The leaves were crisp and sweet, the meat fragrant with chili and an unfamiliar bundle of mixed herbs. The whole ensemble packs a flavorful punch, but it never felt heavy or cloying. Dishes such as gin sa can be found on many Thai, Burmese and Yunnan restaurant menus around Taiwan, but Lumama gives it a special twist that makes the journey to this Shan enclave in the Central Mountain Range worthwhile.

Lumama uses local produce in an understated manner. High altitude cabbage comes from local farms, as does the fresh



Gin sa, a Yunnan version of spring rolls, tastes as good as it looks.

PHOTO: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES

angelica sinensis (當歸), a plant that is more commonly found as a dried herbal medicine. The collation of steamed preserved meats (NT\$200) is also made locally — the restaurant makes much of these authentic flavors, which are made possible by a climate similar to the highlands of Indochina where the Shan originated. The restaurant is situated at an altitude of more than 2,000m above sea level.

Service is brisk and the staff is clearly experienced at handling the large crowds that flock to Lumama for a taste of its unique cuisine. The joint has no pretensions, and maintains a street food ambience while presenting restaurant quality dishes.

Master Hung's Noodle Shop (洪師傳麵食棧)

Address: 72, Jianguo N Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市建國北路二段72號) **Telephone:** (02) 2500-6850 **Open:** 11am to midnight (Jianguo branch); see the restaurant's Web site for hours for other locations **Average meal:** NT\$110 to NT\$260 **Details:** Credit cards not accepted **On the Net:** www.taiwannoodle.com.tw



Master Hung's award-winning "five flower" brisket noodles.

PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

The beef portions are generous enough, but there's plenty else to please the taste buds. The broth was a pitch-perfect balance of tangy-sweet and savory and had a subtle garlic aftertaste. The "home-style" noodles, slightly thinner than the typical "knife-cut" noodles (刀削麵), tasted freshly made and had a nice al dente texture.

Other prize-winning bowls include the "take charge" noodles (獨當一麵, NT\$180), the 2007 champion in the beef noodle festival's braised category, and the "three treasures" beef noodles (牛三寶麵, NT\$230), which comes with a trio of beef chunks, tendon and tripe.

Master Hung, whose full name is Hung Chin-lung (洪金龍), says he uses USDA prime beef for the prize-winning bowls, but in a nod to the recent anti-US beef fracas a small sign on the wall shows a picture of

a crossed-out cow wearing an American flag and reads, "Refuse to eat cows' internal organs, ground beef and beef marrow from the United States."

For something on the healthier side, try the beef noodles with red yeast powder and tomato soup (紅麴蕃茄牛肉麵, NT\$260), the winner of the creativity prize at last year's beef noodle festival. Red yeast powder is among several ingredients used in traditional Chinese medicine, although there are no overpowering herbal flavors in this broth, which has a hearty tomato flavor.

If only Master Hung's would put the same effort into the decor, which dampens the enjoyment of those prize-winning (and pricey) noodles. Both the Jianguo North Road (建國北路) and East Metro Mall (東區地下街) branches are just a step up from the hole-in-the-wall noodle joint with budget-grade furniture and plain-Jane interiors.

For those who don't want to splurge, Master Hung's also offers an extensive menu of noodle dishes ranging from NT\$70 to NT\$140. Leek and cabbage dumplings are NT\$50 for a set of 10. The Jianguo branch also offers fist-sized steamed buns with either beef (黑胡椒牛肉包), green onion and pork (貢丸夫蔥燒包) or cabbage and pork (高麗菜鮮肉包) for NT\$30.

Master Hung's Jianguo branch is located near Changchun Road (長春路), and the East Metro Mall branch is store No. 35 (東區地下街35店舖), near Zhongxiao Dunhua MRT Station (忠孝敦化捷運站).

TIDBITS

BY DAVID CHEN

He waxes passionate about 7-Eleven lunchboxes, poststickers and Peking duck pizza from Costco and calls KFC in Taiwan "moderately awesome." Junk food connoisseurs will appreciate My Inner Fatty (myinnerfatty.blogspot.com), a blog written by Taiwanese American college student "Nicholas." He describes himself as a "former fat kid" who made it through high school on a diet of Pop Tarts.

Clicking on the "Taipei" label reveals an amusing, if long-winded, journal of Nicholas' dining exploits during his stay in Taipei.

In an entry from October, he gawks at a Pizza Hut pizza that has hot dogs stuffed in the crust. Of course he has to try it: "It sounds disgusting right? Oh it is. The hot dogs were cool, it saved me the trouble of having to get hot dogs in Taiwan, and I love the Kewpie mayo, but I could do without eggs."

Another entry offers a detailed comparison of 7-Eleven microwaved fried chicken vs the fried chicken lunchbox (the lunchbox won because the chicken outlet was "not soggy"). He's like a kid in a candy store at the Overseas Dragon (四海遊龍) fast food chain restaurant, polishing off 40 potstickers.

Nicholas' sentiment on Peking duck pizza at Costco perhaps best sums up the spirit of his blog: "I don't care if the crust tastes like cardboard, I will still eat it." And we'll still read about it.