

The arts in 2009

Some things old, some things new



Above: Huang Chin-ho's *Fire* was on display as part of the Jewels of 25 Years Museum Collection at the Taiwan Museum of Fine Art. PHOTO COURTESY OF TFAM
Left: Contemporary Legend Theater's *Legendary Pear Garden*. PHOTO COURTESY OF CONTEMPORARY LEGEND THEATER AND NOVEL HALL

BY NOAH BUCHAN AND IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTERS

The Taiwan Museum of Fine Art's Jewels of 25 Years Museum Collection (25年典藏精粹) examined the intermingling of art and politics in Taiwan's history. Organized for the most part chronologically, from the middle of the Japanese colonial period to the end of Martial Law and beyond, the pieces on display were chosen from among the 4,000 works in the museum's possession because, according to the exhibit's literature, they "illustrate the development of Taiwan's art history." The show revealed how two occupying powers imposed their aesthetic views on Taiwanese artists, resulting in a repetition of styles and lack of innovation — especially when contrasted with the artistic movements flourishing in European painting that found their center in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s, in American painting centered around New York after the 1950s and up to the 1970s, and in Taiwanese painting just before and after the lifting of martial law in 1987. While Jewels of 25 Years Museum Collection did not explicitly suggest that authoritarian regimes — at least in Taiwan's case — stifle innovation, it is hard to imagine that it was not organized with this thought in mind.

TFAM's exhibit *Open Flexibility: Innovative Contemporary Ink Art* (開關與時變—創新水墨藝術展) explored the evolution of ink painting in Taiwan since the 1960s and China since the 1980s. Curator Liu Yung-jen (劉永仁) assembled 80 works by 27 artists — 15 from Taiwan, 12 from China — to trace the revolutionary changes in ink painting that have occurred in both countries. The juxtaposition of Chinese experimental ventures and Taiwanese modernist undertakings illustrated the flexibility of ink painting, which is able to engage the multiple preoccupations of contemporary aesthetics while remaining somewhat grounded in tradition. The exhibit's subtext, of course, made it perfectly clear that Chinese innovative ink painters lagged 20 years behind their Taiwanese counterparts because of China's tumultuous recent history.

Less impressive was the Futurism exhibit held this summer at Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. The design of the show, which included manifestos, sculpture, painting, furniture and clothing, purported to demonstrate how relevant the movement is today by focusing on its obsession with youth, speed and technology. However, it unforgivably glossed over Futurism's violent, anti-environment, anti-feminist and fascist elements. Consequently, the show failed to explain the ideological underpinnings that facilitated the movement's rise. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine that the organizers weren't aware of the message they were

sending when they decided to hold an exhibit of artists who celebrated war and fascism inside a monument built to commemorate a right-wing dictator.

The National Museum of History should be commended for two exhibits. The Smiling Kingdom: The Terra-Cotta Warriors of Han Yang Ling (微笑彩俑—漢景帝的地下王國) displayed figurines and ancient funerary objects excavated from the mausoleum of the Emperor Jing of the early Han Dynasty. It focused on two aspects of Emperor Jing's tomb to show how changes in society can be examined through funerary practices. The main part focused on clay figurines buried with the emperor, while a smaller section was devoted to building materials employed to construct his mausoleum. Small replica burial sites, illustrations detailing the excavation area and a documentary of the archeological dig complemented the 200 objects on display, which included bronze utensils and jade decorations.

The Museum's Collection of Huaxia Artifacts (簡藏華夏文物展) is a permanent exhibit on the museum's third floor. Neolithic pottery, Shang Dynasty bronze ritual vessels and Tang Dynasty clay figurines share space with porcelain plates from the Sung and Ming dynasties and silver ingots from the Qing Dynasty. The exhibit focuses mostly on ceramics and bronze ware to emphasize the initial functional purpose of the objects and their ritualized use later on. Detailed introductions in Chinese and English along with maps, chronological tables and a documentary of excavation sites add depth to the exhibit. Although a little overwhelming, this permanent exhibit shows that a country's plastic arts reveal much about its development as a civilization and the preoccupations of its people throughout history.

The opening of the Chinese opera classic *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (長生殿) at the National Palace Museum (國立故宮博物院文會堂) in July was an exciting event for opera lovers, in presenting a short format opera by a top company with the benefit of good English subtitles. The production, by the Lanting Kun Opera Company (蘭庭崑劇團) and starring Wen Yuhang (溫宇航), was the first production in the New Melody From the National Palace Museum (故宮新韻) series, which is conceived of as an ongoing project. The Lanting production was followed by Li Baochun's (李寶春) Taipei Li-Yuan Peking Opera Theatre's (台北新韻團) staging of a 12-week program titled *New Journey to the West* (新西遊記). There has been no news of how the National Palace Museum aims to continue the series into the New Year, but fingers are crossed that 2010

will not see the end of the venture.

This year also saw the Taiwan premiere of Kenneth Pai's (白先勇) *The Jade Hairpin*, which follows the enormous success of Pai's highly acclaimed version of *The Peony Pavilion* (牡丹亭), which toured successfully in Asia and the US and proved that an ancient style of Chinese opera could form the basis of an international theatrical hit. The show's triumph — far exceeding what is usual for Chinese opera — showed that Pai was onto something with his "youth editions," which sport a young cast and a youthful aesthetic.

In addition to the Taiwan premiere of *The Jade Hairpin*, there were a number of fine operas catering to both traditionalists and modernists in 2009. Most notable for the former was a series titled *Ghostly Stunts* (鬼·戲) by the Guoguang Opera Company (國光劇團) in May. The program included famous opera highlights chosen for their association with the supernatural or delusional. Vengeful ghosts and people (often women) made mad by sorrow provided ample opportunity to showcase Beijing opera's most demanding performance skills.

In addition to often-seen water sleeves (水袖) move and the flourishing of hair and beards, the program includes the use of stilts (蹺工, employed to imitate the effects of bound feet), a discipline that was discontinued in China in 1949 for its depiction of a degenerate feudal custom, and the spitting of fire, a highly dangerous maneuver for singers that is a specific function of supernatural characters but now rarely seen on stage. Beijing opera has never been shy about the delight taken in ostentation, and the show did everything it promised.

Another return to tradition was seen in Contemporary Legend Theater's (當代傳奇劇場) *The Legendary Pear Garden* (梨園傳奇), which opened in November. This is the first time the group has performed a fully traditional work in Taiwan since it formed in 1984. Founder and lead performer Wu Hsing-kuo (吳興國) made a point of underlining the importance of passing on traditional styles to a younger generation, even within modernizing groups such as his. The program ended with two performances of *Loves That Topple Empires* (傾國之戀), which includes the scene *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王別姬), made famous in Chen Kaige's (陳凱歌) 1993 film of the same name and one of the great tragic set pieces of Beijing opera. This was combined with Beijing opera diva Wei Hai-ming (魏海敏) performing *The Drunken Concubine* (貴妃醉酒), a highly technical piece made famous by Wei's mentor Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳). This return to the traditional roots of two bold innovators brought the house down, and provided proof, if any were needed, that traditional opera still has the chops to cut it in the modern world.

November also saw the revival of two highly successful modern style Chinese operas, *The Jester* (弄臣), based on Verdi's opera *Rigoletto*, and *The Wilderness* (原野), based on an unfinished play by China's greatest modern playwright, Cao Yu (曹禺). Both productions by the Taipei Li-Yuan Peking Opera Theater (台北新韻團), a company known for its strong traditional values, proved enormously successful and also toured China, with *The Wilderness* participating in the Shanghai International Art Festival (上海國際藝術節) and *The Jester* in the Beijing International Theater Dance Festival (北京戲劇舞蹈季).

Amid the many art festivals of 2009, one of the most notable was the triple event staged by the Taipei Children's Art Festival (台北兒童藝術節), Taipei Arts Festival (第十一屆台北藝術節) and Taipei Fringe Festival (台北藝穗節), which ran this summer. The three festivals, sponsored by the Taipei City Government, went out of their way to recruit new venues, emphasizing community centers such as schools and cafes, where the performing arts could reach new audiences.

Movies

More new kids on the block

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

With record-breaking blockbuster *Cape No. 7* (海角七號), 2008 saw a renaissance of Taiwanese cinema, which had been in decline since the early 1990s. The momentum has been maintained this year with more newcomers arriving on the scene. If new works by this younger generation of filmmakers are any indication, the auteur age that saw the rise of art-house masters such as Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢) and Tsai Ming-liang (蔡明亮) is a thing of the past. What follows is a new breed of filmmakers whose top priority is to tell a good story.

On the commercial end, *Invitation Only* (絕命派對), 25-year-old director Kevin Ko's (柯孟樺) feature debut, is a competent addition to the genre of horror films made popular by the *Saw* and *Hostel* series. More tender in tone, Norwegian-Taiwanese Hakon Liu's (劉漢威) feature debut *Miss Kicki* (覓鯊心) is a Taiwanese-Swedish co-production that mixes a road-movie style with a coming-of-age tale.

A considerable amount of diversity is shown in the directors' choices of subject matter. The country's new immigrants and migrant workers from Southeast Asian countries take center stage in film critic Rich Lee's (李奇) debut feature *Delours to Paradise* (歧路天堂). Documentary director Kuo Chen-ti (郭珍弟) touches upon the life of the elderly (who are often overlooked in mainstream Taiwanese cinema) in dance genre flick *Step by Step* (練·戀·舞), which weds star charisma with comedy.

Taiwan's tradition of producing strong documentaries continues with Wuna Wu's (吳汶廷) *Let's Fall in Love* (愛情歷險記), a humorous take on modern-day match-making. *Baseball Boys* (野球孩子) by Shen Koshang (沈可尚) and Liao Ching-yao (廖敬堯) dispenses with the dramatic moments and narrative climaxes popularized by documentaries such as *Jump! Boys* (翻滾吧！男孩) and *My Football Summer* (奇蹟的夏天) to

dwell on snippets of everyday life in its portrait of a group of young athletes on the cusp of adolescence.

But the film deserving the most kudos this year is undoubtedly actor-turned-director Leon Dai's (戴立忍) second feature *No Pudeo Vivir Sin Ti* (不能沒有你), which swept last month's Golden Horse Awards (金馬獎) by winning in five categories including Best Feature Film, Best Director and Outstanding Taiwanese Film of the Year.

A long-term collaborator with director Singing Chen (陳志直), Lou Yi-an (樓一安) hands in his feature debut *A Place of One's Own* (一席之地), a socially conscious film with a multi-threaded narrative. Like Chen, Lou is a name to watch, showing great potential in his insightful observations on contemporary Taiwanese society. However, Lou's



Laetitia Casta stars in *Face*, directed by Tsai Ming-liang. PHOTO COURTESY OF ATOM CINEMA

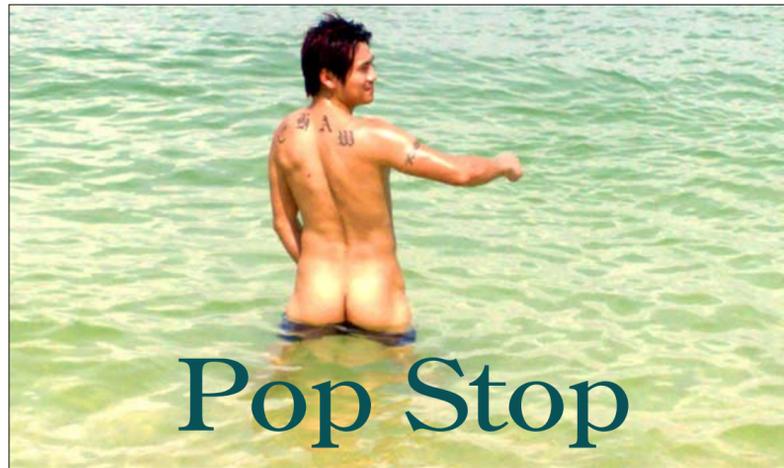
debut displays weakness that also can be found in Chen's *God Man Dog* (流浪神狗人). In dealing with modern existential angst, both films lack subtlety, and the anguish of their protagonists comes across as more constructed than felt. The pair will be irresistible if they overcome this defect.

Box office success *Hear Me* (聽說) cements up-and-coming director Cheng Fen-fen's (鄭芬芬) status as a whiz kid of youthful romance. An award-winning scriptwriter, Cheng has a flair for storytelling and knows how to turn this talent to her advantage when yarning lighthearted romances starring young pop idols.

After his rather messy feature debut *Do Over* (一年之初), director Cheng Yu-chieh (鄭有傑) returns with well executed *Yang Yang* (陽陽), a coming-of-age story tailor-

made for half-Taiwanese, half-French star Sandrine Pinna (張榕容). Shot mostly in long takes with handheld, fluid camera and natural lighting, the film excels in a masterful control of cinematography and succeeds in creating a complicated heroine through a simple, focused narrative.

Finally, let's not forget an old master who made Taiwanese cinema world famous. Tsai Ming-liang makes it to the Louvre with *Face* (臉) (runner up for Best Feature Film at Golden Horse), a deeply personal yet ambitious project posited as a cinematic dream in which the boundaries between life and film are blurred. With *Face*, Tsai once again proves that he is an artist like no other.



Gary Tsao's drunken shenanigans have made him a regular feature in gossip rags. PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

We first start out with the curious case of **Lei Hong** (雷洪) as an extreme symbol of the bizarre marital trends of Taiwan's celebrity firmament in 2009. The star of the popular FTV soap opera *Mom's House* (娘家) and winner of last year's Golden Bell Award (金鐘獎) for best male actor had a complaint of four "wives" that wouldn't look out of place in *Big Love* or *The Last Emperor*.

That's right, four wives. And they all live together under the same roof in Taipei. To maintain harmony, Lei says, he refuses to spend an entire night with just one wife. But not all was roses and chocolate at the Lei homestead. When the 61-year-old announced that he had decided to take a fifth "wife" in a public ceremony, his mother, the media and his other four wives went nuts, as holding a public wedding ceremony in Taiwan comes dangerously close to making the nuptials legally binding. In a mea culpa to the vernacular media, Lei bowed and slapped his face several times in penance for being a bad influence on society. He eventually canceled the ceremony. It should be noted that the character Lei plays on TV only has two wives — proving once again that truth is stranger than fiction.

Not to be outdone by Lei Hong's shenanigans is the ongoing saga of plastic surgeon and alleged lothario **Li Jin-liang** (李進良) who tied the knot in June with **Hu Ying-chen** (胡盈禎), daughter of entertainer **Hu Gua** (胡瓜). Before getting hitched to Hu Ying-chen, Li allegedly carried on an affair with starlet **Mao Mao** (毛毛). His past misadventures also include charges of sexual harassment by a Japanese porn star and an all-night party with two friends and three hostesses at a Taipei hotel.

But Li may have turned out to be an even bigger boob than either of the Hus imagined. The plastic surgeon was recently fined NT\$150,000 and ordered to stop working for three months after illegally inserting silicone breast implants into a patient. Through thick and thin, however, Hu Ying-chen has decided to stay with her man.

Meanwhile, Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) legislator **Wu Yu-sheng** (吳育昇) extramarital tryst with 40-something piano teacher **Rebecca Sun** (孫仲瑜) saw TV anchors devoting much of their primetime news slots to yapping on about the matter like rabid Chihuahuas — which only died down amidst rumors that **Chung Yui-kwong** (鍾離光), the married director of the Taipei Chinese Orchestra (臺北市立國樂團), was doing the dirty with **Ma Tsui-yu** (馬翠娟), a 26-year-old musician with the orchestra.

After the latter two were spotted holding hands and cuddling in the East District (東區), the 52-year-old Chung defended himself by saying he was helping Ma relax after work. Ma was more creative, saying it was only natural for her to snuggle up with her gay friends.

Gay is certainly not the word to describe the public marital problems between singer **Rachel Fu** (傅天穎) and **Charles Chen** (陳子強), which reached a denouement when Fu was admitted to hospital after allegedly slashing her wrist. Fu later denied reports that she had tried to commit suicide, telling reporters that she had fallen down and cut herself on broken glass. When contacted by reporters for comment, Chen said, "She has to be responsible for her own actions," a response that, needless to say, didn't endear him to observers.

Even less endearing were the boozy and drug-addled shenanigans of the celebrity firmament in 2009.

Starlet **Pei Lin** (裴琳) may be out of rehab for puffing the magic dragon but she's still a girl who wants to have fun. These days, though, the high jinks are fueled by booze. According to local media reports, she has lost two jobs, one as a co-host for *Go Go Japan* and the other on the TTV drama *Niang Jia* (娘家), because of alcohol-related issues. Scenes of simulated sex on the roadside and a vicious physical attack against a suspected romantic rival for the attentions of *Go Go Japan* host **Toku** (李育騰) have done nothing for her reputation, but certainly have ensured plenty of column inches.

Golden Melody Award-winning singer **Gary Tsao** (曹格), on the other hand, upheld his reputation as a psychotic drunk by beating up his friend, Canto-pop singer **Justin Lo** (羅田), in an extended brawl that started at a bar, continued in a taxi and ended on the street.

Tsao's past drunken indiscretions include kicking a sign (2006), scowling at reporters (October last year), scaring his friends (same month) and getting bitten (November last year). Small wonder that Tsao's wife doesn't let him hold their baby when he's drinking.

From booze to bud, former Channel V presenter **Henry Lu** (呂良基) was arrested for marijuana possession along with six other suspects — most of whom grew up in either Canada, Australia or the US. Intrepid journalists were quick to point out the correlation between drug use and having been born or studied abroad.

And going one better than former US president Bill Clinton (who claims he pretended to smoke a joint but "didn't inhale"), perhaps in an effort to protect themselves in the event that the fuzz decides to play another round of "Celebrity Drug Bust," singer and wannabe director **David Tao** (陶吉吉) and pop idol **Mark Chao** (趙又廷) both volunteered information that they had involuntarily inhaled "secondhand marijuana" smoke (二手麻). Pop Stop trusts that these two actors won't encounter the same problems as entertainer **Da Bing** (大炳), the stage name of Yu Bing-hsian (余炳賢), who became a poster boy for the anti-drug movement only to later be busted for amphetamines in a hotel while allegedly watching porn.

Dance

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

This year confirmed that Taiwan is a powerhouse in modern dance, while its ballet talent has been left in the dust. It also confirmed that the 10-year old Novel Hall Dance Series is a crucial forum for dance from around the world.

A key factor is Lin Hwai-min (林懷民), founder of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre (雲門舞集) and artistic director of Novel Hall Dance. Even as he continues to create for his own companies, his eye for talent has enriched Taiwan's dance scene through the young choreographers he has championed and the troupes he picks to perform at Novel Hall.

Among those choreographers are former Cloud Gate dancer Bulareyaung Pagarlava (布拉瑞揚), whose young company with partner Sheu Fang-yi (許芳宜), LaFa & Artists, delivered another powerful performance in September as part of the Taipei Arts Festival. The highlight of the show was *Lament*, a beautiful elegy that Bula developed from a piece commissioned by the Martha Graham Center.

The festival also brought a great collaboration between Cloud Gate 2 and the Taipei Chinese Orchestra (臺北市立國樂團), the highlight of which was *Happiness and Music* (樂) by Cloud Gate 2's resident choreographer Cheng Tsung-lung (鄭宗龍), where dancers played, musicians danced and a whole host of conventional and non-conventional instruments were used. Also on the program was Huang Yi's (黃翊) delightful *TA-TA for Now* for five dancers, five chairs and a violinist.

The standout in this year's Novel Hall Dance program was Briton Wayne McGregor's Random Dance troupe, which performed his hour-long *Entily* in May. The 39-year-old McGregor's choreography is a stunning revelation of the human body's potential. His dancers curve and twist their whippet-like bodies



Legend Lin Dance Theatre's *Song of Pensive Beholding*. PHOTO COURTESY OF LEGEND LIN DANCE THEATRE

in angular contortions with such speed and fluidity; by the time the audience's registers it all, the dancers are already two or three steps ahead. McGregor made it clear why he has been one of the hottest choreographers working for more than a decade.

Another Lin who has had a tremendous impact on Taiwan's dance world is Lin Li-chen (林麗珍), whose stunning *Song of Pensive Beholding* (Chants de la Destinée, 觀) for her Legend Lin Dance Theatre (無垢舞蹈劇場) this month at the National Theater closed out the year for dance. Lin's productions are lush visual masterpieces whose sensual aesthetics stand in stark contrast to her minimalist choreography.

On a sadder note, 2009 may prove to be the end of Wang Tzer-shing's (王澤聲) dream of staging world-class galas in Taipei. The 3rd

International Ballet Star Gala was a terrific program, bringing new stars, established faces and several new works. The performances were breathtaking. But Wang has said the struggle to pull off such a program is too much for one person to bear, and without government or private-sector support, she won't do it again. This will be a tremendous loss for both dance fans and students. Young dancers won't have role models, and balletomanes won't be stuck waiting for the next tour of the Mariinsky, or another company, serving up the same old classics.

Despite the best efforts of Wang and other ballet teachers, ballet remains the poor relation in Taiwan's dance world, and the lack of rigorous daily training and studio time was clearly evident in this year's local productions.