

AROUND TOWN

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The mystery behind the walls

*Taipei Crossover Dance Company celebrates its 15th anniversary with 'Time Hotel,'
a piece that combines detective fiction, modern dance and theater*

BY **DIANE BAKER**
STAFF REPORTER

Just over 15 years ago, four members of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's (雲門舞集) "first generation" formed a company so they would have a forum to continue performing. Lo Man-fei (羅曼菲) invited lighting designer Lin Keh-hua (林克華) to join her and her colleagues — Cheng Shu-gi (鄭淑姬), Wu Su-chun (吳素君) and Yeh Tai-chu (葉台竹) — and the Taipei Crossover Dance Company (台北越界舞團) quickly developed a reputation for challenging, collaborative works.

Cambodian-born Zhang Xiao-xiong (張曉雄) joined the company when he moved to Taiwan from Australia in 1996 to teach at Taipei National University of the Arts (NTUA). In 2005 Lo, battling the lung cancer that would kill her a year later, asked another NTUA colleague Ho Hsiao-mei (何曉玫) to become the company's director. Younger dancers were also recruited as guest artists, and in recent years the bulk of the performing fell on the newer generation.

To celebrate the troupe's 15-year anniversary, Zhang, now artistic director, wanted something different: He wanted to reunite the three remaining founders on stage.

"Everyone was like 'no, no, no,'" Zhang said in a telephone interview.

"Tai-chu last performed with company eight years ago at Jacob's Pillow. He came back [from that tour], retired from school and just played his flute. Su-chun didn't want to dance without Man-fei. Shu-gi was about the only one to say 'I don't want to quit the stage,'" Zhang said, noting that he had largely stopped dancing in recent years because of problems with his right foot.

But doing a play last year reminded Zhang how much he enjoyed performing and he was determined to get the others in front of an audience as well.

Listening to Zhang talk, the anniversary show, *Time Hotel* (越界15—時光旅社), began to sound like pure synchronicity — or karma — especially his meeting with well-known theater director Michael Li (黎煥雄). Zhang had done a show in Hong Kong, Singapore and Adelaide about time, a house and history and he wanted to do it in Taipei, but he wanted a theater director to take over so he could concentrate on performing. He met with Li to talk about the play and Li had a novel about a hotel with him. The two men started talking about the mystery inherent in old buildings, and everything just seemed to click, but for a Crossover piece, not Zhang's play.

Li went off and wrote a script for the company. "It was beautiful writing, very exciting to read. All the founding members got excited about it, got excited about getting back on stage," Zhang said. "Michael Li was the perfect person. It was the perfect script, the perfect time."

"The whole idea is like ... a hotel, some people move in, some move out, some are in there for 100 years. The building lives on ... but people are always in and out," he said.

There is an element of detective fiction in *Time Hotel*, in learning about the characters, about what happened in the rooms.

Li spent time interviewing each of the dancers to come up with a story for their characters drawn from elements of their own lives.

"Shu-gi comes from Keelung, where her family's business was a hotel for sailors. She lived and played in the hotel as a child. She remembers the smell of the fish in Keelung.

Those memories are so strong. She plays the owner of the Time Hotel," Zhang said. "Su-chun talked about leaving her first baby at home when she had to travel with Cloud Gate and walking for miles in the snow to reach a public phone so she could call home just to hear her baby cry."

"I play a ship's captain. Li used one of my old poems and I wrote a new one especially for this. It's great to speak my own words on stage," he said.

"Wu Chien-wei (吳建維) is the main character. He comes to the hotel, which is next door to his home and moves in, trying to get the feeling of the Flying Dutchman [the sea captain doomed never to return home]," Zhang said.

There is a cross-generational aspect to the show, since the dancers range in age from 23 to 60.

"Tai-chu is 60 and I'm the youngest [of the seniors] at 52, so together we are 200-something," Zhang said.

Besides Wu, the other "youngsters" are Chu Huang-yi (朱晃毅), who has danced in several of Zhang's works, Yang Hsiao-hsuan (楊孝萱), a former member of Cloud Gate 2 and the Australian

Dance Theatre and an NTUA grad, and Chan Shu-han (詹舒涵), who also studied at NTUA.

Li wanted *Time Hotel* to have a big set, which dictated the choice of theater. They considered the National Theater and other sites but Li liked the space of NTUA's dance theater. However, booking problems meant that the show, which originally had been scheduled for last month, had to be pushed back to this weekend.

"We have never performed on our own stage before but it's a beautiful stage. And it's a wonderful feeling to perform in your own backyard, a feeling of coming home," Zhang said.

The choreography for *Time Hotel*, which runs about 80 minutes with no intermission, was a collaborative effort by Zhang, Li and Ho, though the other "seniors" also pitched in.

Famed Taiwanese designer Sophie Hong (洪麗芬) provided the costumes.

"The stage is so beautiful, the costumes, everything is so beautiful," Zhang said. "This piece pulled everyone together and everyone shared."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAIPEI CROSSOVER DANCE COMPANY

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Taipei Crossover Dance Company (台北越界舞團), *Time Hotel* (越界15—時光旅社)

WHEN: Tonight and tomorrow at 7:30pm, tomorrow and Sunday afternoon at 2:30pm

WHERE: Taipei National University of the Arts Dance Theater (國立臺北藝術大學舞蹈廳), 1 Xueyuan Rd, Beitou Dist, Taipei City (台北市北投區學園路1號)

ADMISSION: NT\$600, NT\$800 and NT\$1,500, available through NTCH ticketing or www.artsticket.com.tw. Tonight's show is sold out. Seats in all prices are available for tomorrow's matinee. For tomorrow night the NT\$1,500 seats are sold out. NT\$800 seats are sold out for Sunday's matinee