

FEATURES

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Headspring Theater's 'human installation' performance
at Huashan 1914 Creative Park strikes a fine
balance between artistic integrity and commercial concerns

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Part from traditional religious processions, Taiwan is not known for its street performers. Buskers, though making tentative steps into public spaces, are still relatively few and often inexperienced in the subtle arts of drawing in a curbside audience.

Chang Wang (張忘), Headspring Theater's (匯川聚場) artistic director, has spent many years promoting street performance. He created "human installations" (人形裝置), which routinely ply the pedestrian precinct surrounding VieShow Cinemas (威秀影城) in Taipei's Xinyi District and have become a popular way to enliven promotion campaigns.

In what is a groundbreaking departure for the theater, formed in 1998, Chang's human installations are on display at Huashan 1914 Creative Park (華山1914創意文化園區) until Feb. 22, alongside inanimate installations positioned in the venue's front courtyard.

Chang said that the new production, titled *Meander — Creative Exhibition in the Land of Huashan* (神遊地 — 神遊華山大地創意展), would bring the performers out of their frozen poses to interact with the installations and each other. Speech, music and dance have all been incorporated, but the basic principle that lies at the heart of Headspring, which is to make people stop and pay attention to what is happening around them, remains unchanged.

Although Chang's characters are dressed up as aliens from outer space or creatures from mythology, he said that he is really just carrying on a Taiwanese tradition.

"Taiwan doesn't have many public sculptures — apart from those of [former] president Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石). What we do have are religious tableaux vivants, with people dressed up as characters from Buddhist or Taoist stories standing in an elaborate background [often carried about in a parade on the back of a truck]," Wang said.

While Wang's characters may look very different, they generate the same appeal.

Wang developed Headspring partly to find a balance between commercial and artistic considerations, without relying on government handouts.

"I wanted to see if I could connect with the commercial world. The private sector. I believe that every person is part of that commercial world, because they spend money. You just have to create a structure that allows them to do so. In this way, I have helped [financially] support many aspiring young artists," Wang said.

When an onlooker throws a coin into a hat, the sculpture moves. Another coin, another movement. It's almost like putting money into a slot machine, the payoff being the anticipation of what happens next. As a way of generating revenue, it seems to be far more effective than more complex or highly

orchestrated routines. "We are one of the very few street performance groups that have managed to survive long term," Wang said, adding that the most skillful performers can pick up as much as NT\$20,000 a month working just weekends.

For Wang, much depends on the artist's skill of working a crowd, an accomplishment that he said most art school performers lack. Headspring provides a platform for artists to hone their street performance, so they can later export what they have learned to the theater.

While Wang usually designs all Headspring's costumes, for *Meander* he asked the performers themselves to create the installations and choreograph their own routines.

The exhibition at Huashan is more than just another gig for Chang, who was among the first group of young artists back in 1997 to begin what became a decade-long struggle over what to do with the venue, then a derelict factory occupying a prime downtown location. First, as the director of the Association of Culture Environment Reform Taiwan (中華民國藝術文化環境改協) and then subsequently as the chairman of the Huashan Cultural District Management Committee (華山藝文特區管委會), Chang has had a long association with this site. Although Huashan has had something of a checkered history as an arts venue, pulled hither and thither by financial and political interests, Chang and others have at least succeeded in preventing the construction of luxury apartments or offices here.

Huashan has now metamorphosed into the Huashan 1914 Creative Park after nearly two years of gradual refurbishment under new management.

I interviewed Chang under the awnings of a branch of the Alleycat's pizza chain that recently opened here; just across the way, the opening ceremony for the Huashan Fine Crafts Boutique (華山工藝精品館) was taking place. Both restaurant and boutique reflect the more commercial direction that Huashan is now taking. Chang, having now achieved financial independence with Headspring, says he created *Meander* to inject something of the old creative and anarchic spirit into this brighter and shinier incarnation of Huashan.

Although Chang is no longer officially connected with the management of Huashan, he still wants to help it find a balance between creativity and commercial imperatives. "It shouldn't lose touch with creativity," Chang said, adding that there is nothing more destructive to creativity than easy money.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Meander — Creative Exhibition in the Land of Huashan (神遊地:神遊華山大地創意展)
WHEN: Until Feb. 22. Performances on Feb. 20 and Feb. 21 in the afternoon and evening
WHERE: Huashan 1914 Creative Park (華山1914創意文化園區)1, Bade Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市八德路一段1號)
ADMISSION: Free
ON THE NET: www.head-spring.com and www.huashan1914.com



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HUASHAN 1914 CREATIVE PARK



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— Chang Wang, Headspring Theater's artistic director

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