

## AROUND TOWN

13

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## A journey of exploration



PHOTO COURTESY OF U-THEATRE

Robert Wilson and U-Theatre cross time and cultures to tell a story about Ming Dynasty admiral Zheng He

BY DIANE BAKER  
STAFF REPORTER

The journey to *1433* began in early January 2007, when famed American stage director and playwright Robert Wilson came to Taiwan to give a lecture about his work as part of the National Theater and Concert Hall's 20th anniversary celebrations.

NTCH staff showed Wilson around Taipei, including a trip to U-Theatre's (優劇場) Laoquanshan (老泉山) home in Muzha to meet the celebrated Zen drumming troupe.

Since that trip, Wilson has become a frequent visitor to Taipei — he created *Orlando* with Beijing opera diva Wei Hai-min (魏海敏), the production that opened last year's Taiwan International Festival — while U-Theatre has made two extended trips to Wilson's Watermill Center on Long Island, New York.

On Feb. 20 the Wilson-U-Theatre collaboration *1433 — The Grand Voyage* (鄭和1433) will have its world premiere at the National Theater as part of the 2010 Taiwan International Festival.

Liu Ruo-yu (劉若瑀), U-Theatre's founder and director, explained how it all came about.

"In 2007 Wilson was here to give a speech. The National Theater introduced him to our mountain home in the morning. He was very impressed and he talked about the company in his speech. He invited the company to Watermill [for the summer program] — we performed and did workshops. We decided we could work together. The next year we went there again," Liu said.

"The first table work of *Zheng He* was in the summer of 2008 in Watermill. In March [2009], he came to do *Orlando* and we held auditions for U-Theatre so he saw all our members. He came here from Sept. 2 to Sept. 27 and we rehearsed. We already had the structure in place. His team came — technicians, lighting — so the work was very fast," Liu said.

The combination of Wilson and the ritual-based, deeply meditative U-Theatre is not as quirky as it might appear. Wilson has built his reputation on abstract productions that feature elaborate sets, sculptural movements and intricate lighting, as well as working with avant-garde and jazz musicians such as Philip Glass. However, his productions remain focused on the basic elements of theater: light, sound, space, movement and time. These are also the key elements to U-Theatre's drumming and dance pieces, which are usually both abstract and deeply philosophical at the same time.

*1433* is a musical theater production that centers on the fabled Chinese mariner Zheng He (鄭和), who lived from about 1371 to 1435. Zheng made seven epic voyages at the behest of his Ming Dynasty emperor between 1405 and 1433, exploring the South Pacific, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the east coast of Africa, at times commanding a fleet of 200 boats and a crew of 28,000.

The show focuses on the last of Zheng's journeys.

U-Theatre drumming director Huang Chih-chun (黃誌群), who plays Zheng, heads the 20-member cast. Huang, however, will speak through movement rather than words, while the story will be narrated by *gezai* (歌仔) opera star Tang Mei-yun (唐美雲).

Wilson designed the set and the lighting, while the costumes were created by longtime U-Theatre collaborator and Oscar-winning designer Tim Yip (葉錦添).

Wilson told a press conference in November that the work was about a journey, but not a journey from one place to an unknown destination, rather one from the East to the West and from the West to the East because it combined both Zheng's explorations and his own experience as a Westerner working in Asia.

"It's an exploration of different stations along this path. It's not necessarily the kind of journey that would be told in a history book," he said. "It's a poetic journey. In this journey we see people coming from different cultures, different backgrounds and merging, socially, culturally, politically."

He has also described the show as a parable of men searching for peace.

*1433* mixes U-Theatre's drumming with the free jazz of American composer Ornette Coleman and saxophonist Richard "Dickie" Landry. The latter, whom Wilson worked with on the 1976 opera *Einstein on the Beach*, will also be performing on stage.

"It's not easy to put two opposites together," Wilson said. "It's always a question of how to take something very different. Basically there are only two lines in the world, a straight line

and a curved line, that's all. You have to make up your mind. Do I want it straight or do I want it curved. So it's like putting two hands on one work, a left hand of one nature and a right hand of a different nature, and you're holding the work together. It's a time-space construction."

For Wilson, putting the show together involved a lot of talking — and watching, watching how people interact.

"When I work I like to be in room and do it with the actual people. It comes from personalities of the performers, technicians, whoever is there," Wilson said.

"You see what they can do, you prepare it and then you share it with other people. Even the setting. You look around, what's outside, what's in the garbage and put it together and it's pretty close to what's in the production. In this production we had a lot of bamboo, string, fabric, so we began to develop set pieces building up with performers," he said.

Both Liu and Huang said working with Wilson had been a terrific experience — and a life-changing one.

"U-Theatre's members learned a lot. It's a new story, everything starts from zero," Liu said. "We really learned so

much from him [Wilson]."

The four-act *1433* runs almost three hours. It will be performed in Mandarin, with Chinese and English subtitles. In addition to the performances, there will be a talk about the show in the National Theater lobby a half-hour before each performance.

SEE FOR ON PAGE 14

## PERFORMANCE NOTES:

**WHAT:** *1433 — The Grand Voyage* (鄭和1433), Robert Wilson and U-Theatre (優人神鼓)

**WHEN:** Feb. 20 at 7:30pm, Feb. 21 at 2:30pm, Feb. 24 to Feb. 27 at 7:30pm, Feb. 27 and Feb. 28 at 2:30pm

**WHERE:** National Theater (國家戲劇院), 21-1 Zhongshan S Rd, Taipei City (台北市中山南路21-1號)

**ADMISSION:** NT\$600 to NT\$3,600, available through the NTCH box office or online at [www.artsticket.com.tw](http://www.artsticket.com.tw)



PHOTOS COURTESY OF U-THEATRE THOMAS OBSTERMEIER AND SCHAUBUHNE AM LEHNHNER PLAZ

## 2010 Taiwan International Festival

The festival at the National Theater and Concert Hall starts Feb. 19 and offers a wide variety of dance, theater and music performances  
ON THE NET: [tif.ntch.edu.tw/en\\_home.php](http://tif.ntch.edu.tw/en_home.php)

## OUTDOORS

► *Sirena a la Plancha*, Sol Pico Dance Company (Spain). Feb. 19 at 8pm. Admission: free

► *Ilisin-Amis Harvest Festival Dances*, The Formosa Aboriginal Song & Dance Troupe. Feb. 20 at 6pm. Admission: free

## THEATER

► *1433 — The Grand Voyage*, Robert Wilson and U-Theatre (優人神鼓). Feb. 20 to Feb. 28 at the National Theater at 7:30pm. Admission: NT\$600 to NT\$3,600

► *Emily Dickinson*, Teatro la Candelaria (Colombia). March 12 and March 13 at 7:30pm and March 14 at 2:30pm at the Experimental Theater of the National Theater. Admission: NT\$600. March 13 matinee is **sold out**

► *Salt*, Odin Teatret (Denmark). March 18 to March 21 at the Experimental Theater of the National Theater. **Sold out**

► *Hamlet*, Thomas Obstermeier and Schaubuhne am Lehnner Plaz (Germany). March 26 and March 27 at 7:30pm and March 26 at 2:30pm at the National Theater. Admission: NT\$400 to NT\$2,500

► *M.E.D.E.A.*, Theater Unikat (Germany). March 26 to March 26 at the Experimental Theater of the National Theater. **Sold out**

## DANCE

► *Snow White*, Ballet Preljocaj (France). March 4 to March 6 at 7:30pm at the National Theater. Admission: NT\$900 to NT\$3,600. **A limited number of tickets are left for the March 5 and March 6 performances**

► *Schwanengesang (Swan Song)*, Lin Mei-hong and the Tanztheater des Staatstheaters Darmstadt (Germany). March 12 and March 13 at 7:30pm and March 14 at 2:30pm at the National Theater. Admission: NT\$500 to NT\$2,000

► *Listening to the River*, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre (雲門舞集). March 18 to March 20 at 7:45pm and March 21 at 2:45pm at the National Theater. Admission: NT\$400 to NT\$2,000

## MUSIC

► *On the Road*, conductor Chien Wen-pin (簡文彬), singers from Taiwan Colors Music, AM Family and the Nanwang Puyuma Community along with the National Symphony Orchestra. Feb. 26 and Feb. 27 at 7:30pm and Feb. 28 at 2:30pm at the National Concert Hall. Admission: NT\$1,200 to NT\$2,500

► *The Blue Planet Live*, composer George Fenton and the National Symphony Orchestra. March 5 and March 6 at the National Concert Hall. Admission: NT\$1,200 to NT\$2,500. **Only NT\$1,200 and NT\$1,600 tickets are left for the performance on March 5**

► *Forlorn — A Rhyming Song for Lovers*, Xinxin Nanguan Ensemble (心心南管樂坊). March 13 and March 14 at the National Recital Hall. **Sold out**

► *Drum Beat, Heart Beat!*, National Symphony Orchestra. March 19 at the National Concert Hall. Admission: NT\$400 to NT\$1,500

► *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (臥虎藏龍), composer Tan Dun (譚盾), National Symphony Orchestra and the Taiwan National Chinese Orchestra. March 26 at the National Concert Hall. **Sold out**

[ THEATER ]

## More than meets the eye

*Pattaya*, a 'ladyboy' revue from Thailand, is the first group to perform at the newly reopened Jiancheng Circle

BY CATHERINE SHU  
STAFF REPORTER

A bevy of tall, glamorous beauties clad in sequined shifts prance into a spotlight and launch into a dance routine reminiscent of Motown girl groups. Audience members sitting at round tables with bottles of wine and plates of gourmet food set before them add to the retro atmosphere. Is this a dinner show in 1960s Las Vegas?

No, it's an evening performance at Jiancheng Circle (建成圓環), a Taipei landmark that was nearly wiped off the map by a botched reconstruction project — and all the dancers are Thai *kathoey*, or "ladyboys," who belong to a 10-member group called Pattaya.

Pattaya's music tastes span the globe. During the revue, the performers lip-sync and dance to *Nothing*, a song by South Korean pop group Wonder Girls, *One Night Only* from the American musical *Dreamgirls* and Taiwanese Mando-pop classics like *There's Only You in My Heart*, *Not Him* (我的心裡只有你沒有他) and *Shaorouzong* (燒肉粽). The show includes Vegas-style showgirl glamour, with dancers donning bejeweled headdresses and strutting about in snug evening gowns that show off their leggy figures, and moments of pure camp, such as when the voluptuous and pigtailed Bessie descends into the audience with two round pillows sewn to her bra.

Audience participation is a big part of the show — or at least Pattaya would like it to be. Last Monday, the performers tried to get men from the audience up on the stage for a playful lap dance, but all of their targets demurred, some even going so far as to run out the door.

Jessica, a slender and doe-eyed dancer who resembles Taiwan Discovery Channel host Janet Hsieh (謝怡芬), says that audiences in Thailand are blasé about *kathoey* performances, but reactions vary when they tour to other countries. The group has performed in China, Japan and Australia. This is their first visit to Taiwan.

"Sometimes they have seen people like us on television or in the news, but they are still like 'oh my God!'" she says. "In Thailand, we are just normal. Ladyboy is not a bad thing."

But the point of Pattaya's shows is not to confront phobias or bigotry against transgender and transsexual people, says Kate, the statuesque leader of the group. It's just to have fun.

"We want everyone to be happy, we want them to come back again," she says.

The new managers of Jiancheng Circle also want audience members to return. The roundabout at Nanjing West (南京西) and Chongqing North (重慶北) roads was once home to one of Taipei's top night markets, with a bustling atmosphere that rivaled Shilin night market (士林夜市). But fires in 1993 and 1999 contributed to the market's decline and business fell precipitously in 2003 after the Taipei City Government spent NT\$200 million to turn the space into a cylindrical glass structure with a two-story food court and performing arts center. Vendors and customers alike shunned the new building and it closed in 2006.

After standing empty for three years, Jiancheng Circle reopened last June with Yuanhuan Lishui Chi (圓環流水席), the dinner theater, and a shabu-shabu restaurant on the second floor. Pattaya is the first group to perform at the newly repurposed entertainment center. Its managers hope that combining shows with traditional Taiwanese food will help attract customers. Groups slated to perform after Pattaya include singers from Russia and Taiwanese Aboriginal dancers.

"We want to combine cultural exchange with reviving [Jiancheng Circle]. It's a very famous place and people feel a lot of nostalgia for it," says Kevin Feng (馮精蔚), who brings performance groups over for the theater.

## PERFORMANCE NOTES:

**WHAT:** Pattaya

**WHEN:** Performances daily until Feb. 28, 1pm to 2:30pm and 7pm to 8:30pm (occasional performances will also take place from 9pm to 10:30pm — call ahead to confirm)

**WHERE:** Yuanhuan Lishui Chi (圓環流水席) at Jiancheng Circle (建成圓環), 284-1 Nanjing W Rd, Taipei City (台北市南京西路284-1號)

**ADMISSION:** NT\$650 for individual tickets (includes dinner) and NT\$600 per person for a table of 10 or more

**TELEPHONE:** (02) 2508-0396



Pattaya brings Thai ladyboy culture to a Jiancheng Circle, a Taipei landmark.

PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES