

CULTURE

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13



Right: Free All Music and Guvera.com have licensing deals with two of the world's largest recording companies, Universal Music and EMI, which represent such popular acts as U2 and the Black Eyed Peas. Left: A woman uses the iTunes application on her iPhone. iTunes stopped using copyright protection software last April.

[THE WEEKENDER]

The trip of a lifetime



Tim Yip's costumes take center stage in Robert Wilson's 1433 — *The Grand Voyage*.

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

American director Robert Wilson said his new production with Taiwan's U-Theatre (優劇場), *1433 — The Grand Voyage* (鄭和1433), would be a journey of exploration. He certainly delivered on that promise on Saturday night at the National Theater.

What a wonderful journey *1433* was, beginning with giant white-clad Eskimos moving slowly across a white expanse, before taking off for Africa, China, Vietnam and Malacca.

U-Theatre director Liu Ruo-yu (劉若瑛) crafted a script that told the story of Ming dynasty explorer Zheng He (鄭和) — played silently by her husband Huang Chih-chun (黃誌群) — through flashbacks. While Zheng explored the world for his emperor, his story was also one of loss and longing, for like so many imperial officials, he had been made a eunuch as a child.

The stars of the show were Taiwanese gezaai (歌仔) diva Tang Mei-yun (唐美雲), saxophonist Richard "Dickie" Landry and costume designer Tim Yip (葉錦添).

Tang had the audience in the palm of her hand. First seen as a crippled old man with a beard down to his knees, the white-face Tang metamorphosed into dapper MC in black pants, suspenders and a white shirt, a motorcycle mama in a black leather vest, cap and chains, a bluesy crooner in shades and a fedora and a mustachioed comic (with a mustache that was a mix of Charlie Chaplin and Chinese Nationalist Party Secretary-General King Putsung [金溥聰]). She hobbled, strutted, swaggered, did a Cajun two-step, sang, talked, and riffed with Landry like she was Ella Fitzgerald.

The most amazing thing about Tang's duets with Landry was that he — like any good jazz musician — was improvising all the time and she plays along. Every show, they make their own journeys.

Then there were the costumes. This show needs to go to London or New York if for no other reason

to give Yip a chance to win an Oliver or a Tony. His designs were brilliant, turning elements of traditional Chinese court dress into something extraordinary.

General Ma Huan (馬歡) — played by Huang Kun-ming (黃崑明) — wears a three-tiered hat that looks like a miniature pagoda, while aide Fei Shin (費信) — played by Huang Kuo-chung (黃國忠) — had the most amazing triple-hoop skirt that often appeared to have a life of its own as he shimmed across the stage. Linking many of the costumes were the broad shoulder pads spiking off to each side that appeared, however, to have more in common with Ziggy Stardust or Kiss than Asian history. The African dancers' costumes were a wonderful, whimsical mix of wooden facemasks and multi-layered stringed garments. Then there was Queen Lipo (麗波皇后), played by Liu, who looked like a 1950s glamour queen.

The cast and musicians came from U-Theatre and it was terrific to see some familiar faces doing very unfamiliar things, even though the usually gracefully fluid Huang Chih-chun was largely restricted to sharp, jerky moves.

The lighting, by American AJ Weissbard, washed the stage with strong reds or blues — or sometimes just Zheng He's face or hands — or stripped it until it resembled a black-and-white snapshot.

Wilson has been both praised and criticized for creating "a series of stage pictures" in his works, but for *1433* these pictures are worth a thousand words: seas of clouds, the black-and-white court scenes, a wonderful giraffe, a sailing junk of rectangular bamboo crates and a billowing square of white silk.

Running at almost three hours, *1433* tests both the performers' and the armchair travelers in the audience's physical endurance, but it is a trip of a lifetime. The company will perform *1433* from Wednesday night through Sunday afternoon as part of the 2010 Taiwan International Festival.

New free music sites learn from others' mistakes

Online startups Free All Music and Guvera.com say they can generate roughly as much revenue per download for recording companies as Apple's iTunes

BY RYAN NAKASHIMA
AP, LOS ANGELES

Two new companies are giving consumers a way to download songs for free by watching a few ads. The idea has been tried before but this time it appears it might work, because the startups have found advertisers that are willing to pay around US\$2 to have a moment of your time.

"That means recording companies can get about as much compensation from the free services as they receive from a download on iTunes that costs the consumer US\$1.29.

"You pay for the song by paying attention to the advertiser," said Richard Nailling, CEO of FreeAllMusic.com, which launched an invitation-only test of its service in December. "It's a fair trade of attention for music."

Both Free All Music and another new free site, Guvera.com, have licensing deals with independent labels and two of the largest recording companies, Universal Music and EMI. Fans of U2, Black Eyed Peas and Norah Jones should be happy. But admirers of Ke\$ha or Sade, both with Sony Music labels, will be out of luck for now.

The new services come after years of falling CD sales. More people are consuming music online but spending far less for it.

In response, recording companies have been licensing songs to an array of Internet businesses that offer songs cheaply or for free — in the hope that these legitimate alternatives can keep people from turning to illegal downloads.

But some sites that allowed free listening on computers couldn't generate enough advertising revenue to cover their debts or pay royalties that were required every time someone played a song. One such site, imeem, was on the verge of collapse before it was bought last year by MySpace Music.

The new services have tried to come up with

unique advertising packages so companies are willing to pay more. And they are putting the money toward offering downloads of songs that can be put on portable devices.

They also have made changes to deal with a problem that helped cause another free-download site, SpiralFrog, to croak last year.

SpiralFrog irked users because its songs expired if people failed to log back on every few months to view more ads. Its songs also couldn't be played on iPods or iPhones.

Free All Music and Guvera let users play songs on any device. The users also don't have to deal with copy protection software that requires checking back in with the service. So-called digital rights management software is on the way out after Apple ditched the copy-protection technology in iTunes last April.

Free All Music and Guvera are privately funded and in a beta testing phase with just a few thousand users. Wannabe joiners must register and then clear a waiting list before getting invited. That lets the sites make sure there are enough advertisers to pay for the songs that will be downloaded.

The 46 advertisers that have signed up for Guvera's test in Australia are paying on average US\$4 per visitor, contributing US\$250,000 so far. As the service expands to the US at the end of March, Guvera plans to add users in tandem with more advertisers.

"Everything's about a controlled, sort of old-school business model of: Build one product, find one customer, sell it. Then build two products, find two customers, and sell it," said Guvera's founder and CEO, Claes Loberg.

"If we have enough to support a million people, that's all we'll open the door to, even if we have 5 million sitting in the background waiting to get in."

Song royalties are paid per download, in the range of 70 percent of the retail price of a song. So advertising revenue should be able to cover what the track would have made if it were sold for US\$1.29 on iTunes.

"We are very satisfied with the business terms we've come to with both those companies," said David Ring, executive vice president of business development and business affairs for Universal Music Group's eLabs unit. "As long as there's fair compensation ... we ought to empower anybody with a good idea and a dynamic new service."

Free All Music is the easier to navigate of the two. Users can type in search terms to find a song, or can pick one from a list of top hits by genre.

They then pick from a range of advertisers, including Coca-Cola and Zappos.com, the shoe and apparel retailer now owned by Amazon.com. Users watch one video ad featuring that brand. One click later, and the song downloads to the user's computer and can be transferred to a portable device. Users can download a maximum of five songs a week; the cap is reset every Tuesday.

Advertisers on Free All Music pay about US\$2 per song for the right to present users with one video ad. That's much higher than general ad rates online because the users have indicated they are inclined to hear from the company. Users must click again to start the download, and they're reminded who is providing the song.

Boston-based advertising agency Mullen, which is testing the Zappos ads on Free All Music, hopes the goodwill generated by paying for the music will carry over to the brand.

"We're giving them something they want," said a media planner at Mullen, Brenna Hanly. "US giving that song can spark them to talk about it on Facebook and Twitter."

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

FEB. 12 TO FEB. 18



1 Show Luo (羅志祥) and *Rashomon* (羅生門) with **24.46** percent of sales

2 Jeremy Liu (劉子千) and *Mr Why* with **7.92%**

3 Rainie Yang (楊丞琳) and *Rainie & Love...?* (雨愛) with **5.13%**

4 Meelia (符瓊音) and *Chic* with **3.03%**

5 Huang Hong-sheng (黃鴻升) and *Love Hero* (愛&英雄) with **2.94%**

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

PLANET POP



Ashton Kutcher, the celebrity with the biggest following on Twitter, is urging Russians to share ideas on social networking Web sites.

Internet has become a lively focus for opposition debate but Moscow-based social media expert Nick Wilsdon of E3internet.com said sites like Twitter

can be used by authorities and not just protest movements.

"Twitter would probably be a better example of democracy in action if more people followed their elected representatives than their favorite film star," Wilsdon said in an e-mail.

In other Twitter-related news, "dead" singer **Gordon Lightfoot** says he feels fine.

The legendary 71-year-old Canadian singer-songwriter is very much alive despite reports last week that said he had died while on a North American tour.

Lightfoot, whose hits include *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*, *Sundown*, and *Carefree Highway*, was said to have been pronounced dead by a prank message posted on Twitter, according to the Web site of the *Globe and Mail* newspaper. Reports of his death spread quickly on radio, television, and news Web sites.

Lightfoot, noted for richly crafted lyrics and a deep, smooth voice, was reached by telephone by Toronto's CP24 news station and said he was informed of his death by a report he heard on his car radio as he drove to his office.

"Everything is good," he told CP24. "I don't know where it came from, it seems like a bit of a hoax. I was quite surprised to hear it myself ... I feel fine."

Finally, former *Family Ties* actor **Brian Bonsall** has been arrested again in Colorado, this time on a charge of using marijuana in violation of the terms of his release.

Deputies handcuffed and led the 28-year-old from a Boulder courtroom on Friday after he pleaded not guilty to an assault charge and a failure to report charge involving another case. Bail was set at US\$10,000.

Bonsall's defense attorney says the actor needs marijuana for headaches and has applied for a medical marijuana card through the state.

He is accused of repeatedly hitting a friend in the head with a broken wooden stool in December and of missing a court hearing in 2007 in another assault case.

Bonsall played the role of the youngest Keaton sibling, Andy, on the 1980s NBC TV comedy sitcom starring **Michael J. Fox**.

— AGENCIES