

AROUND TOWN

FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 2010

13

Dance takes center stage at the 2010 Taiwan International Festival at the National Theater this weekend and the next two, with companies from France, Germany and Taiwan presenting some of their newest works.

The two European troupes, Ballet Preljocaj and Tanztheater des Staatstheaters Darmstadt, are offering their directors' takes on two literary classics of very different sorts and the psychological underpinnings of each. Both are imbued with darkness, humor and dramatic flair. Both examine obsessions. Only one, however, has some very bizarre costumes by one of the greats of contemporary French fashion, Jean Paul Gaultier.

Stepmothers often have a bad reputation. In Western fairy tales, only Cinderella's stepmom comes off worse than Snow White's, probably because the protagonists in these stories are the young women.

French choreographer Angelin Preljocaj has taken a somewhat different tack in his 2008 contemporary ballet *Snow White*, based on the Grimm brothers' tale, by focusing on the motivations of the stepmother.

As he explains it in his company notes, Preljocaj looked at the stepmother's "narcissistic determination not to give up on seduction and her role as a woman, even if it means sacrificing her stepdaughter."

He has said he decided to create *Snow White* because he wanted a change from abstract ballet and he had often read the fairy tale to his children. He also used the writings of child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, especially a translation of *The Uses of Enchantment*, to examine the symbolism in the story.

Ballet Preljocaj's *Snow White*, which opened last night and runs through tomorrow before moving to Kaohsiung next week for two performances, is a rarity in contemporary ballet — a narrative, romantic ballet. Running at just under two hours, the 26-dancer *Snow White* is set to excerpts from Gustav Mahler's symphonies, with additional music by 79 D, and features Japanese ballerina Nagisa Shirai in the title role and Celine Galli as her nemesis, Queen Domina (who has the best costumes).

The visually stunning set pieces, by Thierry Leproust, include a huge mirror that's almost as big as a wall and a mountain for the seven dwarfs to climb down as they make their memorable entrance (they are miners after all).

Preljocaj, whose 26-year-old company is based in Aix-en-Provence, studied classical ballet before turning to contemporary dance, training with Karin Waehner and Merce Cunningham. He worked with several modern dance troupes in France and studied Noh in Japan before beginning his choreographic career in 1984. In addition to creating pieces for his own troupe, his works can be found in the repertoire of major companies around Europe and in the US.

Taiwanese choreographer Lin Mei-hong (林美虹) also trained as a classical ballet dancer before being mesmerized by a performance of German choreographer Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal and switching to modern dance.

The Yilan-born Lin began by studying classical Chinese dance — she was a member of Lanyang Dance Troupe (蘭陽芭蕾舞團) as a youngster

Two European dance troupes bring literary classics to the National Theater this weekend

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER



PERFORMANCE NOTES

WHAT: Ballet Preljocaj, *Snow White*
WHEN: Tonight and tomorrow at 7:30pm
WHERE: National Theater (國家戲劇院), 21-1, Zhongshan 5 Rd, Taipei City (台北市中山南路21-1號)
ADMISSION: NT\$1,200 to NT\$3,600, available through the NTCH box office or online at www.artsticket.com
ADDITIONAL PERFORMANCES: March 10 and March 11 at Kaohsiung Chiang Kai-shek Cultural Center (高雄中正文化中心), 67 Wufu 1st Rd, Kaohsiung City (高雄市五福一路67號)
ADMISSION: NT\$500 to NT\$2,800

WHAT: Lin Mei-hong and Tanztheater des Staatstheaters Darmstadt's *Schwanengesang*
WHEN: Today, tomorrow, March 12 and March 13 at 7:30pm, March 14 at 2:30pm
WHERE: National Theater (國家戲劇院), 21-1, Zhongshan 5 Rd, Taipei City (台北市中山南路21-1號)
ADMISSION: NT\$500 to NT\$2,000, available through the NTCH box office or online at www.artsticket.com



— before moving to Italy to study ballet and then Germany, where she studied at the Folkwangschule in Essen, where Bausch and several other leading European choreographers have trained.

She studied with Bausch for several years and was artistic director for Tanztheater Dortmund before becoming artistic director of the Dance Theater in Darmstadt in 2004.

Her company was originally scheduled to perform her latest creation, *Violett, Lila, Purpur* for the festival, but it wasn't finished in time, so the program was changed to *Schwanengesang* (Swan Song), which premiered in Darmstadt in November and will have its Asian premiere next Friday night.

Like Preljocaj, Lin's *Schwanengesang* was inspired by literature, in her case Belgian poet George Rodenbach's 1892 novel *Bruges-la-Morte*, as well as Erich Wolfgang Korngold's opera *Die Tote Stadt*, which was also based on the book.

Rodenbach's novel is about a man who moves to Bruges, Belgium, after the death of his wife, hoping to find some kind of solace in the cathedral-filled city. He becomes entranced with a dancer he sees at the opera because of her resemblance to his late wife.

While Preljocaj's queen is obsessed with youth and sexuality, Rodenbach and Lin's hero becomes obsessed to the point of madness with death, love and memories. In an interview on Wednesday, Lin said she liked *Die Tote Stadt*, which is why she decided to read the book, and though the story had possibilities for dance, she didn't want to retell the entire narrative. She chose six scenes that she felt conveyed the key motifs, the ones that touched her the most.

She said the working title of the piece had been "Demon Seed" because it examines the demons that are inside everyone.

Schwanengesang is set to score by Michael Erhard, while Thomas Grube designed the sets and costumes, some of which are as outlandish as Gaultier's.

After two weekends of strongly narrative-driven work, the pace at the National Theater will change when a troupe run by another Lin takes to the stage. Cloud Gate Dance Theatre (雲門舞集) will perform *Listening to the River* (聽河), the newest work by artistic director Lin Hwai-min (林懷民), from March 18 to March 21.



Taiwanese choreographer Lin Mei-hong.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TANZTHEATER DES STAATSTHEATERS DARMSTADT

Just the job

Lin Mei-hong knew her calling in life was dance from a very early age

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

Taiwanese choreographer Lin Mei-hong (林美虹) has carved out a career in Europe, where she has lived for more than three decades and has been artistic director at the Tanztheater des Staatstheaters Darmstadt since 2004. The Yilan-born 50-year-old talked with the *Taipei Times* on Wednesday morning about dancing, her career and her newest work, *Schwanengesang*, which will be performed at the National Theater next weekend.

Taipei Times: When did you start studying dance?

LM: I was 9 or 10, but I played around earlier. By the first or second year, very young, I knew I loved it. I was so happy every time I could go to dance class. I always prepared my things early, getting everything ready to go to class. I left my home and joined the Lanyang group [Lanyang Dance Troupe (蘭陽芭蕾舞團)] very early on. We lived together and traveled together.

TT: When did you know you wanted to choreograph?

LM: Also very early on. After five years of dancing I knew I wanted to choreograph. Whenever the teacher would say "imagine you are your favorite animal" or "listen to this music and create something," I was very happy.

TT: Why did you choose to go to Italy to study dance? (She studied at the Accademia Nazionale di Danza in Rome.)

LM: Because of the scholarship. If I could choose again now, maybe I would choose elsewhere. So many Taiwanese go to Germany or Britain. Lanyang's founder is Italian [Father Gian Carlo Michelini], so maybe that influenced me. Going to Italy at 16 — it was not my first time to go there, but before it had always been with the group — but to go there to live, to live with a family, they were very important years for me. The Italians were so different, so passionate; there is always so much drama. They are always talking with their hands.

TT: After six years, why did you decide to move from Italy to Germany?

LM: When I finished my studies — a completely classic European ballet education — I was planning to come home, but fortunately I saw Pina Bausch's company [Tanztheater Wuppertal] in Rome. It was a shock to my soul — something so shocked me, touched me — I called my mom to say "I have to stay here [Europe] for a while."

It was a big culture shock going to Germany — German people, what a shock, so different from the Italians. I went to study German over the summer before starting school, I didn't go home to Taiwan. The first half-year was so tough. Essen was so ugly after Rome; it's cold, industrial, gray.

We started everything all over again from the beginning — an eight-count plie down, eight-count plie up. It didn't matter that you had studied ballet for years, they wanted you to start all over and do it their way. But it was a good mentality, it taught you a new attitude, which is the most important thing.

After one year I started to feel at home because it was like going back to Chinese dance, which is very low [the center of gravity], while ballet is very high. The training made you think about simplicity, to think very clear, without a lot of decoration. Again, it was about going back to my roots, going low, technique-wise.

TT: When did you decide to stay in Germany, to work with Pina Bausch? (Lin graduated in 1989 from the Aachen Folkwang College of Arts Kinetographie Laban Research Institute.)

LM: Not right away. The decision to stay on came later. The [school's] way of thinking was important for me, while the technique [Bausch's] was not so different for me. When I finished school, the Folkwangschule, it was a totally different world. It's not the real world and that is why its graduates can't find jobs anywhere else. (Laughs.)

You have this feeling of innocence, no preconceptions, feeling totally open to the world, and it's important to keep that feeling.



Fairy tales and modern angst

Ballet Preljocaj's *Snow White*.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF K. GARDNER AND TANZTHEATER DES STAATSTHEATERS DARMSTADT

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15