



The world goes mad for plaid

Men love it, women love it, punks, hipsters and suburban dads love it. Checked shirts have never gone out of fashion, but today, this comfortable, rugged cloth of the clans is selling like never before. So why is plaid currently all the rage?

BY ALICE FISHER
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

In life, you're never supposed to be more than 2m away from a spider. In London you're always within 3m of a rat. And, at the moment, it also feels as if you're never more than 6m away from a man's tartan shirt. Durable, comfortable, flattering and functional, they're everywhere. On cool kids and dads, men who wear them to work and men who wear them to work a look. Girls are at it, too, wearing them oversized and cinched with a belt over leggings.

"It's a cloth of duality," says Jonathan Faiers, senior lecturer in cultural studies at London's Central St Martins art and fashion college and author of *Tartan: Textiles that Changed the World*. "Its history is in the establishment — in clansmanship, the aristocracy and military forces, but because it's become the uniform of rugged masculinity it's also revisited in an ironic way — by subcultures such as grunge, punk and gay clones."

Tartan's current ubiquity is a reaction

to the over-groomed metrosexual, and the dandified look of skinny suit jackets and tailored shirts that dominated menswear in the last decade. It's a look widely adopted by New York hipsters in recent years, and the rise of indie and nu-folk music also fanned the tartan flame. From Fleet Foxes' nerd chic to the rock aesthetic of Kings of Leon, every cool band wears checks at sound check.

Unsurprisingly, many of the second-hand shirts worn in the UK hail from the US. "Check and plaid is worn by a huge percentage of that population at the moment," says Angie Ibrahim, area manager of vintage store Rokiti. "hence the increased level of shirts we stock." Pendleton and Harris Tweed are now the labels to search for by men who care about quality and history. Though if you like designer you can look at the spring/summer collections by Givenchy and Tom Ford, both of which feature tartan shirts.

But their true home right now is the high street.

UK high street store Topman reports tartan shirt sales are up 49 percent from last year and up 540 percent from two years ago. Currently the store sells the equivalent of four every minute. "They are the simplest way of injecting a stab of color and pattern to any wardrobe with the minimum of 'fashion' thought," explains

Topman design director Gordon Richardson. "And when a guy is happy with an item he sticks with it. Men are more likely to buy an updated version of something they feel comfortable with rather than experiment."

The male love of tartan seems universal. "Men who don't wear patterns or color wear tartan," says Jeffrey Banks, co-author of *Tartan: Romancing the Plaid* and executive board member of the Council of Fashion Designers of America. "And that's international. The Japanese are crazy about it, all architects have a plaid shirt, and every

chic Milanese doctor has a tartan scarf."

Faiers thinks that plaid's unique dual history in establishment and anti-establishment means it still represents more than a style trend. "You could argue that in a recession climate, tartan signals a back-to-basics feel. You can put a sociological spin on it, and there aren't many fabrics you can do that with."

Banks also explored the psychology of plaid for his book, which was partly inspired by a surge in the number of New Yorkers wearing tartan in the months following 9/11 (reported at the time in the *New York Times*). "We wanted to explore the historical, psychological and emotional views of tartan; we spoke to psychiatrists, theologians, everyone." So with all that wealth of knowledge, does it ever annoy him that so many tartan lovers today have little idea of the cloth's history? "Not at all. You just have to let them enjoy it. People love tartan because it's beautiful."

[CULTURE]

Funny enough for words

The National Palace Museum is taking a risk with the latest installment of its New Melody series of performances, which showcases the Chinese art of cross-talk



Feng Yi-gang, left, and Sung Shao-ching, two of the founding members of the Comedians Workshop.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NPM

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
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After a three-month hiatus, the National Palace Museum's New Melody (故宫新韻) series of performances is back, this time with an innovative offering from the Comedians Workshop (相聲瓦舍) showcasing the Chinese art of cross-talk (相聲), a type of stand-up comedy. Titled *Another Village: Comedians Workshop's Treasure Trove* (又一村: 瓦舍多寶閣), the program is divided into two sections, the first an adaptation of the workshop's established repertoire, the second an original work created for New Melody.

Another Village follows performances of a condensed version of *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (長生殿) by Lanting Kun Opera Company (蘭庭崑劇團) and episodes from *Journey to the West* (西遊記) by Li-Yuan Peking Opera Theatre (台北新劇團), both of which received positive responses from audiences, said Josephine Chu (朱惠貞), director of the museum's Department of Education

Programs (教育展覽處).

The Comedians Workshop's program departs from the series' theatrical format, and while the new approach has many advantages, including versatility, not to mention reduced costs, the lack of a theatrical spectacle is a risk.

With its emphasis on verbal dexterity, jokes and improvisations on topical events, the art of cross-talk developed out of storytelling traditions, and deserves to stand alongside opera as one of Chinese culture's great achievements. It does, nevertheless, provide very little to look at, lacking the elaborate costumes or intricate movements of opera.

This paper praised the museum for providing subtitles of a reasonable quality that gave a level of accessibility not normally available to foreign audiences of Chinese opera for the previous two productions in the series. In *Another Village*, as with all cross-talk performances, the complexity and speed of the dialogue reduces the effectiveness of subtitles. An

introduction to the performance in English and Japanese is provided in a brochure.

Comedians Workshop founder Feng Yi-gang (馮翊綱) said the National Palace Museum performances are a first for the 20-year-old troupe. The show was written specifically for the museum with broadening cross-talk's appeal in mind. The second segment, which relates the Japanese story of *Rashomon*, includes some fancy dress elements.

One of New Melody's provisos is that all the performances should relate in some way to items held in the museum's collection. In the case of *The Palace of Eternal Youth* it was a painting; for *Journey to the West* an illustrated book. For an Aboriginal performance scheduled for July, it will be the collection of Qing Dynasty documents relating to Aboriginal peoples in Taiwan.

With cross-talk, the reference to the collection is more direct, but as of the first show, shoe-horning these references into the comic

dialogue was often labored.

Feng said that the troupe was still honing its production to meet the unique needs of the New Melody series. The versatility of the format will allow the show to reference any variety of items that the museum has on display, which makes realizing the educational goal of the series a little easier.

"These shows are part of a much larger educational program," Chu said. "People can see the shows, and then perhaps look at the actual items related to the show, or participate in the many related activities that we host, whether it be serious lectures or family DIY workshops."

Another Village: Comedians Workshop's Treasure Trove takes place at the National Palace Museum Auditorium (行政大樓文會堂) every Wednesday from 2:30pm to 4pm until June 23. Admission is free. Online reservations for places at the performance, lectures and workshops can be made at tech2.npm.gov.tw/signup/frontend/index.asp.

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