

BY ALITA RICKARDS

COMEDY

POP STOP

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Life is not all roses for the Queen of Mando-pop, and just as her career hit a new high note with the success of her Tokyo concert, in which she unleashed her bad-girl persona **A-mit** (阿密特) on Japan, boyfriend **Sam Ho** (何守正) was caught by paparazzi checking into a Sindhian motel with a woman in a white hat. *Next Magazine* assures us that the couple remained there for two hours.

The report goes on to speculate that the woman in question may have been Ho's former girlfriend "Little Cutie" (小可愛), and that his romance with a, let's face it, vastly more successful older woman, was beginning to weigh on the young stud.

In a little aside, *Next* reports that Ho, on discovering the paparazzi on his heels, drove through nine red lights. Despite "speeding" at more than 80kph, the basketball star wasn't nimble enough behind the wheel to shake off the tail.

Why he should have been so flustered is something of an open question, for not long after evidence of his alleged infidelity hit the media, A-Mei (張惠妹) told *NOWnews* that the relationship had come to an end nearly six months ago and that it was no concern of hers who Ho was seeing. It probably helped that her Tokyo concert on April 18, her first in Japan, has been considered a big success, drawing a crowd of 1,400 and running for nearly three hours. Rumors of suitors in the wings mean that A-mei is unlikely to be lonely for long.

Other women who are getting lots of lovin' in the news this week include model **Liz** (aka Yang Li-si, 楊俐思), who made headlines with rumored relationships with singer **David Tao** (陶喆), and male model **Chen Chih-chiang** (陳志強). While Liz has proved adept at revelation, disrobing in a more than obliging fashion for the camera, what got uncovered this time was a bit of history, which ain't nearly as pretty. It has emerged, if *Next Magazine* is to be believed, that the half-Paraguayan model, who has courted the media

sent to the magazine by a reader disgruntled with her raunchy behavior. With fans like these, who needs enemies.

The release of *Adult Ceremony/Grown UP* (成人禮) by By2, a girl group made up of twins, in the No. 1 spot on the charts has added some spark to the predictable lineup of chart-toppers. The Singaporean twins, **Peh Wei-fen** (白緯芬) and **Peh Wei-ling** (白緯玲), who go by the names Miko and Yumi, have proved a huge hit here. An incident earlier this week, when there was a fire in the building they live in, only enhanced their reputations. According to a report in the *Apple Daily*, when a record company executive alerted them to the fire and told them to evacuate the building, they found time to dress in their promo outfits and don high heels before leaving. "It's not as if they were making an appearance. It's really too much," the staffer is quoted as saying.

The professional and personal rivalry between **Vic Chou** (周渝民), aka Tsai Tsai (仔仔), and **Mark Chao** (趙又廷) has intensified with the approach of the Golden Horse Awards. The two actors, who came to prominence with the somewhat inexplicable success of the police drama *Black & White* (痞子英雄), began their rivalry after Chao pipped Chou to the post for a Golden Bell Award in October last year.

Since then, Chou's career has been in the doldrums, with a number of scheduled projects being put off and his professionalism coming into question after spats with *Black & White* director **Tsai Yueh-hsun** (蔡岳勳). He also refused to participate in a group photo at a classmate's wedding, griggishly citing contractual obligations.

The only bright spot had been the August release of *Love You for a Thousand Years* (愛你一萬年), which will put him in contention for a Golden Horse nomination. Unfortunately, given Chao's involvement in the hugely successful release of *Monga* (艋舺) last month, Chou's chances of outdoing his rival are slim.



Just say yes

Improvisational comedy is spontaneous theater, made up on the spot. So why have the actors from Taichung Improv, who have a live show tomorrow night, been in rehearsal all month?

"You have to rehearse the improvisational skill to be able to think on your feet," said founder and performer Josh Myers, who majored in method acting. "The most important rule in improv is to say 'Yes!' If you say no it kills the seed, nothing can happen. If you say yes you can see where it takes you."

Actors use audience-generated ideas in different games to come up with quick-witted comedy routines. "Improv is storytelling in disguise, using a lot of gimmicks," said Myers. "Do it using questions only, tell it one word at a time, tell it backwards." He uses simplified versions of the games to help with teaching English.

Though the group uses an interpreter to give an introduction to all the games in Chinese, and explain the rules, not everything is translated. "The Taiwanese audience, though not used to improv, seems to get it immediately," said Myers. "It's very physical to accommodate local audiences and we make it less verbal with more games, though some do challenge verbal dexterity."

Myers, Sarah Zittler and Cathy Wilson, who work together in the group, all felt strongly from the beginning that it should be cross-cultural: "We try to go for humor that is universal," said Myers. "We choose our games very carefully, mixing wordy games with physical and high-energy [ones]."

The cast comes from a variety of theatrical backgrounds. Matt Bronsil is a ventriloquist and also does stand-up comedy. Jenny McManus is a dancer, while Nick Ford writes and directs his own material, and Sophie Bleunven is a mime artist.



Frantic antics and comedy by Taichung Improv.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KARIN PARMELEE

rehearsal/workshop on May 1. There is an advanced workshop on May 15.

The "pressure cooker of the stage" is terrifying, warns Myers. "But that's why we love it — the best things in life are exhilarating and terrifying at the same time."

"Sometimes doing improv feels like a religion, awakening something in you that is already there." Saying yes becomes a habit, spilling over into everyday life, and leads to "some surprising discoveries," he said.

"To be able to make people laugh is very rewarding," said Myers. "The audience gives us so much back it's like a drug ... No, it's better than drugs!"

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Improv Comedy: International Night of Unpredicticiousness

WHERE: The Londoner (倫敦公園), 143, Huamei W St Sec 1, Taichung City (台中市華美西街一段143號). Tel: (04) 2314-6919

WHEN: Tomorrow at 10pm

ADMISSION: Tickets are NT\$300 in advance and NT\$350 at the door (both prices include one drink)

ON THE NET: www.taichungimprov.com, www.seoulplayers.com, www.londoner.com.tw

DETAILS: For more information contact Josh Myers at 0912-129-654



Next Magazine caught Taiwan Beer star Sam Ho playing an away game. PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

RESTAURANTS

BY DAVID CHEN

BY HO YI

Feng-yan Vietnamese Shop 鳳燕越南店

Address: 5-5 Lishui St, Taipei City (台北市麗水街5之5號)
Telephone: (02) 2396-4078 **Average meal:** NT\$100
Open: 11pm to 3pm and 5pm to 9:30pm, closed every other Monday **Details:** Credit cards not accepted



The rice noodle salad with sirloin beef is one of Fengyan's specialties. PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

Yongkang Street (永康街) is home to a couple of long-established Vietnamese eateries, the two branches of Thanh Ky (誠記越南麵食館), which sit across from each other and would appear to hold a neighborhood monopoly on Vietnamese fare.

But a tiny restaurant around the corner on Lishui Street (麗水街) has also been reeling in customers with a hankering for noodle salads and pho.

Low prices and a homemade touch attract a steady flow of diners at Fengyan Vietnamese Shop (鳳燕越南店), named after its owner, Ruan Feng-yan (阮鳳燕).

Ruan, a 31-year-old native of Ho Chi Minh City, came to Taipei in 2001 after marrying her Taiwanese husband. After a stint of odd jobs that included working at hair salons, she found her niche running a pho stand at the Jingmei Night Market (景美夜市) and moved to the Yongkang Street area four years ago.

She does all the cooking at a makeshift outdoor kitchen outside of a 3-ping (10m²) dining nook that seats a dozen people and always seems to be full during meal times.

For first-timers, she recommends the beef noodle pho (清燉牛肉湯, NT\$90) and rice noodle salad with sirloin beef (涼拌沙朗牛肉米線, NT\$100).

The rice noodle salad won me over immediately for the generous portion of freshly crushed peanuts sprinkled on top. I also liked how Ruan pan-seared the beef slices, which tasted as if they had been barbecued on a grill. The bean sprouts provided a crunchy texture, while fresh basil and mint leaves added zest.

The rice noodle salads can also be ordered

with pan-fried pork chop (涼拌香煎豬排米線, NT\$90), garlic chicken slices (涼拌香蒜雞米線, NT\$80), vegetable greens (涼拌蔬菜米線, NT\$80) or seafood spring rolls (炸海鮮春捲米線, NT\$90). These items are also available as a la carte appetizers for NT\$50 each.

The beef pho, which can be ordered with either thin or thick rice noodles, has all the requisite ingredients: a fragrant broth with hints of citrus, strips of rare lean beef, onion and fresh basil. Lemon wedges are available but aren't offered.

Other varieties of pho include seafood (清燉海鮮湯米線), chicken (清燉雞肉湯米線) and vegetable greens (清燉蔬菜湯米線), which are all NT\$90. A coconut curry broth is available for an additional NT\$10.

Ruan also offers a full selection of rice plate lunches. The Vietnamese home-style curly chicken (越南家鄉咖哩雞肉飯, NT\$110), a drumstick stewed in a yellow curry sauce with yams and taro and a drizzle of coconut milk on top, makes for a hearty meal.

The green papaya salad (涼拌木瓜絲, NT\$50) and chilled vegetable green salad (涼拌蔬菜, NT\$50), both made with a sweet and sour vinaigrette, are simple but refreshing choices to keep in mind as summer approaches.

The sparse furnishings of Fengyan (fluorescent lighting, plastic stools and night market tables) are a far cry from the more refined vibe at Thanh Ky. But the space is clean and air-conditioned, and the modest atmosphere suits the food.

Ran by a husband-and-wife team, Tien Fu Noodle Shop (天府麵庄) is a hole-in-the-wall set amid a cluster of eateries on an alley off Guangfu South Road (光復南路). The restaurant's drab exterior belies the richly flavored home cooking served inside. With the wife, a native of Yibin City (宜賓), Sichuan, running the kitchen, Tien Fu specializes in noodle and wonton bowls as well as rich Sichuan-style dishes. First-time diners can start out with the curiously named ran noodles (燃麵, NT\$50), a small bowl of thin noodles glazed with homemade red chili oil with chives and served with peanut powder and Sichuan pepper (花椒) with pickled vegetable shreds, or yatsai (芽菜), a Sichuan specialty, sprinkled on top.

The provenance of the dish's name — ran (燃) means "to burn" — is a matter of some debate. Some say the dish is so-named because its red oil-coated noodles look like a lamp's wick. Others say it's because the noodles are so spicy that they burn on the way down. Tien Fu's version, however, is rather mild. Its distinct flavor derives instead from the Sichuan pepper and pickled vegetables, which give the al dente noodles a savory punch.

Likewise, the wontons in red oil (紅油抄手, NT\$65), another trademark dish, is not as spicy as it looks. Nor is the immensely popular kou shui chicken (口水雞, NT\$100), a cold plate of cooked deboned chicken spiced up with pepper and chili oil.

Tien Fu's menu only contains a partial list of what's available at the restaurant. The names of dishes without noodles or wonton dumplings are written on a piece of red paper and boards hung on the wall. These

include the Sichuan-style steamed spareribs (風味粉蒸排骨, NT\$120), another favorite among habitués. Covered in ground rice and served on top of chunks of steamed yam, the spareribs have just the right balance of meat and fat. Also recommended is the chicken soup with bamboo and fungi (竹筴嫩雞湯, NT\$50) whose pleasantly light-flavored broth provides a nice addition to what might otherwise be an overly heavy and piquant meal.

Tien Fu has received plenty of attention from food bloggers and restaurant critics, and there is often a constant flow of patrons at lunch and dinner hours. But the service is fast and friendly. Diners are advised to bring their own utensils and beverages, as the restaurant provides disposable chopsticks, and cool refreshments are a must after a rich meal at Tien Fu.



Not for sensitive palates. PHOTO: HO YI, TAIPEI TIMES

Tien Fu Noodle Shop 天府麵庄

Address: 51, Ln 290, Guangfu S Rd, Taipei City (台北市光復南路290巷51號) **Telephone:** (02) 2721-7846
Average meal: NT\$200 **Details:** Chinese menu, credit cards not accepted
Open: 11:30am to 2pm and 5:30pm to 9pm, closed on the second and fourth Monday of each month

TIDBITS

BY CATHERINE SHU

As one of the few places that serve fresh imported oysters in Taipei, Oyster Bar (tel: (02) 8729-2731) in the food court of Bellavita has proven popular among the capital's food bloggers. Google the bar and you'll find pages of reviews, coupled with lovingly snapped photos. It's no wonder: Oyster Bar's offerings (which also include smoked salmon and caviar) are beautifully plated. The prices also add extra incentive to make your culinary memory last. Oysters (most flown in from France) range from NT\$180 to NT\$400 each.

Considering the individual bivalves' cost, Oyster Bar's signature deluxe seafood platter seems like a value buy in comparison. NT\$3,680 gets you a lovingly arranged pile of freshly steamed Boston lobster, prawns, whelks, scallops, clams, cuttlefish and two each of three oyster varieties. All of the latter had robust and complex flavors; European flat oysters, the briniest, also left a slight metallic aftertaste. The freshly steamed lobster was also excellent, but my companion and I began to feel overwhelmed by the time we'd worked our way through the rest of the platter, which can easily serve three people. Oyster Bar's drink menu is limited, but you can order a glass or bottle from the neighboring A3 wine store.



Oyster Bar in Bellavita is one of the few places in Taipei that serve fresh imported oysters. PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES