

AROUND TOWN

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Dancing door-to-door

Despite a strong case of impresario fatigue last year, artistic director and choreographer Allen Yu has returned to Taipei with a production that looks at the choices we make in life

BY **DIANE BAKER**
STAFF REPORTER

Just as the road — taken or not — figures large in Western literature, doorways play a prominent role in traditional Chinese culture.

What lies within and beyond the doors we pass everyday and those we don't was the inspiration for Taiwanese-born, Austria-based ballet choreographer Allen Yu's (余能盛) production for Chamber Ballet Taipei (台北室內芭蕾).

Last year Yu was feeling battered by his self-imposed annual struggle to mount a full-length ballet, and that was before Typhoon Morakot forced him to postpone the opening night in Taipei.

"When I came back last year I felt society and most of the people here were not so happy because of the economic problems ... I really thought a lot about doors ... if you think deeply, outside the door, inside the door, there can be happiness, sadness, war, divorce, reunions," he said. "I also think about how many doors you pass every day. You get up, you go past the bathroom, you go past the closet, you go out of the house, to the car, to the elevator, go to work, to school and then go back home again. You can not get away from a door."

Not surprisingly, this year's production, which had its premiere in Tainan last weekend and opens tonight at the Metropolitan Hall, is called *The Door* (門).

The show is divided into two parts stylistically and musically. The first half, set to Italian composer Nino Rota's *La Strada* suite, is more dance theater than straight ballet.

"When you hear the music you feel happy, sad. It's so direct, it gave me lots of ideas," Yu said.

He took an old Chinese expression involving six doors and developed a story for each one. However, on stage there will be seven doorways, because, as he said: "In the beginning everyone has to go through the door of life."

The stories range from the door to a job — which, in a nod to the World Cup, involves



Chamber Ballet Taipei dancers rehearse *The Door* by Allen Yu.

playing soccer — to a jail door (which is one you want to go out of) to a red-light door where "young girls are being sold by the mafia," to the front door of an apartment building, where a watchman has worked for 30 years and has "seen so much, he decides to enter a Buddhist temple. He shaves his hair and sheds his clothes" to embark upon his new life, Yu said.

"Every scene is from the door's perspective," Yu said, adding: "The door is the turning point of life."

Part two switches from dance theater to neoclassical ballet, while the music shifts to Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*.

"That's the best music he wrote for us dancers," Yu said.

"I have 12 doors on stage, different sizes, put together they are like a wall. The music is very

serious and tense. I set up it up so it is totally [the] opposite of the first piece. I want to show the door that you cannot walk away from. We all walk into the wrong door [at some point] in our lives," he said.

As usual with Yu's work, several dancers from Europe take the leads in the production — Nadja Saidakova, from the Deutsch Oper Berlin; Richard Szabo and Nistor Laura from the Vienna State Ballet; and Daniel Cimpean, formerly of the Damstadt Staatstheater, who has danced in several of Yu's productions in Taiwan. Another familiar face will be conducting the Taipei Symphony Orchestra — Dutch conductor Anthony Hermus, who was here two years ago for *La Dame aux Camelias*.

Yu said the Rachmaninoff requires 70 musicians, which means the orchestra pit at the

Metropolitan is going to be very cramped.

Since this year's theme is doorways and life choices, it seemed natural to ask Yu why he decided to do another show when he seemed so disillusioned last year. It's not as if he doesn't have enough to do with his main job as deputy ballet director and choreographer at the Graz Opera House.

"I talk with many, many people, dance professors, [sponsors]. They all said they would continue to support me ... if I decide not to do it, I would feel so sad because so many people have supported me for so long. I really thought a lot about it when I went back to Austria," he said. "This year's situation is much better, everything was set up by February."

So Yu chose to walk through the doors to return to Taiwan for another production.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHAMBER BALLET TAIPEI

PERFORMANCE NOTES

WHAT: Chamber Ballet Taipei — *The Door*

WHEN: Tonight and tomorrow at 7:30pm, Sunday at 3pm

WHERE: Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台), 25, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei (台北市八德路三段25號)

ADMISSION: NT\$400 to NT\$1,500, available online at www.artsticket.com.tw

ADDITIONAL PERFORMANCE: Tuesday at 7:30pm at the Hsinchu County Cultural Affairs Bureau Performance Hall (新竹縣文化局演藝廳), 146 Siangjheng 9th Rd, Jhupei City, Hsinchu County (新竹縣竹北市縣政九路146號). Admission is NT\$400 to NT\$1,200

[OPERA]

‘Feather’ pushes nanguan artist out of her comfort zone

As director Lukas Hemleb knows well, some you lose and some you win. His latest production, a ‘nanguan contemporary opera’ falls in the latter category

BY **IAN BARTHOLOMEW**
STAFF REPORTER

The German director Lukas Hemleb has something of a mixed record in Taiwan with his bold avant-garde takes on traditional performance arts. He played a major part in the success of Han Tang Yuefu's (漢唐樂府) brilliantly conceptualized post-modern reworking of the *The Tale of the Lo River Goddess* (洛神賦) in 2006, as he also did in the failure of the massive and depressingly self-congratulatory orgy of *Mackay* — *The Black Bearded Bible Man* (黑鬍馬偕), a three-hour long mixture of Western and Chinese traditional opera, in 2008. With *Feather* (羽), he returns to a smaller canvas, moving from the National Theater (國家戲劇院) to the Experimental Theater (實驗劇場) and working primarily with *nanguan* (南管) virtuoso Wang Xinxin (王心心) to create a work that is described tantalizingly as a "nanguan contemporary opera."

Nanguan, probably the most ancient Chinese musical form still currently practiced, is, superficially at least, about as archaic as it is possible to get. The form dates back around a thousand years and is most notable for its glacial pacing and complex musical structures. With *The Tale of the Lo River Goddess*, which made extensive use of the *nanguan* form, Hemleb created a richly ornamental production that fascinated with its rich costumes and formal sophistication and became an important stepping stone for *nanguan* into the cultural mainstream.

With *Feather*, he is playing a much bolder game. He has turned Wang into a dancer, as opposed to her usual role as principal instrumentalist, and matched her with first-generation Cloud Gate (雲門舞集) dancer Yeh Tai-chu (葉台竹) and experimental theater talent Li Yi-hsiu (李易修) on stage. The performance ranges across a variety of styles, morphing from what might be an intimate chamber concert into contemporary dance, with the austere formalism that characterizes *nanguan* woven through the theatrical canvas.

The production is based loosely on the myth of the cowherd and the weaver maid (牛郎織女), but the conceptual approach abjures simple storytelling for a more complex and suggestive expression of the age-old love story. Wang plays a woman who drifts through time from the distant past to the here and now, and Yeh serves as a channel of communication between the mortal and the divine, while Li serves as a bridal shop owner who tends to Wang's time-bending romantic passions.

Speaking about the production last month, Wang said Hemleb had pushed her out of her comfort zone with this production, taking her away from the protective position behind a *pipa* (琵琶), which she often occupies in her own productions, and forcing her into a more dynamic engagement with the theater space.

The synergies of bringing together Wang, who has

PERFORMANCE NOTES

WHAT: Feather — Nanguan Contemporary Opera (南管現代歌劇 — 羽)

WHEN: Today and tomorrow at 7:30pm, tomorrow and Sunday at 2:30pm

WHERE: National Experimental Theater, Taipei City

ADMISSION: All performances are sold out

created a solid following in Taiwan for the severe discipline of *nanguan*, dancer Yeh, and experimental theater talent Li, has proven a success with tickets already sold out. Both Yeh and Li have studied *nanguan*, with Li describing himself as Wang's student in *nanguan*. By integrating the alternative theater and contemporary dance scenes with Li's and Yeh's involvement in the work, Wang will be able to bring *nanguan* to a wider, and most importantly, younger audience, who given the chance may well discover that its formal beauty is not so alien after all.

The production is co-sponsored by the Maison de la Culture d'Amiens, will tour Europe next year and has its first overseas performance at the New Vision Arts Festival in Hong Kong in October.



Wang Xinxin shows off her mastery of *nanguan* music at the National Theater last month.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NTCH