

# CULTURE

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## Beijing opera:

ancient and modern



Upcoming productions by Contemporary Legend Theater and Taipei Li-Yuan Peking Opera Theater serve as defiant rebuttals of any suggestion that Beijing opera is merely a relic of the past

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER

The upcoming weekend promises to be a treat for lovers of Beijing opera with major productions showcasing the many different guises to which this endlessly versatile operatic form can lend itself as it strives to find its place in the modern world. Contemporary Legend Theater's (當代傳奇劇場) *The Legendary Pear Garden* (梨園傳奇) will open Thursday with a program that revisits the core of operatic tradition at the National Theater (國家戲院). Across town at Novel Hall (新舞台), the Taipei Li-Yuan Peking Opera Theater (台北新劇團) will see director and lead actor Li Baochun (李寶春) reviving two of the group's recent original works, one based on a modern Chinese play, the other on a well-known Western opera.

Much is said about the need to find a happy medium between tradition and modernity in the traditional performing arts and both Contemporary Legend Theater and Yuan Peking Opera Theater have proved remarkably successful in developing a loyal following across the age spectrum. It's a difficult balancing act to pull off, and the former is best known for its sometimes frantic embrace of contemporary theatrical devices, while the latter has a reputation as a stalwart guardian of tradition with a penchant for occasional forays onto the wild side.

Originally scheduled to open last month, *The Legendary Pear Garden* was delayed after Contemporary Legend Theater's founder and

lead performer Wu Hsing-kuo (吳興國) injured himself during a show while on tour in South Korea. The production comprises highlights from classic operas featuring Wu, his long-time collaborator Wei Hai-ming (魏海敏), and a number of emerging talents. The opening performance on Thursday, *Lonely in the Cold Dessert* (寂寞沙洲冷), will feature Wu in the role Fan Chung-yu (范仲禹), supported by comic specialist Lin Chao-hsu (林朝緒) in a performance designed as homage to Wu's mentor Chou Cheng-rong (周正榮). Wu said he aimed to perform this role in the style of his mentor.

"As we get older, we must find ways of teaching a younger generation, and encourage them to follow on in our footsteps ... While I can still perform, I want to show them what it is really about. Even if audiences are hard to come by [these days], they [aspiring performers] must persevere and take this tradition to the world stage," Wu said in a press conference in June to announce the project.

This will be followed on Friday by a selection of highlights featuring the heroic roles of Beijing opera, titled *Young Heroes* (英雄美少年), and will end with two performances of *Loves That Topple Empires* (傾國之戀), which includes the scene *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王別姬), made famous in Chen Kaige's (陳凱歌) 1993 film of the same name and one of the great tragic set pieces of Beijing opera. This will be combined with Wei

performing *The Drunken Concubine* (貴妃醉酒), a highly technical piece that was made famous by her own mentor Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳).

Wei, one of the boldest innovators in Beijing opera, said she was always happy to return to the classics, because she could feel the power of a centuries-long tradition expressing itself through her.

"I feel that although the forms that our mentors and predecessors on the stage developed may now be centuries old, what they created crosses time and still has great dramatic power ... If you perform this material with your heart, there is still so much you can discover in it."

While Contemporary Legend is making a return to tradition, the Taipei Li-Yuan Peking Opera Theater is showcasing two contemporary Beijing operas this weekend in a program titled *One Heart, Two Leaves* (一心二葉), a reference to the double leaf at the very top of a tea plant that is the most highly prized by connoisseurs.

On Saturday and Sunday it will revive its highly successful 2008 production of *The Jester*



(弄臣), which is based on Verdi's opera *Rigoletto* (See story on Page 13 of the Dec. 12, 2008 edition of the *Taipei Times*). Opening the series will be one of the group's most daring modern operas, *The Wilderness* (原野), based on an unfinished play by China's greatest modern playwright, Cao Yu (曹禺). This opera first ran in 2007.

Although premiered relatively recently, they are being revived partly because *The Wilderness* will participate in the Shanghai International Art Festival (上海國際藝術節) and *The Jester* in the Beijing International Theater Dance Festival (北京戲劇舞蹈季) later this month.

A further and more significant reason, according to Vivien Ku (辜懷群), executive director of the Taipei Li-Yuan Peking Opera

Theater, is to change the perception of new style operas and make them part of an established repertoire. She expressed hope that people would come and watch new operas such as *The Jester* to see a contemporary interpretation of a well-loved work built around a different cast, in the same way they would an established classic.

"Of course, to achieve this, we need to stage the opera more than once," Ku said. *The Jester*, with its clever mixing of musical genres, and which shows off Li's prodigious versatility as he shifts from comic to tragic roles as the court jester Rigoletto, and *The Wilderness*, with its stripped-down modern setting and rebellious message that resonates with the idealism and naivety of a young China in the 1930s, are defiant rebuttals of any suggestion that Beijing opera is merely a relic of the past.

"In putting on traditional productions, we can pretty much take it easy as we are enjoying the riches handed down to us by others. But we must also do something for ourselves," Ku said.

Underlining Beijing opera's engagement with the contemporary theater, Ku has invited a new dramatic version of *The Wilderness* by the Tianjin People's Art Academy (天津人民藝術劇院) to Taipei. The production of the opera and the drama took place almost simultaneously as part of a spate of activity surrounding Cao's works related to the 10th anniversary of his death in 2006. It will be performed at Novel Hall on Nov. 20 to Nov. 22.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CONTEMPORARY LEGEND THEATER AND NOVEL HALL



### TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

OCT. 23 TO OCT. 29



1 Elva Hsiao (蕭亞軒) and Diamond Candy (鑽石糖) with **24.62 percent** of sales

2 Delia, aka Ring (丁噐), and Night Cat (夜貓) with **6.3%**

3 Kuo Shu-yao (鄧書瑤), aka Yao Yao, and (瑤瑤) and Hug of Love: Farewell to 18 (愛的抱抱: 告別18歲) with **5.08%**

4 Joseph Cheng (鄭元暢) and Chang a Song (暢一首歌) with **4.77%**

5 Joi Tsai (蔡淳佳) and Back to Basics (回到最初) with **4.3%**

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

### PLANET POP



Sting: Obama is "exactly what we need in the world."

collection of Ledger's work at the Rome Film Festival earlier this month.

A judge granted *American Idol* host Ryan Seacrest a temporary restraining order against a man arrested on suspicion of stalking the radio and television host outside his workplace on Friday, court records show.

Seacrest's attorneys obtained the stay-away order hours after they say Chidi Benjamin Uzomah Jr was detained at the E! Entertainment Television headquarters in Los Angeles.

boyhood friend of Heath Ledger has released a music video the star directed shortly before his death.

N'fa Forster-Jones posted the three-minute, 31-second clip for his song *Cause an Effect* on his YouTube and MySpace pages last week, along with a video in which he explains how the project came about.

Ledger, the celebrity-shy star of Batman blockbuster, *The Dark Knight*, and the posthumously released *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, shot a handful of videos for low-profile artists he liked. Ledger died aged 28 in New York from an accidental drug overdose in January of last year.

Forster-Jones, who had been friends with Ledger since they were toddlers in Perth, said the video was shot in one day in the garage of Ledger's beachside apartment. "He gave me a call one morning, as he often did at crazy hours, and he's like, 'N'fa, I've got this idea for a video,'" the rapper says in the online posting. "He was basically running around directing me each shot," he said. "It was a really cool day." "Every day I count my blessings that I got to have him direct this piece of art," he said. The video was first shown at a

The filing claims Uzomah was carrying a knife and was trying to see the popular television and radio host.

Uzomah, 25, is on probation for another incident involving Seacrest. Court records show he pleaded guilty in Orange County, California, last month to three misdemeanors: carrying a switchblade knife, assault and battery. Uzomah was charged after he attacked one of Seacrest's bodyguards outside an event.

Actor Dennis Hopper is suffering from prostate cancer and has cancelled all engagements to focus on his treatment, his manager said in a statement Friday. Sam Maydew, told *Access Hollywood* that the 73-year-old actor and artist is being treated through a "special program" at the University of Southern California medical center.

The star of *Easy Rider*, *Apocalypse Now* and the TV series *Crash* would be forced to miss an exhibition at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne called Dennis Hopper and the New Hollywood, a collection of his artwork and photos, Mayhew added.

Nicole Richie and her children are getting some court-ordered space from a pair of celebrity photographers.

A judge on Friday granted Richie's request for a temporary restraining order

against the paparazzi. Her filing states that one of the men, Eduardo Arrivabene, caused a car accident involving Richie in Beverly Hills earlier this month.

The filing added that Arrivabene and Ivon Emilio Melo Miguel continued to chase Richie and her children in the pursuit of shots.

The men screamed at Richie "in an attempt to get a reaction" and have left the 28-year-old frightened for her family's safety.

A prosecutor has dropped a case against a man connected to two Ohio police chiefs who were accused of snooping on the woman who bore twins for Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick.

Special prosecutor Shawn Hervey said Friday he prefers to have Bruce Callarik testify in the other men's upcoming trials.

All three were charged with a scheme to steal items from the surrogate's eastern Ohio home and sell them to paparazzi.

Callarik had previously pleaded not guilty to complicity in receiving stolen property. His lawyer says he will testify truthfully but not necessarily for or against anyone.