

CULTURE

MONDAY, JUNE 21, 2010

A quick tour of the 'Peony Pavilion'



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LANTING KUN OPERA TROUPE

Lanting Kun Opera Troupe prunes the 20-hour classic Chinese love story down to a more easily digestible two hours in its latest reworking of 'kun' opera for a modern audience

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

The Peony Pavilion (牡丹亭) is recognized as one of Chinese civilization's great theatrical works, and has the same kind of reputation as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, known about and referred to even by people who rarely, if ever, visit the theater. But even for those who love traditional opera, few have seen a complete version, which runs to 55 scenes and in the 1999 production hosted by the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York ran for 20 hours. It was probably the first full production of the opera in 300 years, and although that production toured extensively around the world at the time, it is not likely to be repeated any time soon.

The opera retains its grip on its audience through performances of key scenes, some of which have been incorporated into Lanting Kun Opera Troupe's (蘭庭昆劇團) post-modern reworking of the opera, which opens on Friday at Taipei's Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台). Through a highly technical compiling of music, lyrics and other materials by the opera's Ming Dynasty author Tang Xianzu (湯顯祖), as well as the use of modern stagecraft, Lanting has sought to create a complete and integrated opera that both radically condenses the original, and provides a way into some of its central ideas.

Lanting has made a specialty of reworking the long, involved and discursive *kun* operas (昆劇) for a modern audience, most recently with a hugely successful 90-minute production of *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (長生殿) for the National Palace Museum (國立故宮博物院). The production opening on Friday, titled *Quest for the Garden Saunter and the Interpreted Dream* (尋找遊園驚夢), also began life as a 90-minute piece designed specifically for performance at what is now the Huashan 1914 Creative Park (華山1914). This production brought together *kun* opera, installation art and experimental theater and arguably inaugurated a new era in

creative stagings of Chinese opera. This was in 2007. There have been a number of location-specific stagings since, but this is the first time that *Quest* will be adapted for a theater setting. Speaking about the transfer of this production in an expanded, approximately two-hour version to a conventional stage, Wang Chih-ping (王志萍), Lanting Kun Opera Company's director, said that given the original production's critical success, its influence and the unique creative energy that it generated, she had been eager to create a version that was not locked into a specific venue.

The story of *The Peony Pavilion* revolves around a romantic relationship between Du Liniang (杜麗娘), the daughter of a powerful Song Dynasty official, and Liu Mengmei (柳夢梅), a young, impecunious scholar. The romance begins in a dream and involves the highly improbable resurrection of the heroine after she pines away for love to be reunited with her beloved. The original opera shifts between dreams, recollection and reality, and is a perfect platform for what *kun* opera does best: the explication of romantic thoughts and longings in beautiful and elaborate language. It is also marvelously suited to the kind of splintered, non-narrative presentation that gives this opera, written in the late 1500s, a very contemporary feel.

The nature of *kun*, with its focus on music and lyrics over narrative, also makes it susceptible to the kind of radical distillation to which Wang and her team have subjected it.

To provide a window into the world of *kun*, Wang has introduced a modern figure into the opera, a woman who serves as a kind of narrator and chorus to the action. "All her lines come from the original text," Wang said. "When there is so much good material available, there is no need to force new material in." The character is sung by actress and singer Sean Hung (洪瑞襄), who is participating in *kun* opera for the first time. Her movements and phrasing are a contrast with the laboriously honed grace

of the *kun* professionals, creating a stylistic tension that helps ease audiences unfamiliar with *kun* into its highly stylized world.

Wang said the original Huashan production provided important inspiration in the area of staging. The depth of the performance area and the opportunity to use precision lighting allowed the creation of visual depth and the sense of characters being in different states or in different times, without making any of this explicit. The normal Chinese opera stage is two-dimensional by comparison, with every attention given to the performers and nothing to creating a sense of atmosphere. While Hung had her work cut out learning to sing *kun*, traditional performers needed to relearn some of the accepted knowledge about projecting their voices to adapt to the more complex staging.

"The Chinese opera companies have enormous depth of talent," Wang said. "Taiwan cannot go head-to-head against them. What we can do instead is create small, innovative productions." Wang said that for the current generation at least, radical innovation in traditional opera in China was still hampered by the narrow discipline of opera training, with few opera professionals having access to a broader liberal arts or theatrical education.

For this new production, Wang has brought in the talents of Wen Yuhang (溫宇航), who played the male lead in the epic Lincoln Center production in 1999. As an acknowledged master in the interpretation of *The Peony Pavilion*, Wang said he had provided invaluable insight in his role as both director and leading male in *Quest*. The female lead is played by Kong Aiping (孔愛萍), a leading performer of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Company (江蘇省昆劇院) who won the prestigious Plum Blossom Prize (梅花獎) for her performance of Du Liniang in *The Peony Pavilion*.

Wang said one of the reasons Lanting could attract performers of Kong's caliber was because of the unique performance opportunities it could provide.

What Lanting has been able to do in its small but important corpus of work, and perhaps most spectacularly in *Quest*, is to show the potential of *kun* as an expressive medium for modern interpretations of classic stories. What is achieved is not a fusion of ancient and modern, but rather a careful pruning of an ancient tradition to highlight elements in which a modern audience can find value and inspiration.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

WHAT: *Quest for the Garden Saunter and the Interpreted Dream* (尋找遊園驚夢) by Lanting Kun Opera Troupe (蘭庭昆劇團)
WHEN: Friday and Saturday at 7:30pm, Sunday at 2:30pm
WHERE: Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台), 25, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市八德路3段25號)
ADMISSION: Tickets are NT\$400 to NT\$2,000, available through ERA ticketing or online at www.ticket.com.tw
ON THE NET: www.lantingkun.org.tw

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

JUNE 11 TO JUNE 17



1 Amber Kuo (郭采潔) and *Sparklers* (煙火) with **26.03** percent of sales

2 Jay Chou (周杰倫) and *The Era* (跨時代) with **10.88%**

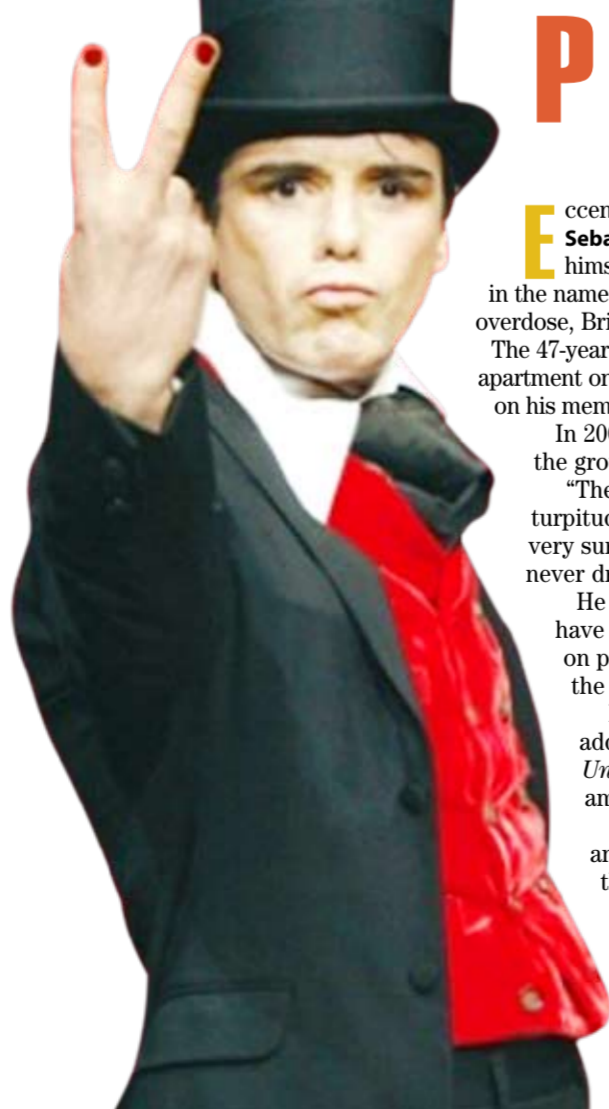
3 Yen-J (嚴爵) and *Thanks Your Greatness* (謝謝你的美好) with **5.54%**

4 Jody Chiang (江蕙) and *Tong Si Beh Ke* (當時欲嫁) with **5.03%**

5 Lu Yao (陸瑤) and *Winding Road* (路遙) with **5.01%**

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

PLANET POP



Eccentric British dandy and author Sebastian Horsley, best known for having himself nailed to a cross in the Philippines in the name of art, has died of a suspected drug overdose, British media reported. The 47-year-old was found dead at his London apartment on Thursday just days after a play based on his memoirs opened at the Soho Theater. In 2008, he was denied entry to the US on the grounds of "moral turpitude." "They said I was suffering from moral turpitude," Horsley said at the time. "I was very surprised. I'm feeling quite well. I've never drunk turpentine in my life."

He was also quoted to have said: "I have invested 90 percent of my money on prostitutes, the rest on Class A drugs, the remains I squandered."

His lurid autobiography of drug addiction and sex called *Dandy in the Underworld* was variously described as amusing and revolting.

It was turned into a play written and directed by Tim Fountain. The theater where the work is being staged said it would continue with the show despite his death.

Tributes poured in for Horsley, recognizable by his

Sebastian Horsley's wild ride ended on Thursday. PHOTO: REUTERS

flamboyant dress and towering black top hat.

"Totally obscure, totally weird; always interesting, always funny. In an age of corporate press releases, he was blessed relief," wrote Emily Hill in the *Guardian*.

Former *7th Heaven* star Jeremy London also used drugs recently — though he says he didn't want to.

Prosecutors in California announced on Thursday that a man has pleaded not guilty to kidnapping London and forcing him to use drugs.

But gossip Web sites smell something fishy.

RadarOnline.com reports that London is subject to random drug testing in connection with a custody issue involving his son. And in an interview with E! News that aired on Friday, London's twin brother Jason and mom Debbie Nielsen said they believe the actor had relapsed after kicking an addiction to prescription pills.

Brandon Adams, 26, of Palm Springs, meanwhile, remained jailed after being arraigned on Tuesday on five charges that include kidnapping and theft, said Michael Jeandron, a district attorney's spokesman.

A statement from Palm Springs police said London, who also appeared on TV's *Party of Five*, was kidnapped while changing a flat tire on June 10.

The 37-year-old actor told police that several men helped him and he offered them a ride home. Police said one man later pulled a gun, forced London to drive around, buy alcohol and smoke crack cocaine.

London said he escaped but his car was stolen. Police later found it and on June 11 arrested Adams. Dominic Friesen, a publicist for London, said on Thursday that the actor was working closely with police in their investigation. Friesen said London is at

"an undisclosed location with family and friends" and appreciates the support from his fans.

In other news, Jake and Elwood, the loveable, hapless characters played by John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd in the classic 1980 film *The Blues Brothers*, have finally gotten Vatican recognition for their "Mission from God."

To mark this week's 30th anniversary of the film, which became a cult classic and spawned a fashion of wearing black hats and dark sunglasses to parties, the Vatican newspaper dedicated a full page and no fewer than five articles to it.

One of the articles says there is "no lack of evidence" that *The Blues Brothers* can be considered "a Catholic film."

It notes that Jake's release from prison and the commitment by him and Elwood to put their blues revival band back together to raise money to save an orphanage from forced closure has parallels with the Biblical story of the prodigal son.

Jake and Elwood — who say they are on a "mission from God" to raise the money to pay a back tax bill for the orphanage — and the band members, are symbols of "redemption obtained with sacrifice."

The newspaper also notes that the film is sprinkled with Catholic and moral references such as the nun Sister Mary Stigmata, who they call "The Penguin."

Elwood even passes up a chance for a one-night stand with a woman played by Twiggy in order to fulfill the mission, it says.

"This is a memorable film, and, judging by the facts, a Catholic one," the newspaper said.

— AGENCIES, WITH STAFF WRITER