

CULTURE

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[THE WEEKENDER]

Lanting Kun Opera Troupe signs a new lease on life

The group's newest production proves that a modern reinterpretation of 'kun' opera can work

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Premiering to an enthusiastic, if slightly understrength, audience at Taipei's Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台) on Friday night, Lanting Kun Opera Troupe's (蘭庭崑劇團) *Quest for the Garden Saunter and the Interpreted Dream* (尋找遊園驚夢) showed that *kun* opera is going places in the 21st century. A post-modern reworking of the classic story of *The Peony Pavilion* (牡丹亭), *Quest* had its work cut out with a pitch that had the potential to annoy traditional opera lovers with its unconventional structure and the inclusion of a non-*kun* singer in the lineup, and leave enthusiasts of contemporary theater confounded by its long and highly elaborate arias and flowery poetic abstractions.

The inclusion of Sean Hung (洪瑞興) as a modern woman reading *The Peony Pavilion* and commenting or echoing the sentiments of the two leading players is a bold move that for the most part was carried off successfully. The passages in which she sang duets with *kun* star Kong Aiping (孔愛萍) were remarkable for the subtle combination of two very different singing styles that created a music both alien and familiar at the same time.

This effect created a sense of familiarity in an archaic operatic form, exactly what Lanting's director Wang Chi-hing (王志祥) has sought to achieve in the company's work. This double-layered singing effectively conveys the work's flowery passages about love, loss and longing for home to modern audiences.

The reshuffling of the familiar narrative was unsettling at first and the fluid movement of the action, without the conventional punctuation of stylized entrances and exits had the audience slightly confused at the beginning, unsure when to applaud the fine demonstrations of skill taking place on stage. But this little hiccup was quickly overcome as the new rhythms of this unconventional production became familiar.

The stripping away of the original's involved narrative and the focus on the essentials of romantic longing gave the opera a disembodied quality — it was more a meditation on love than a story of two lovers. For audiences unfamiliar with the story, the whole thing might seem too ethereal.

That being said, *Quest* is one of the boldest experiments in adapting traditional opera to the modern stage, and it successfully avoids the pitfalls of many productions of recent years for which unsympathetic styles were forced together with little regard to how they work when combined. Wang has created a highly abstract distillation of *The Peony Pavilion* that exudes a deep respect for the *kun* opera forms, and she gives them a new relevance through her command of stagecraft and spatial design. It would be wrong to call this fusion: it is a much more organic revitalization of a traditional art for the modern world.



The *Quest for the Garden Saunter and the Interpreted Dream* boldly, and successfully, went where no *kun* opera had been before.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LANTING KUN OPERA TROUPE



The Scissor Sisters, from the left: Babydaddy, Jake Shears, Ana Matronic and Del Marquis.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

The Scissor Sisters' midnight evolution

With 'Night Work,' which goes on release tomorrow, the band returns to its clubland roots and gets down and very dirty

BY MELENA RYZIK
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Though it was afternoon, the shades in the studio were pulled tight, which seemed appropriate for a Scissor Sisters rehearsal. Nighttime suits this band, which got its start playing flamboyant dance-pop at late-late gigs on the Lower East Side and in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, always with the idea that the best stuff happens in the wee hours, in the dark, when anything, or anyone, is possible.

And even in rehearsal, Jake Shears, the group's frontman and chief songwriter, was all slithery animation, two-stepping and hip-shaking his way through the songs from *Night Work*, the group's third album. "I'll kill you, I'll kill you and your mincing dance moves," his foil and frontwoman, Ana Matronic, said, before joining in to go-go. Cue the disco beat: "You can find your life in the nightlife," sang the group, which includes the multi-instrumentalist Babydaddy, the bassist Del Marquis and the drummer Randy Real.

Night Work, which goes on release tomorrow, is a return to Scissor Sisters' dingier clubland roots, before the band became a chart topper in Europe and a cult favorite in the US. The album is driven by dance-floor bass rhythms, a thematic through line and what Shears — born Jason Sellards — called "more brooding and upright and sinister and creepy" songs. It's still fun, but it's dirtier fun.

"It's a nighttime album," said Babydaddy, ne Scott Hoffman, in a green room after the rehearsal. "We wanted to return to that feeling, what we used to do, which was perform at 2am at Luxx," a defunct club in Williamsburg that was part of the (equally defunct) electroclash scene. It was from there that the Sisters developed their aesthetic and identity as gay-centric downtown New York performers. They've hardly compromised since.

For what began as a niche act, they've always had a broad sound. Now, nearly a decade into the band's career, Downtown, its new label, is hoping that *Night Work* will be an opportunity for Scissor Sisters to establish themselves for an American audience that so far has viewed them more as a novelty than a stadium filler.

Their self-titled debut album, released by Universal in 2004, drew comparisons to the Bee Gees and Elton John and sold 320,000 copies domestically, according to Nielsen SoundScan. In Britain it was the top album of the year, selling 2.7 million copies and sweeping the Brit Awards. The follow-up, *Ta-Dah*, spent nearly a year on the charts there, and the Sisters were coveted headliners, known for their over-the-top shows. (They were doing notable nudity and costumes years before Gaga.)

But in the US, *Ta-Dah* sold only 181,000 copies. "Europe

in general is much better for electronic music, it's much better for flamboyant pop," said Casey Spooner of Fischerspooner, a friend of Scissor Sisters who emerged from the same scene.

In a telephone interview Elton John, a friend and collaborator, said, "I do believe the gay thing got in the way."

If *Ta-Dah* proved creatively unfocused — "It was a brittle record," Shears said, and his band mates called it "rushed," "shambolic" and "Muppet-y" — *Night Work* represents a major shift. It is the first time the Sisters have collaborated with an outside producer, Stuart Price, a Londoner who worked on Madonna's *Confessions on a Dance Floor*. Relinquishing production duties, which in the past had fallen to Babydaddy and Shears, was a big deal.

"We always felt really safe" working as a unit, "and I just kept worrying, like, who is this outside

person?" said Marquis, 32, born Derek Gruen.

"There's a certain amount of pride that we had about producing our own records," Babydaddy said. "The first one was made in my living room."

But at this stage in their career, Shears said, "we want to upgrade everything."

"Total evolution," Babydaddy agreed, completing the thought. (They do that a lot for each other.)

"We're much better at this," Matronic added. "We're better musicians."

Offstage they have a sharp, familiar camaraderie, born of tour-bus raves — "Someone always brings the sketchiest porn," Shears said fondly.

Still, creating *Night Work* was a trial. At home in New York, Shears wrote dozens of songs, but felt unfulfilled. On a whim he went to Berlin to recharge and spent last spring partying there.

"I love all-nighters and going out

and listening to DJs and staring into strobe lights," he said, in an interview in his well-appointed TriBeCa loft, loaded with books and records and found art discovered by his boyfriend, an artist. "Club life has really been in my heart. It's just who I am, and I think where I'd gone astray the last few years was losing that from my life."

In Berlin he met Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys, who suggested Price as a producer. Price, who with his own band had toured with the Sisters, suggested that the band abandon the material it had already written and start fresh.

On a first album an artist often has a lousy job, lives in a lousy building, he said, "you're maybe in a relationship with someone that you don't want to be in a relationship with, all these amazing ingredients for writing really good songs." After the hits, "you've got a

really nice apartment, you've got really great artwork, and you've probably had sex with more people than you know what to do with," he said. "For the Scissor Sisters, at least three out of four of those have got to be true. These are the not the elements to make a great song."

"What we wanted to do with the third album," he continued, "was restore some balance to the situation, to not take ourselves too seriously. I think the balance to the Sisters is great songs with a carefree attitude, that make you feel like you're having a great night out, possibly too drunk, marveling at the great records being played." There are references to classic disco and classic rock, but also not-so-classic albums, from groups like Frankie Goes to Hollywood and ZZ Top. "We decided to dwell on that side of the taste buds," Price said.

The result, John said, is reminiscent of 1970s and 1980s disco-pop, "fun all the way through."

"This is the album that really symbolizes what they sound like live," he said.

And though to compete in the post-Gaga age, the Scissors are toning down their look — "Ana is not going to wear a live lobster on her head," Shears said. There are still the boundary-pushing touches: references to straight "breeders" and crystal meth, and one song, *Whole New Way*, about anal sex. The pulsing closing track, *Invisible Light*, features some dark oration by Ian McKellen. "You can't beat gay-super-club-Ian McKellen-goth," Spooner said. "That's like a new facet of homosexuality that we all need."

For the album cover Shears selected a Robert Mapplethorpe photo of a man's clenched buttocks, clad in a skintight leotard. (They belong to the ballet dancer Peter Reed, who died of complications from AIDS in 1994.)

"Nobody in my band wanted that album cover," Shears said. "The label didn't want that album cover. Management didn't want that album cover." It was too stark, too gay and too niche. "I don't think they did themselves any favors," John said.

Asked about it, Deutsch of Downtown Records laughed reflexively. "It's a strong statement," he said. "It's provocative." (For squeamish retailers, there is a version with a card covering the image.) Shears insisted on it, he said, because it symbolized the era the album referenced, and because it represented a certain debauchery in the face of despair — or disadvantage, or daylight — that he witnessed in Berlin and considered universal. In the end the Scissor Sisters embraced the photo, making it the tour poster.

"We don't think small," Marquis said.

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

JUNE 18 TO JUNE 24



1 Bibi Zhou (周筆暢) and *I, Fish, Light, Mirror* (I·魚·光·鏡) with **26.41 percent** of sales

2 Peter Ho (何潤東) and *Remembered Love* (我記得我愛過) with **15.12%**

3 Danson Tang (唐禹哲) and *The First Second* (D1秒) with **10.47%**

4 Lu Yao (陸瑤) and *Winding Road* (路遙) with **4.35%**

5 Jody Chiang (江蕙) and *Tong Si Beh Ke* (當時欲嫁) with **3.29%**

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

POP STOP

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Spare a thought for the stars of the show at the 21st Golden Melody Awards (第二十一屆金曲獎) ceremony, which took place at Taipei Arena (台北巨蛋) on Saturday night. Not only did they do battle for the top slots, they had to contend with inclement weather, preventing many from showing off their carefully preened plumage on the red carpet. And as if it couldn't get any worse, the ceremony ran over time, with some awardees complaining that their acceptance speeches were unfairly cut short while A-listers were given as much time as they liked.

Pop diva Chang Hui-mei (張惠妹), better known as **A-mei** (阿妹), was crowned the biggest award winner to date, picking up top honors in six categories, including Best Mandarin Album, Best Mandarin Female Singer and Best Song for her concept album *A-MIT* (阿密特, also the name of her alter ego). She broke the record **Jay Chou** (周杰倫) set with his album *Fantasy* (范特西), which garnered five awards in 2002.

"God, this [award] is so hard to get," said A-mei, after receiving her second Best Female Singer trophy in eight years.

Nominations in the prestigious Best Mandarin Album and Best Song

categories were dominated by familiar faces such as **Cheer Chen** (陳綺貞), **Tanya Chua** (蔡健雅) and **Karen Mok** (莫文蔚).

Having garnered six nominations, young songstress Hsu Chia-ying (徐佳瑩), aka **Lala Shu**, was a sure winner in the Newcomer category. The song *I Ride a White Horse*, from her self-titled debut album, is a smash hit that combines *gezai* opera (歌仔戲), pop and references to puppetry.

The hotly contested Best Band Award was handed to indie rock outfit 1976, which beat out two-time titleholder Sodagreen (蘇打綠), and Super Band (縱貫線).

"We have kept playing music for 14 years ... Winning this award may encourage young people to think that it's great to play music," the band said.

The biggest surprise of the night came when **Yan Yung-neng** (嚴詠能) and his band Takaorun (打狗亂歌團) from Kaohsiung beat off Golden Melody regulars **Ricky Hsiao** (蕭敬騰) and **Judy Chiang** (江蕙), the uncontested reigning queen of Hoklo music, to take home the Best Taiwanese-language Album gong for their CD *Ta Yuan I Chia Nung Chu Lai* (大員一家農出來).

Since it was founded in 2005, Yan's group has been touring the country's towns and villages, entertaining

inhabitants with Taiwanese grassroots music. The T-shirt wearing, barefooted Yan said that many elders in farming villages buy his CD but don't have the equipment to play it. "So they place the CD on their altar tables and ask the deities to protect my voice," the musician said. "I make music for those who are farmers like my grandparents. I think we can all learn from their wonderful and humble attitude toward life."

The ceremony overran, winding up at midnight. While the tedious event was filled with uninspiring performances and loquacious presenters prattling on, a time limit was imposed on the winners' acceptance speeches. Well, some of them. Many awardees struggled to finish in the designated time. But that restriction wasn't applied to everyone. Big-name acts, such as A-mei, were given as much time as they wanted.

The unequal treatment didn't end there. During her acceptance speech after winning the Best Instrumental Album Producer award for *Paper Eagle* (紙鷲) by jazz ensemble Sizhukong (絲竹空), pianist and composer **Peng Yu-wen** (彭郁雯) said: "We almost made it to the red carpet. But someone said 'hurry, she [A-mei] is here,' and we [were asked] to leave."

If it's any consolation, Peng wasn't

the only one who didn't make up the red carpet. Heavy rain put the kibosh on the traditional star-studded parade.

The 90m-long red carpet posed a real challenge to stars as they tottered along in the downpour.

Hong Kong actress and singer Mok was among the few who gracefully completed the treacherous walk. "It is quite romantic walking in the rain," the star said, despite the hem of her haute couture Lanvin evening dress turning into a sodden dishcloth.

A-mei, queen of all she surveys.

PHOTO: REUTERS

