

Acclaimed Zhejiang Wu Opera Research Centre returns to Chinese Opera Festival to showcase fine blending of strength and delicateness of Wu opera (with photos)

The Leisure and Cultural Services Department has invited the Zhejiang Wu Opera Research Centre to return to Hong Kong for three stunning performances in late July at this year's Chinese Opera Festival (COF). Winners of the China Theatre Plum Blossom Award (Plum Blossom Award), Yang Xiayun and Lou Sheng, will be joined by renowned artist Chen Lili and other outstanding actors to perform a seamless integration of martial and civil repertoires in "The Legend of the White Snake" and numerous classic operatic excerpts, showcasing to audiences the fine blending of strength and delicateness as well as the crossing over of the civil and martial styles of Wu opera.

Wu opera, also known as Jinhua opera, is the second major regional operatic genre of Zhejiang Province. It first grew in popularity in Jinhua and its environs, and was named after Jinhua's former name, Wuzhou. On stage, Wu opera shows a distinct style of liveliness and a character of "crossing the line between the martial and the civil repertoires". With an adept use of fluid choreography, stunning martial art fighting and sonorous music to express strength of movement and emotions, Wu opera's repertory covers a wide range of subject matter that reflects the lives of common people and tells of the legendary figures in Chinese folklore.

The first performance is a full-length production of "The Legend of the White Snake" in which actors will perform many stylised movements and stunts that are unique to the genre, such as the "snake slither" by the White and Green Snakes, and the "swift leap-and-kneel" and "rolling off the back" by Xu Xian. "The Broken Bridge", which has long been acclaimed as the "No. 1 Bridge presentation" in Chinese opera circles, is an excerpt that is representative of a lyrical scene rendered with a martial overtone, and serious drama presented with comedic effects. Featuring a total of six operatic excerpts, the second performance will begin with "Reneging on the Marriage", in which the style of "crossing the line between the martial and the civil repertoires" has significantly been adopted. The subsequent excerpts demonstrate the traditional skills and martial art stunts of Wu opera, such as the popping from and falling back into a crate in "Fan Zhongyu Beaten and Thrown into a Crate", the fast wielding of the spear and footwork grips in "The Eight Mallets", the acrobatic techniques of falling and flipping in "Struck by Gold Bricks", and the "water sleeve" and "hair flinging" techniques in "Catching Sanlang Alive". In "The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea", audiences will be delighted with the fast yet aesthetically pleasing routines and stylised movements. Another five excerpts will be staged in the

final performance. The first three pieces, "Water Nymph of Sizhou City", "The Party" and "Lu Bu Pacing His Horse", will showcase numerous difficult moves and stunts, including the use of the spear to exercise catching and kicking, "feather wiggling of the headgear", "blanket sequences" and more. The last two excerpts, "Executing His Own Son" and "Mu Guiying Breaking Through the Army Formation in Front of the Palace", are the stories of Mu Guiying. The former exhibits the excellent mimi skills of the actor, from the moment she enters with her "horse", making an impressive entrance, to handing over her family heirloom. Meanwhile, the latter, serving as the climax of the full-length opera production "Mu Guiying", shows off an outstanding feature of Wu opera, which are spectacular martial art scenes with awe-inspiring grandeur staging.

Details of the three performances are as follows:

Date and time: July 21 (Friday), 7.30pm

"The Legend of the White Snake"

Main cast: Chen Lili, Yang Xiayun, Lou Sheng, Li Xuanyu, Ying Fujin, Wu Yanxing, Song Baoduan, Liu Fuming

Synopsis: Bai Suzhen, the White Snake, finds the lonely life as an immortal too much to bear, and yearns to be among the mortals. She and the Green Snake descend to Hangzhou, where she meets Xu Xian by the West Lake. It is love at first sight for the two of them and they pledge and marry. Monk Fahai of the Jinshan Temple sees through the snakes' human forms, and is determined to break up the couple. His many attempts succeed because Xu is a distrustful character and is not as much in love as the White Snake is. Suzhen's honesty and true love to her husband finally touches Xu's heart, and all ends well for the two.

Date and time: July 22 (Saturday), 7.30pm

Excerpt "Reneging on the Marriage"

Main cast: Lou Sheng, Ye Xiaohua

Synopsis: Cai Wende is misled into believing that an ugly-looking mad woman is his fiancée, so he reneges on the marriage. He then gets into trouble and is arrested. His real fiancée, Ms Lin, comes to visit him when he is on the execution ground. Wende learns the truth with remorse and hatred.

Excerpt "Fan Zhongyu Beaten and Thrown into a Crate"

Main cast: Dong Xuyang

Synopsis: The new national top scholar Fan Zhongyu wants to report the treacherous act of Ge Dengyun, Grand Tutor to His Majesty, but is knocked unconscious, then thrown into a crate and discarded in the wilderness. The officers who are sent to find him retrieve the crate, unlock it, and save Zhongyu.

Excerpt "The Eight Mallets"

Main cast: Zhou Hongwei

Synopsis: In the Song dynasty, General Yue Fei is engaged in a battle at Zhuxian Town against Jin forces. Four of Yue Fei's warriors, adept in

wielding double sledgehammers as their weapons, are defeated by Lu Wenlong, the adopted son of Prince Wushu of Jin. The tide turns at the end when Wang Zuo severs his own arm to give a false cause for him to find Wenlong and divulge to him the truth about his birth. Wenlong joins the Song warriors to defeat the Jins.

Excerpt "Struck by Gold Bricks"

Main cast: Ying Fujin

Synopsis: During the reign of Emperor Guangwu of Han, his Royal Concubine, Lady Guo, wants to avenge her father's death as he was killed by Yao Gang, the son of Yao Qi. As punishment, the emperor banishes Yao Gang to the border, but this does not appease Lady Guo. She schemes by plying the emperor with wine. When he is in an intoxicated state, the emperor orders the beheading of Yao Qi and a group of senior courtiers. Ma Wu chases after the emperor with a gold brick. The emperor locks himself inside his chambers. This infuriates Ma Wu so much that he bashes himself on the head with the gold brick and dies by his own hand. The emperor soon discovers that he has beheaded his ministers. Filled with guilt and regret, he takes his sword to stab Lady Guo to death before he proceeds to the Grand Ancestral Temple. But he is so befuddled that he trips and dies from the fall.

Excerpt "Catching Sanlang Alive"

Main cast: Xu Pengjiang, Lou Yiting

Synopsis: Song Jiang takes Yan Xijiao as his concubine but she has a relationship with Zhang Wenyuan. Song kills Xijiao in a rage. The ghost of Xijiao visits Zhang at his home to take him with her to the netherworld to continue their love relationship.

Excerpt "The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea"

Main cast: Yang Xiayun, Song Baoduan

Synopsis: The Eight Immortals return from the birthday banquet of the Queen Mother of Heaven and are tipsy from the wine they drank. They happen to cross the path of the Gold Fish Fairy of the Eastern Sea. Lu Dongbin makes a rude remark and the Fairy is offended. In her rage, she wields her magical powers and the Eight Immortals are not her match. It is only after Zhang Guolao apologises to her formally on behalf of all eight of them and presents her with a gift that she relents and lets them cross the Eastern Sea.

Date and time: July 23 (Sunday), 2.30pm

Excerpt "Water Nymph of Sizhou City"

Main cast: Wang Xingxing

Synopsis: The Water Nymph Demon has entrenched herself at Sizhou and has wreaked havoc in the city. The Monkey King leads a celestial army to battle her, and finally manages to subdue her.

Excerpt "The Party"

Main cast: Lou Sheng, Chen Lili, Chen Jianxu

Synopsis: In the last years of the Eastern Han era, Minister Wang Yun plans to eliminate Dong Zhuo to preserve the dynasty. He executes a series of inter-related ruses, which include inviting Lu Bu for a small banquet at his

residence and introducing the beautiful Diao Chan to him, on which occasion they fall for each other.

Excerpt "Lu Bu Pacing His Horse"

Main cast: Li Zhongjun, Wang Mingming

Synopsis: During the Three Kingdoms period, military commander Lu Bu is thrilled to receive a precious horse. He brings his team to the countryside to try out the power of the precious horse, but the horse is born wild and difficult to tame. With his militant pride and superior riding skills, Lu Bu subdues the horse and returns to camp in delight.

Excerpt "Executing His Own Son"

Main cast: Yang Xiayun, Chen Jianxu, Li Xuanyu, Lou Sheng, Gao Qian, Wu Yanxing, Liu Fuming, Chen Xiaojian

Synopsis: Marshal Yang Yanzhao is defeated by Mu Guiying and returns to camp on a rampage. His son, Zongbao, is however enamoured of Guiying and is ready to marry her. The Marshal decides to have him executed as dictated by martial law. It so happened that Guiying has decided to join the Song forces, and she confronts the Marshal. The Marshal cannot but accept her as his daughter-in-law and sets Zongbao free in the end.

Excerpt "Mu Guiying Breaking Through the Army Formation in Front of the Palace"

Main cast: Yang Xiayun, Lou Sheng

Synopsis: Mui Guiying puts on her full armour and enters the battlefield. Undaunted by the military formation that the enemy from the north has set up, she valiantly leads her army to break it down. With her spears, she beats the general on the enemy's side and returns in victory.

Founded as the Zhejiang Wu Opera Theatre Company in 1956, the Zhejiang Wu Opera Research Centre has been reviving and exploring the traditional art of Wu opera. The centre has since collated more than 800 plays and 3,000 sung tunes and set tunes; the traditional masks and costumes unique to Wu opera have also been documented. The centre currently boasts a contingent of illustrious artists, including winners of the Plum Blossom Award. The centre has created and performed several distinguished plays, many of them were awarded in the national Chinese opera showcase, and have been staged in numerous countries and regions across Europe and Asia.

Three performances will be held at the Auditorium of Kwai Tsing Theatre. Each performance will run for about two hours and 30 minutes, including an intermission of 15 minutes. Lyrics and dialogue are with Chinese and English surtitles. Tickets priced at \$160, \$260, \$300 and \$380 are now available at URBTIX (www.urbtix.hk). For telephone bookings, please call 3166 1288. For programme enquiries and concessionary schemes, please call 2268 7325 or visit www.cof.gov.hk/2023/en/wu.html.

A Meet-the-Artists session entitled "The Unique Features of Wu Opera" (in Putonghua) will be held at 7.30pm on July 20 (Thursday) at AC2, 4/F, Administration Building, Hong Kong Cultural Centre. The speakers include Director of Zhejiang Wu Opera Theatre Company Wang Xiaoping, veteran Wu opera

artist Chen Meilan as well as performers of the centre Yang Xiayun and Lou Sheng, while Chinese opera researcher Chan Chun-miu will be the moderator. Admission is free with limited seats available on a first-come, first-served basis. Details can be found on the above-mentioned website.

Since its inception in 2010, the COF has curated quality operatic programmes with the aim of promoting the artistry and culture of Chinese traditional opera. COF 2023 will once again bring together an excellent line-up of Chinese opera troupes to stage nine quality operatic programmes covering a variety of theatrical genres, including Peking opera, Qu opera, Sichuan opera, Han opera, Cantonese opera, Wu opera, Kunqu opera and Yue opera, from June to October, showcasing the splendour of Chinese operatic art in all its glory. For more details, please visit www.cof.gov.hk.

