

Sichuan Opera Troupe to showcase different vocal styles and unique stunts of Sichuan opera at China Opera Festival 2023 (with photos)

The Sichuan Opera Troupe, upon the invitation of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, will stage two iconic plays and a selection of brilliant excerpts for three consecutive nights starting from June 30 (Friday) at this year's Chinese Opera Festival (COF). The troupe's director and two-time recipient of the China Theatre Plum Blossom Award, Chen Zhilin, will lead Plum Blossom Award recipients Liu Yi and Zhang Yan, as well as National Class One and outstanding young performers, to visit Hong Kong and showcase their distinguished skills, allowing audiences to savour the vocal styles and unique stunts with the artistic flavour of the Sichuan region.

Originated during the Qing dynasty period, Sichuan opera is the most widespread regional theatrical form in the southwest region of China, and was inscribed onto the First National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006. Sichuan opera has assimilated the artistic vocal styles of kunqiang, gaoqiang, huqin, tanxi and dengxi that blended with the vernacular features of the local dialect, featuring unique humour and wisdom that are highly enjoyable to audiences.

The first performance will stage the traditional play "The Legend of the White Snake". The role of White Snake is civil at first and later turns martial, whereas that of Green Snake is interpreted in the two different images of huadan (young female) and wusheng (military male) rotationally. The scenes also employ demanding stunts like swift face-changing, lifting, standing on shoulder and flicking of flowing sleeves. At the second performance, Chen Zhilin will star in the classic Sichuan opera "A Marriage as a Peace Pact", featuring the entire stock roles in a story filled with dramatic turns and distinct regional flavour. The play has been well-loved by audiences since its first performance in 1962. The final performance will be a selection of five excerpts performed in the unique gaoqiang and tanxi vocal styles of Sichuan opera. "Catching Sanlang Alive" highlights the unique Sichuan opera stunt of "lifting the dummy" as well as the stylised routines of the satin ribbon and the walk of the demon fox. "Waylaying the Horse", "Wu Song Killing His Sister-in-Law" and "The Injustice Done to Dou E" will show the stunt with the chairs, the flicking of flowing sleeves and the fests of "hair flip" and "stance fix". "Holding a Candle to Burn His Books" is an excerpt from the famous Sichuan opera play "The Scholar from Bashan", which showcases the singing skills of gaoqiang of the cast.

Details of the three performances are as follows:

Date and time: June 30 (Friday), 7.30pm

"The Legend of the White Snake"

Main cast: Liu Yi (former part) / Zhou Ting (latter part), Yang Kunhao, Xie Zhanghong, Liu Su, Li Jiajun, Yang Xu

Synopsis: Fairy White Snake is imprisoned in the white lotus pond by the Buddha because of her love for Arhat Guizhi. She struggles to free herself from the shackles and flees to the mortal world. With the help of Green Snake, she marries the banished Xu Xian (Arhat Guizhi reincarnated). At the order of the Buddha, Monk Fahai follows Xu to the mortal world and tries to break up the loving couple. White Snake shows her magical power furiously and flooded the Mount Jin. Together with Green Snake, the two fight bravely against the ferocious heavenly generals.

Date and time: July 1 (Saturday), 7.30pm

"A Marriage as a Peace Pact"

Main cast: Chen Zhilin, Xiong Xiangang, Zhao Siya, Du Jia

Synopsis: During the final years of the Eastern Han dynasty, Liu Bei uses Jing Province that he borrowed from Sun Quan of Eastern Wu as a foothold. When Sun Quan's repeated attempts to reclaim Jing Province prove futile, his military governor Zhou Yu sets up a beauty trap. By saying Sun offers his sister Lady Sun Shangxiang to Liu Bei as a wife and asking Liu to cross the river to complete the wedding ceremony, Sun Quan hopes to seize the chance to reclaim Jing Province. Liu Bei's counsellor Zhuge Liang arranges tricks, turning Sun's trick around and realising the fake marriage instead. Zhou Yu then comes up with another scheme by trying to lure Liu Bei to indulge in wine and women. Following Zhuge Liang's advice, Liu feigns being fatuous and succeeds in learning Lady Sun's heartfelt wish. They wait for the chance to flee. In the end, Zhou Yu loses on both fronts and must pay a double penalty.

Date and time: July 2 (Sunday), 7.30pm

Excerpt "Catching Sanlang Alive" (Gaoqiang)

Main cast: Wan Duo, Li Yujie

Synopsis: Unwilling to be alone in the netherworld, ghost Yan Xijiao returns to the mortal world in search of her previous lover Zhang Wenyuan and attempts to lure him to join her in the netherworld for fun. Zhang refuses, but is eventually captured alive by the ghost Yan.

Excerpt "Waylaying the Horse" (Tanxi)

Main cast: Huang Haiwei, Yin Lianlian

Synopsis: During the Song dynasty, Song soldier Jiao Guangpu is stranded in the state of Liao and opens a small tavern. One day, a Liao soldier with a border pass on the belt arrives at the tavern. Jiao hopes to steal the pass to exit the border. The two break into a fight. Jiao reveals that he is a general of the Yang family, while the soldier discloses that she is the eighth daughter of the Yang family. As a result, the two cross the border together to return home.

Excerpt "Wu Song Killing His Sister-in-Law" (Tanxi)

Main cast: Zhang Yan, Xie Zhanghong

Synopsis: Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing collaborate and kill Pan's husband Wu Dalang with poison. Hearing this, Dalang's brother Wu Song kills Ximen Qing

and brings his severed head to the mourning hall, intending to kill Pan to avenge his brother's death. Before her death, Pan makes the excuse of wishing to toast Song with three cups of wine to lament the inevitability of her fate while confessing her love for Song.

Excerpt "The Injustice Done to Dou E" (Tanxi)

Main cast: Liu Yi, Liu Dandan, Li Ke

Synopsis: Zhang Luer and his father try to seize Dou E and her mother-in-law Cai. Zhang poisons the food in an attempt to kill Cai, but his father eats it instead and dies. Zhang accuses Dou E of poisoning his father. Dou E is wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death. Snow falls unexpectedly on the day of her execution in June, crying out for justice for her.

Excerpt "Holding a Candle to Burn His Books" (Gaoqiang)

Main cast: Chen Zhilin, Liu Yan

Synopsis: Bashan scholar Meng Dengke tries to seek justice for the village folk who died wrongfully in the case of Bashan. However, due to his bookishness, his petition for justice is futile and results in physical suffering instead. Meng then decides to go all in, burn the petition and appeal again, swearing to fight for justice for the wrongfully killed.

The Sichuan Opera Troupe was established in 1960. It is an important unit for the inheritance of National Intangible Cultural Heritage, and has created and rearranged more than 200 outstanding repertoire pieces. The works received high acclamation and won various national awards. At present, there are seven recipients of the Plum Blossom Award, one national and four provincial exponents of National Intangible Cultural Heritage in the troupe. The troupe has footprints all over the country and has performed in several countries including the United States, Germany, France and Japan.

Three performances will be held at the Auditorium of the Ko Shan Theatre New Wing. 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 and \$360 are now available at URB TIX (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/sichuan.html.

A Meet-the-Artists session entitled "Sichuan Opera Excels the Rest" (in Putonghua) will be held at 7.30pm on June 29 (Thursday) at AC2, 4/F, Administration Building, Hong Kong Cultural Centre. The speakers will be Chen Zhilin and Liu Yi, and the moderator will be Chinese opera researcher Chan Chun-miu. 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.

