

# CULTURE

## EVENTS START IN HONOR OF PEKING OPERA KEY STARS

Father and son, the discipline's most famous actors, are remembered with performances across the country in poignant tribute, **Chen Nan** reports.



Peking Opera actor Hu Wenge plays the role of Yuji in *Farewell My Concubine*, one of the most popular pieces by the late Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang, in Beijing in March. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

The legendary master of Peking Opera, Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) is a household name in China, thanks to his contribution to the 200-year-old art form.

He was one of the first Chinese artists to introduce Peking Opera to an audience abroad, and many of his classic repertoires are still performed today. Peking Opera, also known as *jingju*, was recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2010. It brings together various disciplines such as singing, dancing, martial arts and acrobatics.

Marking the 130th anniversary of Mei's birth, a series of events was announced in the capital by the Jingju Theater Company of Beijing last month. The 90th anniversary of the birth of Mei Baojiu (1934-2016), Mei Lanfang's son and a key inheritor of his art, is also being marked.

According to Zhu Jia, deputy director of the Jingju Theater Company of Beijing, Mei Lanfang's style of Peking Opera became known as *meipai*, or the Mei School, and together with the Russian Stanislavsky System (utilizing emotional memory) and German Brecht System (emphasizing the suggestive) formed the "three performing systems of the world".

"When we talk about Peking Opera, Mei Lanfang is a name that cannot be ignored. His contribution to the art form, his innovation in the development of the art form and the success he achieved in promoting Chinese art to the world will always be remembered," Zhu says.

The company joins hands with Peking Opera companies around the country, such as the Shanghai Jingju Theater Company and the Tianjin Jingju Theater Company, as it began to stage more than 60 shows from March to October in cities, including Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Nanjing, Jiangsu province.

The first 10 shows were staged in Beijing from late March to April 6, featuring Peking Opera stars, such as Fan Yuyuan, Hu Wenge, and Zhang Huifang, who played classic pieces adapted and performed by Mei Lan-



“It also proves that the art of Mei Lanfang is timeless and shared by people from around the world.”

Hu Wenge, Peking Opera artist



Left: The late Peking Opera artist Mei Baojiu (right) and Hu performing in *Yuzhoufeng* (Sword of the Cosmos), another classic Peking Opera piece. Right: The late Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang (left) as Yuji in *Farewell My Concubine*.

fang, including *Bawang Bieji* (Farewell My Concubine), *Taizhen Waizhuan* (The Legend of Yang Yuhuan) and *Mu Guiying Guashuai* (Mu Guiying Taking Command).

As well as live performances, the memorial program also includes an exhibition displaying more than 70 costumes, used by Mei Lanfang and Mei Baojiu, which will be held at the Capital Museum and the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing from August to October.

Forums by Peking Opera experts and artists will celebrate the art of Mei Lanfang and Mei Baojiu, and focus on issues on the training of young Peking Opera performers.

Mei Lanfang was born in Beijing into a Peking Opera family. He began studying Peking Opera at the age of 8, and made his stage debut at 11. He specialized in per-

forming *nandan* roles, in which men play female characters — a practice forged in feudal times, when women were forbidden to take the stage. At 13, Mei Lanfang joined Xiliancheng, then the biggest Peking Opera troupe in Beijing, and with performances not only in Beijing, but also in Shanghai, Mei Lanfang soon gained a national reputation.

He toured Japan in 1919, 1924 and 1956. In 1930, he toured the United States for about two months, giving shows in New York, Washington and San Francisco, among others. In 1935, he performed in the former Soviet Union and, in the same year, he toured Europe.

The heyday of *nandan* performance was in the first half of the 20th century, when Mei Lanfang, Shang Xiaoyun (1900-76), Cheng Yanqiu (1904-58) and Xun

Huisheng (1900-68) established the four different performing styles of Mei, Shang, Cheng and Xun. Each style has been preserved, learned and is still performed by their students today.

Mei Baojiu, the ninth son of Mei Lanfang, started learning Peking Opera at 10 years old and, like his father, Mei Baojiu was also known for playing *nandan* roles. When he was 13, Mei Baojiu made his stage debut in Shanghai, before starting to tour with his father Mei Lanfang's Peking Opera troupe when he was 16. Mei Baojiu became head of the troupe after his father died in 1961.

"Back in 2014, when we commemorated the 120th anniversary of Mei Lanfang's birth, my master (Mei Baojiu) led us to visit his father's ancestral home in Taizhou, Jiangsu province, and places where he

once performed, such as Tianjin, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tokyo and New York. We performed *Farewell My Concubine* and *Mu Guiying Taking Command*. All those memories are still vivid. Ten years later, my master left us, and now we commemorate him and his father," says Hu Wenge, the only *nandan* apprentice of Mei Baojiu, who now performs with the Jingju Theater Company of Beijing.

Hu adds that, back in 2014, when they performed in New York, a fan of Mei Lanfang came to their shows and gave Mei Baojiu a piece of paper — a music score of Mei Lanfang's when he toured the US in 1930.

"It was a very touching moment when I saw the old music score had been so well looked after. It also proves that the art of Mei Lanfang is timeless and shared by people from around the world," Hu says.

According to Feng Gang, deputy director of Shanghai Jingju Theater Company, Mei Lanfang made his debut in Shanghai when he was 19 years old and, in 1932, he moved to Shanghai from Beijing due to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45).

The Peking Opera master withdrew from the theater for years from 1941 to 1945, growing a beard because he refused to perform for the Japanese army. In October 1945, he resumed his acting career with shows in Shanghai.

"His comeback performances in Shanghai were a sensation. We not only want to celebrate the great art of Mei Lanfang, but also his patriotism," Feng says, adding that the Peking Opera master also learned Kunqu Opera and infused the art of the 600-year-old traditional Chinese opera form into Peking Opera.

On May 31, 1961, Mei Lanfang performed *Mu Guiying Taking Command* in Beijing, which proved to be his last stage appearance, concluding a legendary career spanning over 60 years.

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## Stalwart play blossoms again in double treat for audience

By CHENG YUEZHU  
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Much like the peach blossoms that have just come into bloom, *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*, a magnum opus by US-born, Taiwan-based theater director and playwright Stan Lai, is blossoming once again across China with a 2024 tour.

Starting on March 30 and scheduled to run until the end of June, the play will be performed in 14 major Chinese cities, including Beijing, Guangdong province's Guangzhou, and Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region's Urumqi.

Its unusual format combines a comedy and a tragedy on the same stage, as the storyline revolves around two stage crews, who accidentally book the same theater for rehearsals.

The comedy, *Peach Blossom Land*, is a farcical rendition of a utopia written by Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420) poet Tao Yuanming, while the poignant *Secret Love* tells of a couple being separated during the War of Liberation (1946-49).

As the two crews scramble for stage space, excerpts from the two plays take turns to unfold, and the universal human sentiments presented in both become increasingly evident amid a series of absurd and amusing scenes.

Since its debut in 1986, the play has gone through 10 renditions under Lai's direction. In 2017, a special version premiered at Theatre Above, Lai's venue in Shanghai, which he founded in 2015.

Unlike conventional theater venues, Theatre Above is located in Metro City, a shopping mall in Shanghai's Xuhui district, and represents a contemporary way of theatergoing envisioned by Lai.

"I hope that theater can be closer to everyone's lives. When you come to the theater to watch a play, it's no longer a special occasion where you have to dress up to attend," says the 70-year-old director.

"You can simply come and watch a play after a day of shopping at the mall and going to restaurants. And after you've finished, you can grab a coffee with your friends and discuss



Left: Director Stan Lai (right), with Luan Lan, associate director, of *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*, at a news conference in March in Shanghai. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY Right: The play revolves around two stage crews accidentally booking the same theater for rehearsals. LIN JINGWEN / FOR CHINA DAILY

the play. This is how I think theatergoing should be in our lives."

Approaching its ninth year, Theatre Above has hosted many premieres, particularly of plays by Lai, and many of its productions have toured to other cities.

The Theatre Above version of the play features a cast of young performers, most of whom have been with the theater since its founding, and have performed a variety of

roles in some of Lai's other well-known productions, such as *The Village*, *One One Zero Eight* and *A Dream Like a Dream*.

Luan Lan, associate director of the Theatre Above version of *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*, first worked with Lai on the play in 2006, and says that this version executes his vision in the most accurate manner.

"Performers at Theatre Above



have the opportunity to work with Lai and the rest of his crew over the long term. They are able to grasp the humor and style unique to the director, as well as understand his demands," Luan says.

Last year marked the first tour of the play's Theatre Above version, with the 2024 tour covering more cities.

"Regardless of the changes over the years, the themes of the play revolve around the quest for love

and the yearning for a beautiful world. Because of its universality, this play is able to stand the test of time," Luan says.

"For this tour, I hope our performers will carry with them the professionalism of Theatre Above and present an exemplary version of *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* to audiences around China, passing on the legacy of this classic piece."

Although the play was written 38 years ago, Lai says that for him, it seems like only yesterday.

"I find it hard to explain how this play could possess such vitality, but I feel that wherever it's performed, the audience enjoys it, and is enlightened by it," Lai says. "It's a revelatory piece. It shows that stage art can be presented in this way, especially as many people have told us that it is the first stage production they've seen."

With this year's tour, Lai hopes that his play will serve as an introduction to theater for more people, who will reflect on its captivating but not readily apparent plot, and spark discussions centered on theater arts.