

LIFE



Left: A scene from the Chinese ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* by the National Ballet of China. **Right:** Principal ballerina Qiu Yunting plays the lead role of Wu Qionghua. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

A new generation's take on an old classic

Red Detachment still entralls audiences and wins fans 60 years after it was first performed, **Chen Nan** reports.

The air vibrates with the rhythmic sound of ballet shoes on the floor, as the young dancers focus intently on their breathing and movements. Here, in the rehearsal room at the National Ballet of China, they are busy with intense preparations for *The Red Detachment of Women*, which celebrates the 60th anniversary of its premiere with 10 performances that end on Thursday.

Since its premiere on Sept 26, 1964, China's first ballet has transcended the realm of dance to become a cultural icon, and a powerful symbol of the country's artistic evolution. Over the past 60 years, the ballet has not only told its poignant story, but also inspired audiences with its representations of perseverance and national pride.

It is known in the US as the ballet performed for former president Richard Nixon during his visit to China in 1972.

This anniversary season, the production is touring nationwide, with 60 shows planned by the end of this year. In Beijing, the National Ballet of China put on a star-studded show with the likes of principal dancers Qiu Yunting and Ma Xiaodong and for the first time, students from the company's ballet school will also participate as a showcase of the troupe's collective strength and new generation of talent.

Additionally, esteemed ballet dancers, who have played leading roles in the classic production, such as Wang Caijun, Zhang Jian, and Wang Qimin, will grace the stage, adding depth and continuity to the celebrated work.

Under music director and chief conductor Zhang Yi, the national

ballet's symphony orchestra will provide powerful live accompaniment, permitting the audience to reexperience beloved melodies.

"*The Red Detachment of Women* is a milestone in Chinese ballet, a testament to the collective creativity of New China's artists. It has inspired generations and garnered global acclaim. Our mission is to preserve and renew this classic, ensuring that its emotional and artistic power remains ever-vibrant," says Feng Ying, artistic director and the head of the National Ballet of China, which was founded in 1959, 10 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Based on a 1961 film of the same name, *The Red Detachment of Women* tells the story of a rural girl, Wu Qionghua, who escapes a life of slavery and joins an all-female Communist Party army battalion led by commander Hong Changqing on Hainan Island during the civil war in the early 1930s.

Feng, a renowned ballerina, can still recall the first time she played Wu. It was May 23, 1992, when *The Red Detachment of Women* was being restaged after a 10-year gap.

"The first ballerina to play Wu Qionghua was Bai Shuxiang, and she set a high standard for those who followed her in the role. *The Red Detachment of Women* is a Chinese story and incorporates a range of dance elements including classical Chinese dance movements, as well as movements borrowed from martial arts and Chinese operas," says Feng, who is known for playing the lead in Western ballets like *Swan Lake*, *Giselle* and *Don Quixote*.

"I was very lucky to be trained by the established ballet dancers and artists who created *The Red Detachment of Women*, such as choreogra-



Left top and above: Dancers of the National Ballet of China rehearse *The Red Detachment of Women* in Beijing. **Right:** Feng Ying, artistic director and the head of the National Ballet of China, coaches ballerina Qiu Yunting.

pher Li Chengxiang," says Feng. "The ballet plays a crucial role in training new generations of dancers, instilling in them the techniques, expressions and cultural narratives that are integral to the company's heritage."

Feng says that to better understand and portray the female soldiers, the creative team and cast members received military training, allowing them to observe and experience women soldiers in person. "The dancers took off their ballet shoes and put on army boots. They received strict training just like soldiers," says Feng, adding

that they also traveled to Hainan, where the story takes place.

Zhang Jian has played Wu many times. The former principal ballerina and the deputy director of the national ballet will return to the stage to reprise the role for the latest celebration.

"Ever since I joined the company, I wanted to play Wu Qionghua, a woman who is fearless and brave, battling a miserable fate. In 2002, I was proud to be able to fulfill that wish," says the dancer, who began to train at the age of 9 and graduated from Beijing Dance Academy in 1996. "The ballet embodies the rev-

olutionary spirit and patriotic fervor of its time, and celebrates the resilience and bravery of the Red Army's female soldiers, which resonates deeply with national identity and memory. It represents the artistic innovation of early Chinese ballet, blending Western techniques with Chinese themes and storytelling, setting a precedent for future works in the genre."

Feng says that *The Red Detachment of Women* is still evolving, as a new generation of dancers performs the piece. One is the current principal ballerina of the company, 29-year-old Qiu Yunting, who will

also be part of the celebration, and will play Wu.

"Though the story is far removed from my life, my main inspiration comes from the black-and-white movie, and the experiences passed down by veteran dancers. Wu Qionghua is like a role model for today's young people, as they fight for their future. She's full of positive attitude and energy," says Qiu.

In addition to Wu, the ballet tells the story of Hong, a key character who is a revolutionary leader and a dedicated Communist, and who plays a pivotal role in supporting Wu and leading the fight against oppressive forces in the story. He embodies ideals of resistance and dedication to the cause of revolution, and is generally played by senior ballet dancers like Wang Caijun and Ma Xiaodong, the latter being the company's principal male dancer.

"I have toured with this classic nationwide and abroad. The warm feedback from the audience proves that it is still as relevant and popular as ever," says Ma, adding that many young people are coming to watch the performance, and have been inspired to learn more about history and China's martyrs.

Ma grew up by watching superhero movies like many young Chinese. When he saw the film version of *The Red Detachment of Women*, he was intrigued by Hong, a hero who rescues Wu Qionghua and is captured and killed by the enemy.

"I grew up in a totally different world compared to Wu and Hong. In playing the role of Hong, I have fulfilled my wish to be a hero onstage," Ma adds.

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Cai Guo-Qiang's big bang of art, science and AI

By **RENA LI** in Los Angeles
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When art meets science, the result can be explosive and revolutionary.

This fusion lies at the heart of *Cai Guo-Qiang: A Material Odyssey*, an exhibition currently on at the University of Southern California Pacific Asia Museum, which runs until next June.

The exhibition goes beyond the traditional gallery format, merging art with chemistry, physics and artificial intelligence to display the pioneering work of contemporary artist Cai Guo-Qiang, who uses gunpowder in his creations.

"Cai's work is a masterful demonstration of how art and science can converge to create something entirely new," Bethany Montagano, director of USC Museums, told reporters at a preview event on Sept 13.

"We are excited to host this transformative exhibition, which not only celebrates Cai's

innovative use of gunpowder, but also highlights the important research and collaboration happening at the intersection of art, science and AI," she says.

A Material Odyssey features a series of gunpowder test pieces produced for the Getty Research Institute to study.

The 67-year-old was born in Quanzhou, Fujian province, and trained in stage design at the Shanghai Theatre Academy in the early 1980s. From December 1986 to September 1995, he worked in Japan and has lived and worked in New York since then.

Best known for his use of gunpowder in intricate paintings, drawings and large-scale pyrotechnic performances, Cai has spent decades pushing the boundaries of art by incorporating volatile materials into his creative process.

These materials have been central to his philosophy and creative practice, symbolizing both destruction and creation.

"I am often inspired by the calmness and the natural strength manifested in the work after the vibrant colors fade. Changes in the gunpowder bring about uncontrollability and unpredictability, which is what makes working with gunpowder so fascinating. The change itself is part of my work," Cai says.

According to Rachel Rivenc, lead curator and head of Conservation and Preservation at the Getty Research Institute, *A Material Odyssey* highlights something rarely seen in exhibitions: science as a tool for understanding artistic techniques, and presents imagery that explores the molecular behavior of gunpowder, and its evolution as an artistic medium in the artist's hands.

"Cai has embraced the use of gunpowder because he wanted to relinquish control over the creative process. No matter how precisely a gunpowder drawing is planned, the results are still unpredictable," Rivenc says.

"The awe-inspiring nature of Cai Guo-Qiang's work embodies many of the values we hold dear at our museum," says Rebecca Hall, USC PAM curator. "His gunpowder drawings and paintings, when presented alongside the museum's permanent collection and housed in this historic building, remind us that as we push the boundaries of art and science, we remain deeply connected to the wisdom and creativity of the past."

The event serves as a companion to the artist's latest project, *WE ARE: Explosion Event for PST ART*, which lit up the skies above the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum on Sept 15. Integrating AI-driven choreography with fireworks, drones and data science, the free daytime performance commissioned by Getty launched PST ART's new theme, *Art & Science Collide*, in a spectacular fashion.

"Today, with the rapid rise of technologies like AI, culture and the arts often seem powerless. I



A visitor takes a photo of the exhibition during the preview event for *Cai Guo-Qiang: A Material Odyssey* on Sept 13 at the USC Pacific Asia Museum. **RENA LI / CHINA DAILY**

hope *WE ARE* will serve as a monumental gesture of how the art world can merge the virtual and real in this new AI-driven era, while also standing as a strong voice and decisive action in these turbulent times," says Cai, who has been researching

AI since 2017.

The event was one of the first large-scale daytime fireworks display in the US to incorporate drone formations equipped with pyrotechnic devices, according to Katherine Fleming, president and CEO of the J Paul Getty Trust.