

*Attracting young people to  
the theatre is the main task of  
Chinese opera groups*



## **Traditional Theatre in Transition**

### **Performances in the Park**

*Gui Wei Hsin*

In conjunction with Singapore's Festival of Asian Performing Arts, held by the National Arts Council, the Chinese Opera Institute (COI) organised an international seminar entitled 'Traditional Theatre in Transition', with the aim of providing a cross-cultural discursive platform for interaction among academics, practitioners and enthusiasts from all forms of traditional theatre. This event was held in Singapore, on two fronts; invited guests and speakers presented their papers at daily symposium sessions from the 6th to the 8th of June in the day, while various traditional theatre groups performed their pieces at night starting from the 5th.

The symposium on 'Traditional Theatre in Transition' was meant to be a study of the process of change in traditional theatrical forms, culminating in 9 papers delivered over 3 days in both Chinese and English. It was opened by the principal of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Mr. Ho Kah Leong, and the first day saw Wang An Kui presenting his paper '**A New Space in Modern Chinese Opera**'. On the second day, an even greater variety of topics that ran across the board was offered, from Tu Xiu Hao's discussion of '**Space in Ming Hua Yuan - A Case Study**', Lu Mei Hua's explanation of '**Symbolism in Chinese Opera**', to intense, personal accounts based on first-hand experience by Wu Qi Ren ('**A Singapore Perspective of the Creative Process in Li Yuan Xi**') and Shang Guan Liu Yun ('**An Actor's Perspective on the Persistent Survival of Chinese Opera**'). Bao Hua Sheng ended the day's presentation with his thorough review of '**The Unique Art of Hu Ju**'.

During the third and final day of the symposium, English speakers put their papers forward. Wong Kwang Han started off with a comparison of '**Chinese Opera and Epic Theatre**', drawing similarities and differences between the two performing styles; while Gui Wei Hsin spoke from his individual experience of learning Chinese opera movements in his presentation '**Chinese Opera Movement - Gracefulness in Precision**'. Lee Tong Soon completed the symposium with his paper on '**Constructing Social Space and Identity: Chinese Street Opera in Singapore**' that dealt with the social as well as the cultural correlation between the Chinese opera troupes and Singaporean society.

'Traditional Theatre in Transition' was, however, not only limited to scholarly discussion. Considered as part of the Festival of Asian Performing Arts Fringe event, the COI invited various local performing troupes to stage excerpts in an open grass patch along Orchard Road, at the heart of the Central Business District in Singapore. This innovative locality proved very successful as it attracted many passers-by and foreign tourists who were shopping or on their way home from work, while the makeshift stage and open air environment simultaneously lent an authentic atmosphere, reminiscent of the earlier street wayang performances of a bygone era.

If the theories and discussions of the symposium sessions were rich and varied, the night-time performances were spectacular and fascinating as almost 800 traditional performing artists from 17 groups took the stage for 4 nights. To help members of the public who might be unfamiliar with the conventions of the traditional performing arts, the comperes

for each night would brief the audience on the background and distinguishing characteristics of each performance genre, and English and Chinese translations of the script were flashed on

*Beijing Opera 'The Water Margin' performed by the artists of Chinese Opera Institute in a park.*



*'Traditional theatre in the Park' is an effective outreach programme*

slides throughout the performance.

In this way, the event served as a means by which young people could both learn and be involved in traditional performing arts. For one, the English and Chinese translations en-

abled those of a younger generation who are not well versed in the performing dialects such as *Cantonese* or *Teochew* to be able to follow the action on stage. Furthermore, the COI enlisted

the help of several eager and enthusiastic students from the Anglican High School in Singapore to be ushers, comperes and slide projector assistants. They provided invaluable assistance for the entire event, while being able to watch and learn from the experienced and veteran artists on stage.

Of special note is the makeshift, open-air design of the backstage area, where the performers donned their costumes and prepared their make-up. This open concept allowed passers-by and audience members to witness first-hand the process of preparing for a stage performance as the actors and

actresses transformed themselves before their very eyes, while the musicians tuned their instruments and practised short snatches in anticipation of the upcoming show.

On opening night, a reflection of Singapore's multi-cultural

and ethnic diversity was presented by the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society with an Indian Kathak Dance **'Journey of the Magical Anklet'**, an encomium about the magical anklets that adorn the lotus feet of Lord Shiva and other Indian deities. The Malay Sriwana Dance Troupe put up a Bangsawan piece called **'Princess Nilam Kencana'** about a fairy princess, and the rest of the night was filled by Chinese operas in various dialects, with Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association's Teochew opera **'Eight Immortals'** based on the legendary Chinese deities; the Chinese Theatre Circle's Cantonese opera **'Broken Bridge'** from the famous legend of Madam White Snake; a special guest performance by Peking opera veteran Mdm Phan Wait Hong in her piece **'Women Generals of the Yang Family'**, and a Peking opera finale by the COI's own performers with **'Heroine of the Water Margin'** about the exploits of the heroine of the Song dynasty, Hu San Niang.

On the 6th of June, the Kong Chow Wui Koon performed **'The Emperor Tung Chi and Empress Ah Lu Te'** about the manipulative and domineering Empress Dowager Ci Xi; and the Hymn Rhyme Sing Opera Club performed **'Zhang Wen Xiu'**, a

Peking Opera piece which told the story of a lowly scholar who excels in the Imperial examinations and tests the loyalty of his wife. Teck Ghee Community Centre offered a Cantonese opera excerpt about the romance between a young lady and a scholar who gives her a jade bracelet as a gift in **'Picking the Jade Bracelet'**, and Ping Sheh Peking Opera Troupe concluded the day's events with **'The Revenge of Lady Li'**, which saw the spirit of an imperial concubine returning to save her lover from assassination by the evil Prime Minister.

Three new original operas were staged on the 7th of June. First on the list was Lao Sai Tao Yuan Opera Association with a Teochew opera **'The Triumphant Return'** about a poor scholar who gains wealth and fame during the Imperial examinations and his struggle to prevent his fiancée from being married off to a rich man's son. The Hokkien Khong Huay followed with an entertaining tale of the contest of wits between one of the Eight Immortals, Lu Dong Pin and an

other deity in **'The Immortal Lu Dong Pin and Lady Peony'**

The story of a young peasant girl with superior sword-fighting skills who saved the Kingdom of Zhao during the Warring States period was recounted in Thau Yong Musical Association's **'The Lady Zhao'**.

Several classical and familiar pieces were performed on the final night of performances. **'The Witty Maid'** by Tian Yun



Gui Wei Hsin presenting his paper "Chinese Opera Movement - Gracefulness in Precision" at the 'Traditional Theatre in Transition' Symposium at the Chinese Opera Institute, Singapore

Peking Opera Society is self-explanatory - a witty young maid Chun Cao defeats her opponents with her verbal dexterity. The ever-popular *huang mei* opera **'Romance of Tang Bo Hu and Qiu Xiang'** was presented by the Singapore Hainan Association to the delight of those who have always enjoyed the wooing of the pretty maid Qiu Xiang by the scholar Tang Bo Hu. The

Teochew Drama Association recounted the story of the famous female general of the Yang family, Mu Gui Ying, and how she falls in love with her enemy, Zhao Ying, in **'The Tale of the Dragon Wood'**. As a grand finale, the Siong Leng Musical Association capped the event with a Hokkien *li yuan xi* adaptation of the Indian classical epic **'Ramayana'**, changing the text and music to suit the conventions of *li yuan xi*.

As an event which coupled the theoretical discussion of trends in traditional theatre developments with empirical manifestations on stage, the Chinese

Opera Institute's 'Traditional Theatre in Transition' series of symposium sessions and performances proved to be an outstanding event, and won accolades from all involved. Not only was it a platform for learned and experienced practitioners to exchange their views, it was also an entertaining event for the general public which was treated to a wide range of spectacular shows under the stars in the park.

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## Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia

*Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia* introduces many traditional forms of theatre that are not widely known outside their countries of origin. Edited by Dr Chua Soo Pong, Currently the Director of the Chinese Opera Institute in Singapore, the book discusses how traditional forms of theatre should be revitalised in the rapidly changing socio-economic environments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

*Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia* (US\$ 10 excluding postage cost) can be obtained from:

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