

A Memorable Festival for Teochew Opera

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in
Singapore

History repeats itself. Forty-three years ago, Teochew opera veteran, Yeoh Liew Kung made history, when he successfully persuaded the stars of that time to perform together in a gala to commemorate the then Malayan Teochew Opera Union's 2nd anniversary. The show entitled 'The Hidden Heroes', was directed by Lin Ru Lie, the multi-talented director, producer and scriptwriter. On the 2nd July 2000, Teochew opera fans were once again treated to a grand show that featured the best of local talents in the opening night of the Lion City Teochew Opera Festival organised by the Ngee Ann Kongsi.

Opening with a real big bang was the Chao Zhou Da Luo Gu (Teochew grand percussion). The traditional piece was led by trumpet player Ng Han Song and guest drummer Lin Li Qin from China.

The Thau Yong Musical Association presented the excerpt of its production 'The Secret of the Song Palace', which was acclaimed at the Shantou International Teochew Opera Festival. Directed by Yan Shi Yan, the fast-paced production, featuring water-sleeve and headgear special skills and strong singing from the cast, was an applause-winning curtain raiser.

Er Woo Amateur Musical Association, which triumphed in the recent International Comedy Theatre Festival in France, presented the comic excerpt from the hit of the 60s 'Su Liu Niang', performed by a female clown and a male clown. Another hit of the 60s 'Chen San Wu Niang', was performed with the right mix of comedy and serious singing. Directed by Hu Qi Xian, a famous director from China, the cast from Kiyang Huay Kwan first created the atmosphere of a crowded Lantern Festival and then the misunderstanding was resolved by a persuasive maid in a well-choreographed sequence.

The audience was delighted by the highly innovative interpretation by the lead performers of Nan Hua Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association. They cleverly gave a familiar opera 'Jin Hua sending

her husband off' in an unusual setting. The romantic piece has been performed numerous times but in this production, the performers Lee Sze Yau and Chua Ai Peck were clothed in modern day attires! With Chua dragging a suitcase and later carrying an umbrella, and Li taking her husband's passport from her handbag for him, the performers were rewarded with roaring laughter and thunderous applause.

Ng Song Heng of the Teochew Drama Association, who received a standing ovation in the Anatolian Theatre Festival in Turkey, sang a classical piece 'Gao Wen Ju' with confidence and conviction. The song is not only timeless in its texture of composition, but also a remarkable testimony of the technical prowess of the Teochew opera of the 50s. Many in the audience were heard humming with Ng throughout the piece.

The evening was at times marred by technical faults of the sound system, and imperfect timing on the part of the singers to the accompanying tapes. This is a pity. Singing to pre-recorded music is seldom satisfying and this also reflected a weakness that most of the Teochew opera groups must address: how to groom an ensemble that can play music for opera performances.

The lighting and set designer Eric Tan Thian Huat must be credited for the simple yet effective stage decor. Using shadows of different types of windows or doors, different localities were clearly defined.

The highlight of the evening was the last item when well-known songs from various operas were sung by the stars of all participating groups, some dressed in their costumes, others in contemporary clothes. Under the direction of Zhu Yi Zeng, a teacher of the Chinese Opera Institute, the presentation flowed with graceful movement and engaging singing. It is in these familiar songs that one is moved by the deeply felt connection between stage and auditorium. The Festival succeeded in creating an awareness and aroused pride in the community over the centennial tradition

of Teochew opera, and it will no doubt be remembered as a watershed event in the history of Teochew opera in Singapore.

On the 16th, it was Teochew Drama Association's turn to present its new talents to the audience. The 16-year-old Teochew Drama Association featured three polytechnic students in an excerpt of 'Madam White Snake: the Broken Bridge' and its more senior members in another excerpt 'Yuan Chong Huang the Patriotic Warrior'.

Adroitly directed by Zeng Yi Fan with choreography that enhanced the emotional conflict between the three characters, the 40-minute piece taken from the ever-popular 'Madam Whitesnake' was sprinkled with well-composed stage pictures.

The director had at various critical points used the postures of the performers to highlight the complex relationship between Madam White Snake and her lover Xu Xian, and Madam Green Snake.

Madam Green Snake, played by Soh Cai Yin, was extremely angry that Xu Xian had betrayed Madam White Snake time and again, sought refuge at the Golden Mountain Temple. Soh showed her anger with the double swords which she used to threaten the man all the time.

Jenny Neo's White Snake was fragile and torn between hatred of the man who has greatly disappointed her and her burning love for him.

Chong Shu Chi did make a convincing Xu Xian. The gradual realisation of the seriousness of his wrongdoing was nicely done and so was his sincerity in asking for forgiveness.

With further training in voice, they could be groomed to take on greater challenges in the future. The appreciative audience that packed the Ngee Ann Auditorium gave the three 19-year-olds a warm applause for their focused performance.

After the interval, the two veteran performers of the Association, Lim Moi Kim and Ng Song Heng were seen tackling their roles with sensitivity in their long dialogue with much tension.

Their acting was strong, making the audience feel the agony of the characters in their dilemmas in the two selected scenes of the famous full length Teochew opera 'Yuan Chong Huang the Patriotic Warrior', written in the early 80s by Shi Cao of the Guangdong Teochew Opera Academy.

Premiered by the Association in 1989 and re-staged in 1994, due to popular demand, the piece

is about the conflict between courage to fight the invaders and fear under threat. It is also about upholding the 'face' of the emperor or the integrity of an upright fighter.

Lim Hong Fei, the veteran director from Shantou, China who has guided the Association since the mid 80s, directed the opera without frills and furbelows. The approach is masterly and it results in a tightly controlled production. The characters acted upon instincts firmly rooted in the turbulent times of war.

A less skilful director would have made the performers move too much. By focusing our attention onto the desire of the jailed warrior to be free to fight and the inner struggle of the emperor, the production exerted considerable impact.

However, some of the actors who played the supporting roles, were lacking in subtlety in their characterisation. The director could have helped to solve this problem if he was around this time to coach the actors.

Teck Ghee Community Centre Teochew Opera group, which staged a classic 'Tale of the Elegant Gown' two years ago, presented four excerpts on 23rd of July 2000. It repeated a scene from the full length opera directed by the famous actor Li Qian Yu; the touching scene from well-known tragedy 'Wang Kui and Gui Ying', 'Killing at a temple', a dramatic scene from 'Qin Xiang Lian' and the evening ended with a comedy 'The maid who carries Snacks', played by a cast that is sensitive to the delicacies of the playwright's language and paced themselves extremely well.

The Story centred on a womaniser who lured his maid without his wife's knowledge. The maid by the name of Jian Yu, wisely informed her mistress who later caught the unfaithful husband red-handed Ng Rong Zhou who excelled in playing his wife, is certainly one of the best Nan Dan (female impersonator) in town. Her every gesture and glance was comically arresting. The maid, played by Cai Wan Lin, gave the detailed interpretation her pivotal role deserved.

The 87-year-old Er Woo Amateur Dramatic and Musical Association had also chosen to present four excerpts rather than a full-length opera from the Lion city Teochew Opera Festival on the 29th July 2000.

These included a repeat of 'Mu Gui Ying Zhao Qin', which delighted the audience in France recently; 'The Broken Bridge' directed by Ye Qing Fa, who

became famous in the 60s because of his convincing portrayal of a nasty womaniser in a Teochew Opera film and light-hearted scene played by two clowns: 'Yang Zi Liang Asking for Marriage'.

The evening also included a tragedy 'Jin Niang Sending her Brother off'. Directed by a veteran director from Fu Jian province, the piece showcased Lin Siew Hong's skill in singing. Her songs were clearly sung with phrasing and note-length always nicely judged, although the excessive use of watersleeve movement needs re-consideration.

2000 has been a year of Singapore Teochew opera. One needs only to cite the enormous global success of the three tours of Teochew opera productions to the western hemisphere to show that the international community is beginning to recognise and enjoy the 500-year-old theatre from southern China.

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Singapore drama students in Thailand

Students of the Drama Department, led by Dr. Chua Soo Pong, Director of the School of Performing Arts, participated in the Ramayana Episode Performance held at the National Theatre of Thailand in Bangkok from 9 to 12 Dec 99. Together with artistes from Wilwatikta High School of the Arts in Surabaya in Indonesia, Centre of Indian Performing Arts and Culture in Kerala in India, and the Royal Institute of Music and Drama in Thailand, the Singapore delegation gave seven performances to an enthusiastic audience who enjoyed the multi-cultural interpretation of the classical epic: Ramayana.

Performed in Chinese opera style, the Singapore team, which consisted of students from NAFA and artistes from the Chinese Opera Institute, opened the show with Princess Sitas grand marriage at the court of King Janak. It was followed by the dramatic abduction of the princess by the ten-headed monster. The tuneful melodies, graceful stylised movements and colourful costumes were indeed spectacular curtain raisers.

Leading Thai scholar, Prof Surapone Virulrak, hailed the Singapore production as an innovative and

imaginative production that added new colours in the ASEAN repertoire of Ramayana.

The NAFA team also took the opportunity to visit Chulalongorn University and Bangkok University. Head of Performing Arts Department of Bangkok University, Assoc Prof Punnasak Sukee, who hosted the visit showed great interest in the curricula of the NAFA drama department and hopes to further develop links with NAFA in the future.

Choy Kean Hau, who played the role of King Janak, said that it was an educational trip and the visits to drama departments of the universities in Thailand were inspiring. Echoed Ong Jun Hui who said, "The eye-opening experience makes me realise the significance of Ramayana in South East Asian theatre and the similarity in styles between the various classical theatre forms (Kathakali, Chinese Opera, Wayang Wong and Khon) in Asia".

Annie Teoh, who played the court dancer, said that it was really an unusual lesson for her as she was able to have a close-up look at these performance genres and that helped her to understand what was taught in the classroom better.