



Hebei Provincial Theater's production of *The Odd Couple* features a cast of foreign actors.

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The stage is a world

A Chinese-language production of the classic New York play *The Odd Couple* at the National Center for the Performing Arts was a brave experiment. **Han Bingbin** reports in Beijing.

In what was a world's first, a full cast of Western actors from six countries performed an all-Mandarin version of Neil Simon's Broadway comedy classic *The Odd Couple* at the National Center for the Performing Arts (NCPA) on Wednesday and Thursday.

With its vivid portrait of the hilarious happenings between two mismatched flatmates, both suffering from frustrating marriages, the Tony Award-winning play has enjoyed success since its debut in 1965, with more than 1,200 performances staged on Broadway so far.

While it's generally believed that American sarcasm doesn't really work for Chinese audiences, this didn't seem to be a problem. Meanwhile, the actors spoke with such a range of accents that it was like a dubbed foreign movie.

The natural style of acting made the New York story more credible, director Gu Wei says — though he admits the choice of foreign actors was a business strategy to begin with.

Rather than choosing an obviously popular play, Li Tihua, from the Hebei Provincial Theater decided on *The Odd Couple* as part of the theater's transformation from being a

government-sponsored art troupe to a market-oriented theater company.

The two nights of performances were on the same NCPA stage where Hebei Provincial Theater created a box office record in the capital with a revolution-themed drama in 2011.

Gu says the process was "very daring" because the stage was booked even before rehearsals were scheduled. After two painstaking months searching for foreigners who can both act and speak fluent Mandarin, there was only time for one month's rehearsal — shorter than for a typical Chinese play.

And though the foreign actors could speak good Chinese, they needed help reading the script. Also, though many of them had experience working on TV series and movies, they had limited stage experience.

Gu says, fortunately for him, they were all quick learners and worked so hard they "outshone their Chinese counterparts".

For Georg Anton from Austria, who plays the protagonist's sarcastic poker buddy, it was an "honor" and "rare chance" to perform in front of 1,000 people.

Like the other actors, Anton is part of an active foreign language (mostly English) act-

ing community in China. He was formerly a member of the Beijing Actors' Workshop, which along with Beijing Playhouse, is the capital's oldest English-language drama troupe.

In this circle, about 100 amateurs and semi-professional actors rehearse mainly at the experimental Penghao Theater, which provides a small stage to bring their non-profit projects to fruition.

Two years ago, Anton quit his consulting job to do more acting work and since then has appeared in six TV series, three made-for-TV films and four movies.

If you counted every foreigner who has said a line in a Chinese TV series or film over the past 10 years, he says, then you'd get around 1,000 different people.

"That's 1,000 people who got a free haircut, a nice close-up and a memorable experience, and who were seen for a few moments by probably hundreds of millions of Chinese viewers at some point," he says.

However, he says there are others who over the years have had decent roles, learned to make money from acting in China, and reached a certain level of professionalism.

"We're at the forefront of this experiment. We have this responsibility to make it a success to convince people to continue this thing," he says.

Though Gu predicted a good reaction from audiences for *The Odd Couple* and suggests there will be similar productions in the future, he doesn't see foreign-cast productions as a trend as "it's a small circle (niche)".

This doesn't bother Karl Eiselein, who takes the lead role in the drama and started acting in China at the beginning of the 1990s. He has taken part in dozens of productions, including Jackie Chan's 2011 movie *Shaolin*.

After having abandoned theater for more than 20 years since his early drama experiences in New York, *The Odd Couple* involvement has once again inspired him.

"I'll probably never have another chance to stand on the NCPA stage. But I can go back to Broadway to start again with some small roles. The point is I have to keep improving the quality of my work and never be satisfied with myself," he says.

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Painting cats like kids

By **ZHU LINYONG**
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Zhao Benfang is a warm-hearted ink artist. She always has visitors at her small apartment in Tianzhu, near the Beijing Capital International Airport.

Among the most frequent visitors are wandering cats that come and go from a hole in the window.

When they arrive in threes and fours, Zhao prepares food and toys, then attentively watches them play or sleep in the sitting room. "I treat them well because they are my friends, as well as models and the inspiration for my paintings," says Zhao, 63.

The retired librarian devotes most of her time and energy to birds-and-flowers ink paintings.

For Zhao, painting has never been just a hobby or pastime. "Becoming an artist was my childhood dream," Zhao says.

Born to a peasant's family in Huaiyang, Henan province, Zhao worked at a factory and a community service center after finishing her middle school education.

"All those years, I taught myself drawing in secrecy," she says.

But she did not fulfill her dream of being an artist until 1979, when she moved to Beijing with her husband, a pilot.

Here she took a fulltime job at a Beijing library, but spent all her spare time learning ink art. Thirsty for knowledge, she eagerly sought apprenticeships from master painters Sun Jusheng (born in 1913) and Lou Shibai (1918-2010).

Later, she enrolled in intensive training classes at Beijing Fine Art Academy and studied art history at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

Creating a good ink painting is not simple, explains Zhao, head of the Beijing Blue Sky Artists Association.

"To become a good ink painter, one needs to have a deep understanding of classical art history and the relevant aesthetics, in addition to a solid grasp of technique."

Compared with other genres such as portrait and mountains-and-waters painters that record social changes in a fairly realistic manner, Chinese birds-and-flowers ink art, beginning as an independent genre in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907), is not generally realistic.

Rather, it used to be a genre favored by intellectuals who gave their subjects symbolic meanings.



Zhao Benfang paints at her home in Beijing.

FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

Without wanting to take the risk of angering the rulers of the day, painters often chose to express their inner thoughts through birds-and-flowers paintings.

"I paint my favorite subjects, such as cats and peony flowers, mainly to express my passion for life, my goodwill and fondness for friends," Zhao says with a smile.

She pays frequent visits to parks, zoos and botanical gardens, where she sketches flowers, birds and animals.

And she dares to innovate and find her own artistic style.

Zhao intentionally depicts animals so they appear to be like naughty, clever and energetic

young children in the playground.

Cats, for instance, have impressively round, big, brightly colored, shiny eyes, soft, fluffy hair, and bigger heads than normal.

"I try to bring to life the cutest cats I can imagine," she says.

Zhao admits her paintings do not address weighty subjects but says, "Ink art can be a language through which people from different cultures communicate without obstacles".

Zhao will hold an exhibition in Taipei in late August, as part of a cross-Straits cultural exchange program. In November, she is likely to stage another art exhibition in Los Angeles.

EDITOR'S PICKS

The Lorax speaks for the trees

Fans of Universal's beloved animation *Despicable Me* will get to watch the company's new creation, *The Lorax* in theaters in IMAX and 3D from July 27. It is an adaptation of American writer/cartoonist Theodor Seuss Geisel's 1971 environmental fable.

The film opens with an introduction from the Lorax, an orange creature with a big yellow mustache who "speaks for the trees". The story unfolds as a man-made town where everything is packaged and plasticized. The 13-year resident Ted has no idea of how a real tree looks until he sets foot on a journey to find one to impress his neighborhood girl. He learns the story of the Lorax on the trip, highlighted by beautifully designed 3D plants among other visual wonders.

The voice comes from a stellar cast of Danny DeVito, Betty White, Ed Helms, Taylor Swift, and Zac Efron.

Viewers are likely to be drawn to the entertaining tale with environmental protection as its underlying message.

— LIU WEI



Symmetrical polygons in oil

US-based Chinese artist Xie Caomin obviously likes symmetric polygons very much. In his ongoing solo exhibition *Circle of The Ruins* presented by the Other Gallery (Beijing), he showcases oil paintings of complicated and colorful polygons.

Xie names the series *Mandala*, which reveals the origin of these geometrical forms — Buddhism. The name also reflects the artist's willingness to cross boundaries and create his own cultural understanding. At the same time, Xie shows his great passion for iconography.

10.30 am to 6 pm, until Aug 26. Other Gallery (Beijing), 798 Art Zone, 2 Jiuxianqiao Lu, Chaoyang district, Beijing. 010-6431-9684.

— ZHANG ZIXUAN



Sandy Lam on strings

At 46, singer Sandy Lam has not stopped releasing new albums and performing concerts. Constantly challenging herself, the Hong Kong-based artists will play guitar for the first time on stage for her upcoming concert, *MMXTT*, in Beijing.

"I learned guitar from my 14-year-old daughter. She is also a big fan of rock," says Lam, who will be dancing and singing rock songs during the concert.

A radio DJ in Hong Kong since she was 16, Lam has released 30 albums under Sony, Warner Music, and Rock Records — Taiwan's largest independent label. She sings in Cantonese and Mandarin. Her smooth, soft voice has won her a huge fan base across the region, with Chinese listeners.

She married one of the most productive and famous singer-songwriters and producer in Taiwan, Jonathan Lee, in 1998, but divorced in 2004. She once said that Lee wrote some of her best songs, and brought her pain and happiness.

"The reason why my songs are widely shared by fans, especially the female fans, is because they can relate to my personal experiences," she once said. "But now I am a mother and I have more fun with my daughter. When I sing those heartbreaking songs now, I feel as if I'm telling someone else's stories."

8 pm, on Aug 10. At Mastercard Center, the former Wukesong Arena, No. 69, Fuxinglu, Haidian district, Beijing. 400-610-3721.

— CHEN NAN

