



Tai Chi, a play that mixes Chinese martial arts and dance with comedy, makes its recent debut at the second Super Theater in Gu'an, Hebei province.

ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

GETTING THEIR ACT TOGETHER

Artistic duo team up to fulfill their dream, **Chen Nan** reports.

Several years ago, when Chinese actor Deng Chao and scriptwriter Yu Baimei met in the lobby of a hotel in Beijing and decided to use their own money to open a theater in the capital, they were prepared for it to fail.

"It was a dream for us and we just wanted to try," says Deng, adding that this had been his goal since he was in his third year of studies at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing.

The theater, named Super Theater, has around 500 seats and is located in a *hutong* near Wangfujing Street, a popular commercial area in the capital.

Since its opening on June 26, 2016, the theater has staged more than 300 shows, which have attracted over 100,000 people.

The success of the theater was beyond the expectations of both Deng and Yu, which led them to open a second Super Theater two years later.

On June 28, the new theater opened in Gu'an county, Hebei province.

Occupying about 2,500 square meters, the theater has two venues with capacities of 390 seats and 100 seats respectively, as well as three rehearsal rooms and cafes.

"When we launched the first Super Theater, I said that I enjoyed acting in theater because it's like a magic box, containing various emotions," says Deng.

"Now, with the second theater, I am proud to share the magic of theater with more people."

Deng, 39, who was born in Nanchang, Jiangxi province, rose to fame by acting in popular TV series such as *The Young Emperor* and *Happiness Is Like Flowers* and big-budget movies, including Chinese director Feng Xiaogang's film *Assembly*, and Hong Kong actor-director Stephen Chow's film *The Mermaid*.

In 2014, Deng made his directorial debut with *The Breakup Guru*, and he directed his second comedy, *Devil and Angel*, the following year.

According to Yu, Deng's partner and longtime friend, who is also the scriptwriter for Deng's two directorial ventures, the duo started making preparations for the second theater over a year ago.

Gu'an is part of the Jingjinji (Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei) economic circle. A two-hour drive from downtown Beijing, Gu'an is a growing city, and Yu expects that the Super Theater there will become a key entertainment venue for the local people and people from nearby areas.

The opening play for the new theater was a 90-minute comedy, titled *Tai Chi*, which was staged until July 8.

The scriptwriter Yu, whose real name is Wu Tao, is known for his original comedies, and his compa-

“We bring in shows catering to families. And the feedback from the audience proves that language is not a barrier.”

Yu Baimei, scriptwriter

ny, Baimei Studio, is home to a dozen Chinese comics, including Liang Chao and Yu's wife, actress Dai Lele.

However, the new comedy, *Tai Chi*, unlike his other works, combines Chinese martial arts, dance and comedy with minimal onstage dialogue.

Speaking about the play, Yu says: "We wanted to present a different form of comedy," and adds that a team from South Korea joined in the production, including director and scriptwriter Lee Jun-sang.

Meanwhile, besides staging original comedies, Yu also travels to Scotland every year for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival — the largest arts

festival in the world — where he sources small and mid-budget plays to present in China.

So, during the past two years, audiences at the Super Theater have seen productions, including *Morgan and West: More Magic for Kids*, a comedy by Rhys Morgan and Robert Wes, a duo of magicians from the United Kingdom, and *Sticks, Stones and Broken Bones*, a show by Canadian puppeteer Jeff Achtem.

"We bring in shows catering to families. And the feedback from the audience proves that language is not a barrier," says Yu.

"Before I came to Beijing from my hometown, Xi'an, when I was about 25 years old, I had never watched a play performed in theater, but now my 4-year-old kid has watched more than 40 shows.

"So, you can see the huge change in China's performance market."

And while he is happy with the sold-out shows at the theater, Yu is also concerned about the future of Chinese comedy and the younger generation of Chinese comics.

"Compared with five years ago, we have fewer good comedy scripts and talented young comedians.

"The market (for Chinese comedy) is growing, which makes the situation urgent," says Yu.

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Super! Martial arts comedy a big hit

By CHEN NAN

The opening show for the new Super Theater founded by Deng Chao and Yu Baimei in Gu'an, Hebei province was a martial arts comedy, entitled *Tai Chi*.

The show was staged in Gu'an and Beijing from June 28 to July 1 and July 6 to 8, respectively, and the comedy is scheduled to return to the capital in September.

The story begins with four students sharing their dreams in a classroom. One of them, named Tai Ji, dreams of becoming a tai chi master. So, he learns tai chi but doesn't understand its spirit until he faces bullying from a classmate.

Chinese kung fu star Wu Jing initiated the idea of the play along with scriptwriter Yu.

Wu, 44, who was born in Beijing and received professional martial arts training as a child, made his film debut in the Hong Kong martial arts film *Taichi Boxer* in 1996, which was directed by Hong Kong martial arts choreographer and director Yuen Woo-ping.

Speaking about the play, Wu, who is also the director of the hit franchise *Wolf Warrior*, says: "I started by playing a tai chi master in that film, but I always wanted to direct a film about tai chi.

"Tai chi is an important part of Chinese martial arts culture. It has a long history and is based on the Chinese philosophy of yin and yang. So, by telling a story of tai chi, young people get a better understanding of the ancient art."

According to Yu, *Tai Chi* fulfills his dream of presenting different types of comedies to Chinese audiences, who are used to comedies centering around dialogue.

He adds that the process of auditioning was harder and longer than his other comedies since he

was looking for actors with martial arts skills.

The six actors in the comedy include actresses Li Muzi, who practices taekwondo, and Yang Qingzhu, who practices fencing.

For Zuo Xiang, 27, who was an acrobat with the China National Acrobatic Troupe, it is his first play. And when he applied for the role, he didn't expect to be picked.

"I had no experience, but it's my dream to become a comic," says Zuo, who won the top Golden Circus prize at the International Circus Festival of Monte-Carlo in 2013.

Zuo, who was born in Cangzhou, Hebei province, says he started doing acrobatics at the age of 5. And when he was 15, Zuo won the Golden Clown award in the children's group.

Speaking about his move into comedy, Zuo, who also received two years of training at the Beijing Film Academy before acting in TV dramas, says: "It's an art. It's harder to make people laugh than to make people cry."

Zhang Zhenlei, who plays the teacher in *Tai Chi*, is, however, not new to comedy.

Zhang, 36, a veteran dancer and comic, who has been performing with Yu's company for seven years, has also starred in the two films directed by Deng.

Speaking about the play, he says: "We spent two months in Seoul early this year. And for eight to 10 hours each day, we received training in dancing and acting.

"Unlike other comedies I've acted in, *Tai Chi* is all about physical moves, which is very challenging. And it depends on eye contact and body language instead of dialogue to make the audience laugh."



Deng Chao, actor and co-founder of Super Theater



Kung fu star Wu Jing (middle) who co-initiated the idea of the play *Tai Chi*, interacts with the audience together with Super Theater co-founder Deng Chao and other performers. PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

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