

DANCING TO A DIFFERENT TUNE



Contemporary dancer and choreographer, Wang Yuanyuan's latest production breaks new ground with its combination of dance and dialogue. **Chen Nan** reports.

Contemporary dancer and choreographer, Wang Yuanyuan has lost her voice working on new dance pieces on two occasions.

The first time was four years ago when she was choreographing *Wild Grass*, which took its inspiration from the renowned Chinese writer Lu Xun's 1927 poem collection of the same name.

The second time was for her latest piece, *A Leaf in the Storm*, based on a war novel by Lin Yutang (1895-1976).

On June 6, five hours before the premiere of *A Leaf in the Storm*, Wang returns to the Tianqiao Performing Arts in Beijing, where she spent most of the past 48 hours ensuring that all the detailed preparation work like rehearsals, stage setting and sound checks are all running smoothly.

"She has been rehearsing 12 hours a day for about half a month. She will go to hospital after the premiere," says Han Jiang, Wang's husband, who is a renowned lighting and stage set designer. "However, when the show is finally done, it will be clear that it has been worthwhile."

There is little doubt that the intensive rehearsals have taken their toll on Wang's health, especially as she is nervous about the new piece because it is the first production in which she has combined dance with dialogue.

"It took us two months to train the dancers," explains Han. "They had to speak onstage like dramatic actors, which is very challenging."

The idea to combine the two disciplines stems from her relationship with the Beijing Repertory Theater, which she co-founded in June 2017 with Han and set designer Tan Shaoyuan.

Last September, Wang made her directorial debut with a production of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's 1888 stage drama, *The Lady From The Sea*.

The experience of working with dramatic actors must have struck a chord of inspiration within the dance choreographer.

For Wang, the bold project will also mark the 10th anniversary of her company — the Beijing Dance Theater.

"We wanted to do something different," she explains, her voice low and husky. "For the company, it was time to try something new. We wanted to combine contemporary dance with many other art forms, like musicals and opera."

She continues, "The line between different art forms is quite blurred these days and audiences are open to them."

Wang first encountered *A Leaf in the Storm* — which was published in 1941, and is about the lives of several characters in Beijing during the Japanese invasion — about ten years ago.



Top: Dancer-choreographer, Wang Yuanyuan, makes a series of dance moves. Above: Two dancers perform in Wang's contemporary dance production, *A Leaf in the Storm*.
PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY AND PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

What drove her to adapt the novel into a piece of contemporary dance were the vivid characters like Yao Boya, a wealthy, married man who is facing a crisis in his relationship with a woman named Danni.

"The romance, hope, belief, madness and death portrayed in the novel continue to run wild in my imagination," Wang croaks excitedly through her strained vocal chords. "It will still relate to a contemporary audience, even though the novel tells a story set

during the 1940s."

After its Beijing residency, *A Leaf in the Storm* will tour around the country, as will the company's 2015 production, Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose*, this year. Over the next five years, several productions by the Beijing Dance Theater, including *Wild Grass* and *Haze*, will hit the road and visit theaters around China.

Born and raised in Beijing, Wang started learning Chinese dance at 10 years old and graduated from the Beijing Dance Academy in

1995, before she studied contemporary dance choreography.

From 2000 to 2002 she trained at the California Institute of Arts' School of Dance in Los Angeles. She was named resident choreographer at the National Ballet of China and was invited to serve as guest choreographer at the New York City Ballet in 2003.

She is widely celebrated for choreographing the ballet *Raise the Red Lantern* directed by Zhang Yimou, the dance scenes in director Feng Xiaogang's movie, *The Banquet*, and for her part in the production of the 2008 Beijing Olympics' opening ceremony.

Since founding the company in 2008 with Han and Tan, she has choreographed 15 dance compositions and toured the world.

With no government support, the trio rely on grants, commissions and ticket sales.

Recalling her decision to start the Beijing Dance Theater, Wang says that it was out of pure idealism and admits she still has mixed feelings about it.

"Artists speak through their work. I want to create movement I've never seen. I want to move the body in new and different ways," she says, adding that it's the same reason why she founded the Beijing Repertory Theater, which enables her to explore a different way of self-expression.

"Unfortunately, I cannot just

focus on the art. I have to also manage the company."

In China, contemporary dance is still a minority interest and, as such, in the early years, getting funding was a struggle for Wang.

However, the turning point came in 2011 when she staged her controversial dance piece, *The Golden Lotus*, a stage adaptation of the 16th-century novel, widely considered to be one of China's most erotic works.

The dance piece was commissioned by the Hong Kong Arts Festival and premiered there, bringing Wang's company a lot of exposure and opportunities despite the controversy surrounding it.

For Han, who married Wang eight years after they first met, the company reached its peak after that performance, garnering a lot of invitations to tour abroad.

"Our shows have been booked until 2020 and we are proud to still have an international audience after so many years of hard work," he notes.

Han, who worked for the National Ballet of China for over a decade before he co-founded the Beijing Dance Theater in 2008, concludes: "It's her dream to choreograph new works and my job is to fulfill her vision."

Contact the writer at chennan@chinadaily.com.cn

China, Spain celebrate an evening of ancient court music

By **FANG AIQING**
fangaiqing@chinadaily.com.cn

It's common these days to see Chinese and Western musicians work to create musical pieces that combine elements from both genres.

And while this type of musical collaboration was rare in the 17th century, it was not unheard of.

Yet, thanks to the efforts of Diego de Pantoja, a Spanish missionary who had been in China since the end of the 16th century and established cultural relations with the court of the Emperor Wanli (1563-1620) during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the practice was pioneered.

Pantoja brought with him the first foreign instrument with a keyboard to the Forbidden City and demonstrated to the court the musical art of playing the clavichord.

It was from this time on that Western instruments such as the clavichord, spinet, organ and harpsichord began to appear in the Chinese imperial court.

And as a tribute to Pantoja, a program of music composed during the

16th to 18th centuries was staged in Beijing recently.

The concert took place in a traditional Chinese wood-and-brick building in the style of a temple, located in a bustling *hutong* in the city's Dongcheng district.

With its red pillars lining the interior, the building dates back to the Ming Dynasty and was once the site of an imperial printing workshop.

Seven Spanish musicians, with the women dressed in *qipao* and men in Chinese suits, played a program that blended the Western baroque style with traditional Chinese music.

The music was once played to the Chinese imperial court in the Forbidden City during the Ming and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties.

The musicians played Western orchestral instruments including the violin, harp and violone, alongside typical baroque instruments such as the lute and harpsichord — as well as the Chinese instruments, the *erhu*, *dizi*, *sheng* and *guzheng*.

The instruments mixed harmoni-



Spanish musicians in Beijing give a concert that combines ancient Chinese music with Western baroque music. PHOTO PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ously and, in some pieces, the melody was accompanied by an aria, which was combined with the singing styles of traditional Chinese Kunqu Opera.

The musicians were from two separate bands. One is called Todos los Tonos y Ayres, which specializes in the research and interpretation of early Chinese music, as well as the musical relationship between Impe-

rial China and the West.

According to Ruben Garcia Benito, one of its two musicians, the band took up ancient Chinese music in 2012 when they were living in Beijing. Since then, they have returned to China for a few weeks every year to learn more about Chinese instruments at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

They wanted to popularize the music with Spanish people because

little is known about China's thousands of years of musical history in the country.

The other band taking part in the concert was the Iliber Ensemble, a chamber music group that specializes in performing baroque music using ancient instruments.

The two bands started working together on the project a year ago. According to Benito, the repertoire of the concert was designed to follow Pantoja's path from Spain to Macao and then on to Beijing.

Most of the musical pieces were rediscovered at libraries and museums, among which, the sonata pieces by Teodorico Pedrini were found in the National Library of China.

Benito says that he has been looking into dozens of academic papers, not only about Pantoja, but also about the lives of missionaries in the Chinese imperial court.

The concert attempted to highlight the links and differences between the Chinese and Western styles of music. "The origins of producing music might have been the same, but then the Chinese and the

West went off in two different directions, with uniquely beautiful results," says Benito.

The concert, which was part of the 18th Meet In Beijing Arts Festival, was jointly held by the Cervantes Institute in Beijing and the Spanish embassy to China to commemorate the fourth centenary of the death of Pantoja.

In the early 17th century, he wrote a letter from Beijing to the Bishop of Toledo in Spain, giving a detailed introduction to life in China, including details of its geography and economy, as well as the country's history, religion and politics.

The letter was believed to represent the most comprehensive and objective understanding about China by a European native at that time.

"Pantoja was a key figure in helping the Spanish to learn about Chinese culture," says Alberto Carnero, the Spanish ambassador to China.

"It was due to his efforts that Spanish people began to develop a direct knowledge of China," Carnero says.