

Cantonese opera "The Return of Lady Wenji" to be staged in August

Hong Kong audiences have been awaiting a rerun of the Cantonese opera "The Return of Lady Wenji", and their wait will finally be over in August. Presented by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the opera forms part of its "Chinese Opera Festival". Performers will include Cantonese opera stars Yuen Siu-fai, Chan Ho-kau, Yau Sing-po, together with renowned artists Lee Lung, Chan Wing-yee and Lai Yiu-wai.

The original script of the play and the character of Cai Wenji were written and tailored for Chan Ho-kau by playwrights Yuen Siu-fai and the late Yip Siu-tak in 1997. The story depicts the helplessness and sadness of Wenji as she returns from foreign lands to her homeland, leaving her husband and son behind. In particular, Yip was invited to write the lyrics for the singing part in the scene "Farewell to the Wife". When the play debuted, the superb performances of Yuen Siu-fai and Chan Ho-kau and their intricate interpretation brought out the most intense melancholy of the couple's eternal farewell and the separation of mother and son.

For the return journey to Han, Chan Ho-kau brilliantly interpreted Wenji's yearning for her husband and son, her complete devastation striking the hearts of the audience. In this rerun, Lee Lung and Chan Wing-yee have been specially invited to act as Dong Si and Lady Bian respectively. The accompanying percussion and ensemble music by the Ko brothers complement and highlight the emotional performance of the opera stars of different generations. Cao Cao, another of the play's leading characters, will be played by Yau Sing-po. In the end, Cao's wife, Lady Bian, speaks of how Cao has ruined Wenji's happiness, despite his good intentions. Performing the theme song in the final scene, Chan Ho-kau brings out the desolation of a mother and a wife who can never reunite with her family, to an accompaniment by the Ko brothers.

The story takes place in the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280). Cai Wenji, the daughter of Cai Yong, is famous for her accomplishments in literature and music. She is captured by a Xiongnu (Huns) chieftan, the Wise Prince of the Left, during the chaotic times of war. He admires her artistic gifts and finally wins her heart, so the two become husband and wife. Twelve years later, Cao Cao has gained power and is the prime minister of Han. He remembers his old friend, the historian Cai Yong, who had left no heir to continue his monumental written work, "The Book of Han". So he sends an envoy to the Huns, expressing his willingness to pay a large ransom for Cai's release and return to Han. He envisions that she will pick up the work from where her father left off, and, feeling grateful and indebted to him, she would write him favourably into the historical archives. What Cao has misunderstood is that while he may have had good intent, the heartless severance of Cai from her family in Hun will take away all her happiness. A wife and mother, she will never be able to see her husband and son again. She is so heartbroken that she grieves to the end. On her long journey back to

Han, Lady Cai pours out her heart in a song cycle with lyrics, which she writes, and which includes the masterpiece, "Eighteen Variations on a Hu Pipe Melody".

"The Return of Lady Wenji" will be staged at 7.30pm on August 7 and 8 (Tuesday and Wednesday) at the Grand Theatre, Hong Kong Cultural Centre; and at 2.30pm on August 12 (Sunday) at the Auditorium, Tuen Mun Town Hall. Tickets priced from \$150 to \$450 are now available at URBIX (www.urbtix.hk).

For telephone credit card bookings, please call 2111 5999. For programme enquiries and concessionary schemes, please call 2268 7325 or visit www.cof.gov.hk.

A Meet-the-Artists session featuring Yuen Siu-fai and Lai Yiu-wai with Barbara Tang as moderator will be held at 7.30pm on August 15 (Wednesday) at AC2, Level 4, Administration Building, Hong Kong Cultural Centre. Admission is free. Limited seats will be available on a first-come, first-served basis.