

Centuries-old Liyuan opera to be staged in June

The Chinese Opera Festival will present performances in June by Experimental Theatre of Liyuan Opera of Fujian, one of the oldest theatrical genres in China with a history dating back more than 800 years.

Liyuan opera originates in Quanzhou, Fujian and is sung in the Quanzhou dialect of the Minnan (southern Fujian) system.

Experimental Theatre of Liyuan Opera of Fujian will showcase Liyuan opera in three streams, namely "shanglu", "xianan" and "xiaoliyuan". The shanglu stream consists of a large number of traditional libretti and scores from the nanxi (Southern opera) of the Song and Yuan period (960-1368), the content of which is largely inspired by stories of patriotism, filial piety, chastity and righteous spirits. The libretto of Zhu Maichen faithfully follows the incomplete edition of the original script, which was orally transmitted by actors of the older generations. In reviving the play, the troupe has made no additions or changes in a bid to retain as far as possible the original staging and plotline, re-presenting the folk culture through the use of ancient dialects and slang of southern Fujian in the lines and lyrics. The play has been described as an "invaluable gem" of great cultural and research value.

In the xianan stream, the stories mostly come from folklore, such as "Singing the Beggar's Ditty" from "Li Yaxian", which is imbued with vivid and interesting details of everyday life.

As for the xiaoliyuan stream, its stock repertory consists of many nanxi plays dating back to the early Ming period. This stream is distinguished by the delicate, insightful acting of artists performing the sheng (male) and dan (female) roles. "Lu Mengzheng" belongs to the nanxi of the Song and Yuan period. It is in the stock repertory of the 18 pengtou plays of the xiaoliyuan stream. Another xiaoliyuan repertory is "The Story of the Rabbit", which carries the alternative title of "Liu Zhiyuan", was one of the four major nanxi plays of the Song and Yuan period. Its ancient provenance makes it a rare legacy of the traditional genre of Liyuan opera. The upcoming shows are performed by a company cast led by Zeng Jingping, Representative Bearer of Liyuan opera as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage and two-time winner of the Plum Blossom Award for Chinese Theatre. They will re-enact the quaint charm of this theatrical genre.

Performances are with Chinese and English surtitles. Details are as follows:

June 28 (Friday); 7.30pm

Excerpts: "To the Cave Dwelling Across the Bridge", "Cooking Gruel", "Checking Footprints on the Snow", "Leaving the Cave Dwelling" from "Lu

Mengzheng" (remnant extant version)

June 29 (Saturday); 7.30pm
"Zhu Maichen" (remnant extant version)

June 30 (Sunday); 7.30pm
Excerpts: "Reunion by the Well", "Forcing His Father to Return Home",
"Reunion at the Mill" from "The Story of the Rabbit" (remnant extant version)
and "Singing the Beggar's Ditty" from "Li Yaxian"

Performances will be staged at the Theatre, Hong Kong City Hall. Tickets priced at \$160, \$260 and \$340 are now available at URBTIX (www.urbtix.hk) and the Xiqu Centre Ticket Office. 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/2019/en/liyuan.html.

Free admission talks will be held. Limited seats will be available for the talks on a first-come, first-served basis. Details are as follows:

Meet-the-artists Section: Introduction of performances from the Liyuan Opera Repertoire (in Putonghua)

June 27 (Thursday); 7.30pm

Venue: AC2, Level 4, Administration Building, Hong Kong Cultural Centre

Speaker: Zeng Jingping

Moderator: Chan Chun-miu

Talk: On the Use of Dialects in "Zhu Maichen" and Their Meanings (in Putonghua)

June 29 (Saturday); 4pm

Venue: Theatre, Hong Kong City Hall

Speaker: Lin Fufu (seasoned artist of Liyuan opera)