

Inaugural Chinese Culture Festival to stage two classic Shandong Liuzi opera plays in July (with photos)

After a 17-year hiatus, the Centre for the Safeguarding of Liuzi Opera of Shandong is returning to Hong Kong, upon the invitation of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), to stage the classic hualian (painted face) work "Zhang Fei Crashing the Palace Gate" and the signature piece "Sun An Presenting Memorials" with its best line-up at the first Chinese Culture Festival in July. National Class One performer Wang Wei will bring immediacy to the "hualian" (painted-face) characters (Zhang Fei and Xu Long) he portrays in these two plays respectively with his exquisite, high-pitched singing and vivid acting, demonstrating the explicit charm of Liuzi opera as a regional opera genre. This programme is one of the highlights of the 12th Chinese Opera Festival.

Liuzi opera has a history of nearly 600 years and is known as one of the four ancient Chinese opera genres. It was also one of the four major vocal styles in Chinese opera in the early days of the Qing dynasty. With its comprehensive repertoire of set tunes, Liuzi opera has significant value for research on Chinese opera music during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and was inscribed on the first list of Intangible Cultural Heritage at the National Level. Liuzi opera originated from popular vernacular songs and short tunes during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, blending the robust style of the North with the graceful, delicate features of the South. Its lyrics extol naturalness and simplicity while maintaining a rich vernacular touch.

The first performance is "Zhang Fei Crashing the Palace Gate", which is the signature piece of Zhang Chunlei, a famous actor who played hualian roles in Liuzi opera and was hailed as the "living Zhang Fei". This time, Wang Wei, who is trained in Zhang's iconic style, will take the hualian role, performing with a thunderous and grinding singing style, mostly in falsetto. In the excerpt "Crashing the Palace Gate", which is the climax of the play, General Zhang Fei enters the stage in a civil way of holding a folding fan, and his conflict with Zhuge Liang is highlighted with the intense music of the "jianzi" trombone and the "four big hand fans" (a pair of large cymbals). Zhang Fei rises above the chorus with his high-pitched singing, thus enhancing the dramatic moment of the play.

The second performance, "Sun An Presenting Memorials", is a representative work of Liuzi opera. Zhou Jinwei, a third-generation actor of Sun An, will perform the set tune called "Zanzi" with a robust vocal style that befits the aged character. He will be joined by Chen Fengying, who will act as Sun's wife, and Wang Wei, who will play the role of Duke Xu Long. Together, the three will inject a fresh burst of youthful energy into this traditional opera genre.

Details of the two performances are as follows:

"Zhang Fei Crashing the Palace Gate"

Date and time: July 5 (Friday), 7.30pm

Main cast: Wang Wei, Hou Pengtao, Zhou Jinwei, Zhang Zhongqiu, Chao Dahai, Peng Yanhui

Synopsis: During the Three Kingdoms period, Liu Bei stations his army at Xinye and appoints Zhuge Liang as his marshal. As Zhuge is young and new to the position, Zhang Fei, one of the valiant generals, regards him with spite. Zhang deliberately turns up late during the officers' roll call at the Palace Gate. Zhuge intends to shape up the army under stricter martial law, and Zhang is so enraged that he crashes into the gate, threatening to kill Zhuge. Other generals reprimand Zhang, and in great anger, Zhang decamps. When Xinye is under attack, Zhuge shows his military acumen and lures the enemy into his ambushing troops, and is greatly impressed by Zhang.

"Sun An Presenting Memorials"

Date and time: July 6 (Saturday), 7.30pm

Main cast: Zhou Jinwei, Chen Fengying, Wang Wei, Li Weiguo, Chen Yanmiao, Chao Dahai, Zhang Zhongqiu

Synopsis: During the Wanli reign of the Ming dynasty, the Grand Tutor Zhang Cong holds sway at court, embezzles relief funds and causes many innocent people to die under his despotic governance. Sun An, a local official, petitions the emperor thrice to impeach Zhang. However, the young emperor, influenced by Zhang's slander, sentences Sun to death. Duke Xu Long goes on a rampage at court, sternly pleading for justice. In the end, Sun is pardoned, and justice prevails.

The Centre for the Safeguarding of Liuzi Opera of Shandong, established in 1959, is affiliated with the Shandong Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism. It is the only professional performing group in China that specialises in Liuzi opera. The troupe's representative works include "Sun An Presenting Memorials", "Zhang Fei Crashing the Palace Gate", "Rendezvous on the Boat after the Fair", "The Story of the White Rabbit", and more. In recent years, the troupe has dedicated itself to safeguarding, inheriting, developing, and innovating the art form, with the aim of promoting exemplary traditional culture and ensuring the legacy and development of Liuzi opera.

The two performances will be held at the Auditorium of Ko Shan Theatre New Wing. Each performance will run for about two hours and 30 minutes, including an intermission of 15 minutes. Lyrics and dialogue are with Chinese and English surtitles. Tickets priced at \$180, \$280 and \$380 are now available at URB TIX (www.urbtix.hk). For telephone bookings, please call 3166 1288. For programme enquiries and concessionary schemes, please call 2268 7325 or visit

www.ccf.gov.hk/en/programme/centre-for-the-safeguarding-of-liuzi-opera-of-shandong/.

A meet-the-artists session entitled "Upholding Traditions and

Innovating: The Artistic Essence of Liuzi Opera" (in Putonghua) will be held at 7.30pm on July 4 (Thursday) at AC2, 4/F, Administration Building, Hong Kong Cultural Centre. The speakers include Chen Yuan, a winner of the China Theatre Plum Blossom Award, and Yang Chunwei, a second-generation Sun An actor, also the former deputy director of the troupe. Chinese opera researcher Chen Liangliang will be the moderator. Admission is free and online registration is required (www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/Programme/en/chinese_opera/programs_1716.html#tab_13_0). Limited seats are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

The programme will also feature a session under the "Chinese Culture for All: A Special Performance Series" at 2.30pm on July 7 (Sunday) at the Auditorium of Ko Shan Theatre New Wing, with free admission specially for local primary and secondary school students. Performers from the Centre for the Safeguarding of Liuzi Opera of Shandong will stage six selected excerpts, giving students a chance to learn more about and appreciate the artistic style of Chinese regional opera so as to experience the wonders of Chinese culture and arts. Interested schools can call 2268 7325 for details.

The CCF, presented by the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau and organised by the LCSD's Chinese Culture Promotion Office, aims to enhance the public's appreciation of Chinese culture and cultivate citizens' national identity and cultural confidence. The inaugural CCF is held from June to September. Through different performing arts programmes in various forms and related extension activities, including selected programmes of the Chinese Opera Festival, exemplary local arts projects recognised by the China National Arts Fund, performing arts programmes from arts and cultural organisations, film screenings, exhibitions, talks and more, the festival allows members of the public and visitors to experience the broad and profound Chinese culture with a view to promoting Chinese culture and patriotic education as well as enhancing national identity amongst the people of Hong Kong, making contributions to the steadfast and successful implementation of "one country, two systems". For details, please visit the CCF website www.ccf.gov.hk.

The LCSD has long been promoting Chinese history and culture through organising an array of programmes and activities to enable the public to learn more about the broad and profound Chinese culture. For more information, please visit www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/ccpo/index.html.

