

Veteran local Cantonese opera stars to showcase art of wusheng roles at Chinese Opera Festival (with photos)

The Chinese Opera Festival (COF) 2023, presented by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, will bring together an array of well-known local Cantonese opera stars to stage a four-day programme, "The Art of Wusheng Roles in Cantonese Opera", starting from July 13 (Thursday). Renowned wusheng artist Liu Kwok-sum is the Artistic Director, and he will join a star-studded cast including Lee Lung, Wan Fai-yin, Lui Hung-kwong, Chan Ka-ming, Yuen Siu-fai and others to reprise selected exemplary wusheng plays of the late "King of the Wusheng Role" Lan Chi Pak, offering the audience an excellent opportunity to experience the intricate artistry of wusheng characterisation in Cantonese opera.

Wusheng (martial male) roles call for much emphasis on singing, delivery of lines, stylised movements and eye expressions, all of which require solid martial arts skills. Most wusheng roles in Cantonese opera are middle-aged or elderly characters, distinguished by the actors wearing a long beard, hence they are also known as "xusheng" (bearded male). Beard maneuvering skills are used in the rendering of many wusheng characters to express emotions. As for singing, a robust vocalisation called "baqiang" (also known as "dahou") and "roudaizuo" are used to show that the character is a man who has seen the ways of the world, thus injecting into the character a unique depth in the performance.

The first performance of "The Art of Wusheng Roles in Cantonese Opera" will start with the traditional set piece "Prime Minister of Six States", featuring the miming of "riding a chariot" by the character Gongsun Yan that will be performed by Liu Kwok-sum with the stylised routines taught hands-on by his mentor Lan Chi Pak. The excerpt "Beating Hands" from "Wang Baochuan" highlights the performing routine "three hand claps to sever blood ties" that performers in wusheng roles use quite often to express the breaking up between father and daughter. In "Judge Bao's Night Trial of Guo Huai", the character of Judge Bao (hualian, literally "painted face") will be played by wusheng that features many stylised movements and singing in a deep voice. At the second performance, the act "Burying the Horse" from "Contention for the Seal" has rarely been staged over the last 20 years. This time the entire act in the original script will be staged, showcasing the various detailed routines for interpreting the emotions of the character, who has no choice but to kill his beloved horse and buries it under a cliff. The third performance will stage the classic play "Death of a Loyal Warrior", in which wusheng will play the lead role in the two acts "Forcing His Son to Get onto the Saddle" and "Killing His Own Son" to revive the stage directions and stylised movements that were devised, rehearsed and performed by Lan Chi Pak. At the final performance, the character of Yan Song in "The Impeachment of Yan Song" will be played by wusheng, as in the early practice. In the court

scene of the play, the actor playing Yan Song will perform the miming of "sitting with an imposing air on the chair", with actions need to be in sync with the percussion cues and supported by the waist and the thighs, showcasing the solid skills and physical strength of the actor.

Details of the four performances are as follows:

Date and time: July 13 (Thursday), 7.30pm

"Prime Minister of Six States"

Main cast: Lee Lung, Wan Fai-yin, Lui Hung-kwong, Liu Kwok-sum, Chan Ka-ming, Yuen Siu-fai, Pui Jun-hin, Ng Lap-hei, Leung Fei-tung, Li Yuen-yi, Lo Lai-see, Shum Pak-chuen, Wan Yiu-sing, Chung Kui-man, Chu Siu-yat, Lee Ching-yan, Siu Wing-yee, Cheung Siu-lun, Fung Choi-wan, Chin Yin, Mou Lai-yin

Synopsis: Su Qin lobbies the six states to form an alliance against the powerful state of Qin. After successfully forming the alliance, leaders of the six states agree to appoint Su Qin as their joint prime minister.

Excerpt "Beating Hands" from "Wang Baochuan"

Main Cast: Lee Lung, Wan Fai-yin, Lui Hung-kwong, Liu Kwok-sum, Chan Ka-ming, Yuen Siu-fai, Pui Jun-hin, Ng Lap-hei, Li Yuen-yi, Lo Lai-see

Synopsis: Wang Baochuan throws an embroidered ball to choose her husband, and it falls into the hands of a destitute young man, Xue Pinggui. Her father, the prime minister, wants to nullify the engagement but she refuses. Three hand claps are performed by the father and daughter to signify the unwavering positions of the two.

"Judge Bao's Night Trial of Guo Huai" (Screenplay Arrangement: Yuen Siu-fai)

Main Cast: Lee Lung, Wan Fai-yin, Lui Hung-kwong, Liu Kwok-sum, Chan Ka-ming, Yuen Siu-fai, Pui Jun-hin, Ng Lap-hei, Lo Lai-see

Synopsis: Royal Concubine Liu conspires with Guo Huai the eunuch to replace Royal Concubine Li's newborn prince with a dead cat. Lady Li is sentenced to abandonment at the cold palace, while Lady Liu becomes the Queen Consort.

Kouzhu the palace maid does not have the heart to kill the baby and gives it to the eighth prince to raise. Since the Queen Consort is barren, the eighth prince offers her the baby as a godson. Guo Huai wants to set the cold palace on fire to kill Lady Li, but Kouzhu hurries to inform Lady Li to flee.

Eighteen years later, the young prince succeeds the throne. One day, Judge Bao is on his way to Chenzhou and meet Guo Haishou, a vegetable vendor who has been giving shelter to Lady Li. On knowing what has happened to Lady Li, Judge Bao reopens the case. Pretending to be the King of Hell, he sets up a night trial of Guo Huai, and solves the mysterious case in the end. The young emperor is reunited with his mother, Lady Li.

Date and time: July 14 (Friday), 7.30pm

"Contention for the Seal"

Main Cast: Lee Lung, Wan Fai-yin, Yuen Siu-fai, Liu Kwok-sum, Chan Ka-ming, Lui Hung-kwong

Synopsis: Shangguan Yunlong and Situ Wenfeng have been conferred the title of Marquis of Pingnan and Marquise of Pingxi respectively for putting down

unrests on the frontiers, and the former is bestowed with an imperial sword and the latter a death-exemption token from the emperor. They meet in the streets and a confrontation follows as neither refuses to give way. They decide to bring the dispute to the emperor for a ruling. Caught in a dilemma, the emperor comes up with a trick: he would confer upon Wenfeng the title of "Princess Royal" and gives the order that she is to marry Yunlong. On their wedding night, pride gets in the way of any reconciliation and the two spend the night apart. The next morning, news arrives that the northern Di barbarians are infringing on the borders. The two contend to be the appointed commander, and eventually Wenfeng wins. When she calls the roll, Yunlong deliberately arrives late. He is sent to meet the enemy force with his own squad as punishment. When his squad is losing ground, Wenfeng enlists the entire army to come to his aid. The two reconcile and return to the imperial court in victory.

Date and time: July 15 (Saturday), 7.30pm

"Death of a Loyal Warrior"

Main Cast: Lee Lung, Wan Fai-yin, Lui Hung-kwong, Liu Kwok-sum, Chan Ka-ming, Yuen Siu-fai, Pui Jun-hin

Synopsis: The story takes place during the Ming dynasty. Xiaoquan, the elder son of the patriotic family of Marshal Zhong Yujun, suspects the consort's father for conspiring with the King of Wala, and is waiting to hear from his brother Xiaoyi who is gathering intelligence on the enemy. However, the Marshal mistakes Xiaoquan's prudence as cowardice, and orders him to go ahead with the expedition. Xiaoyi discovers the enemy's plot against Xiaoquan and hurries to rescue his brother from an ambush. The consort's father slanders Xiaoquan before the emperor. Xiaoquan is thus summoned by the emperor to return to the court, and is dismissed from his position. Zhong Yujun also falls into the trap of the villain, thinking that the ruthlessness of his son has triggered the invasion of the enemies. Zhong Yujun strikes Xiaoquan in anger with his sabre, wanting to kill him with his own hands. At the same time, the consort's father arrives with the royal decree and announces that Xiaoquan be executed. Despite coming back with the proof of the consort's father's treason, it is already too late for Xiaoyi to rescue his brother who has been executed. To avenge his brother, Xiaoyi strikes his sabre and kills the villain on the spot.

Date and time: July 16 (Sunday), 2pm

"The Impeachment of Yan Song"

Main Cast: Lee Lung, Wan Fai-yin, Lui Hung-kwong, Liu Kwok-sum, Chan Ka-ming, Yuen Siu-fai, Pui Jun-hin

Synopsis: The story takes place during the Ming dynasty. Yan Song, father of the emperor's favourite concubine, amasses power, takes bribes and extorts exorbitantly high taxes. The emperor has already decreed that anyone who impeaches Yan Song will be executed, but Inspector Hai Rui, undeterred by the powers-that-be, submits 10 memorials to impeach Yan Song. The emperor then orders to strip Hai Rui of his official title, and sends Hai Rui to prison to await execution. Meanwhile, Yan Song's son, Yan Shifan, is exposed for delaying military manoeuvres and colluding with Japanese pirates. The emperor

confiscates all of Yan Song's assets and revisits accusations of his dereliction of duty. Yan Shifan is executed after proven guilty. Yan Song is pardoned from death, but ends up being a beggar in the streets.

Four performances will be held at the Grand Theatre of Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District. Each performance will run for about three hours and 30 minutes, including an intermission of 15 minutes. Lyrics and dialogue are with Chinese and English surtitles. Tickets priced at \$180, \$280, \$380 and \$480 are now available at URBTIX (www.urbtix.hk). For telephone bookings, please call 3166 1288. For programme enquiries and concessionary schemes, please call 2268 7325 or visit www.cof.gov.hk/2023/en/cantonese.html.

A pre-performance talk and a post-performance talk in Cantonese will be held. The pre-performance talk will be held at 7.30pm on July 3 (Monday) at AC2, 4/F, Administration Building, Hong Kong Cultural Centre. The speakers include Lee Lung, Liu Kwok-sum and Yuen Siu-fai. Admission is free with limited seats available on a first-come, first-served basis. Details can be found on the above-mentioned website. The post-performance talk will be held after the performance on July 16 (Sunday). The speakers are Liu Kwok-sum and Yuen Siu-fai. Members of the audience are welcome to stay behind to join.

In addition, this year's COF features "The Art of Wusheng Roles in Cantonese Opera" exhibition to introduce the intricate artistry of wusheng characterisation through photos and textual explanations. Details are as follows:

Date: From now until June 18 (Sunday)

Venue: Foyer Exhibition Area, Hong Kong Cultural Centre

Date: July 13 (Thursday) to August 20 (Sunday)

Venue: Arts Resource Centre, 10/F, Hong Kong Central Library

Since its inception in 2010, the COF has curated quality operatic programmes with the aim of promoting the artistry and culture of Chinese traditional opera. COF 2023 will once again bring together an excellent line-up of Chinese opera troupes to stage nine quality operatic programmes covering a variety of theatrical genres, including Peking opera, Qu opera, Sichuan opera, Han opera, Cantonese opera, Wu opera, Kunqu opera and Yue opera, from June to October, showcasing the splendour of Chinese operatic art in all its glory. For more details, please visit www.cof.gov.hk.

