

Yue opera stars to gather on Hong Kong stage at Chinese Opera Festival in August (with photos)

The Leisure and Cultural Services Department has invited over 10 renowned winners of the China Theatre Plum Blossom Award of Yue opera from different troupes to join hands in Hong Kong to perform at the programme "A Stellar Meet featuring Plum Blossom Award Winners in Yue Opera" under this year's Chinese Opera Festival (COF). The starred performers will stage classic full-length plays of four main "xiaosheng" (young man role) stylistic schools of Yue opera on four consecutive nights starting from August 3 (Thursday). They will pay tribute to Yue opera predecessors by reconstructing the stellar cast of the former times, when the school founders appeared onstage together to perform the signature production of each school.

Yue opera, also known as Shaoxing opera, originated in Shengzhou in Shaoxing city of Zhejiang Province, where the ancient kingdom Yue was located. The four main schools of Yue opera xiaosheng, namely Xu (Yulan) School, Lu (Jinhua) School, Fan (Ruijuan) School and Yin (Guifang) School, are all distinguished by unique styles and artistic features. Over the years, each school has nurtured many widely sought-after Yue opera performing artists, whose artistic accomplishments are widely recognised.

The first performance will feature "The Dream of the Red Chamber", one of the signature pieces of Yue opera that has been enjoyed by theatregoers for over six decades, with the most familiar cast being Xu Yulan and Wang Wenjuan. This time, seven Plum Blossom Award winners from various schools will deliver a stellar version of the play, with Zhao Zhigang, dubbed the "Prince of Yue Opera", and Yuan School huadan (female lead) Chen Xiaohong playing the lead roles of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu respectively, which is a must-see piece for opera fans.

The famous traditional piece of the Lu School, "The Pearl Pagoda", will be staged in the second performance. Wu Fenghua, a two-time recipient of the Plum Blossom Award and leader of the Fan School; Zhao Zhigang, a signature performer from the Yin School; Zhang Lin, a new-generation Yin School xiaosheng, and more will play the role of the protagonist Fang Qing in three different stages. They will vividly express each of the roles with great depth, including feelings of disappointment, a renewed sense of hope and a triumphant return. After five years since the passing of Lu Jinhua, the performance will also serve as a tribute to the founder of the Lu School.

The performance to be staged on August 5 (Saturday) will feature "The Butterfly Lovers", an iconic play of Fan Ruijuan, founder of the Fan School. In the scene "Three Bidding Farewell", the duet between Fan School xiaosheng and Fu School huadan has become a classic song piece of Yue opera. The styles of both schools will also be featured in this play.

The final performance will be "He Wenxiu", a signature traditional piece of the Yin School founder Yin Guifang, leader of the "Yue Opera Ten Sisters" and one of the "Four Top Xiaoshengs". Featuring Zhao Zhigang, Cai Zhefei and Zhang Lin as the protagonist He Wenxiu in different stages, this play includes a special segment in which He Wenxiu is wrongfully imprisoned and after that, Zhang Tang leads his people to go after and snatch Wang Lanying forcefully. The additional funny and amusing fighting scenes will also let the audience have a taste of the light-hearted, humorous side of this opera.

Details of the four performances are as follows:

"The Dream of the Red Chamber"

Date and time: August 3 (Thursday), 7.30pm

Main cast: Zhao Zhigang/Zhang Xiaojun (as Jia Baoyu), Chen Xiaohong, Xie Qunying, Wu Fenghua, Wu Suying, Chen Fei

Synopsis: Lin Daiyu stays with her grandmother at the Jia mansion at a tender age. She becomes close with her cousin Jia Baoyu, and they grow fond of each other. One day, Daiyu witnesses Baoyu seeing Baochai off at the door and becomes saddened. Daiyu takes a hoe to bury the petals. Baoyu sees this and confesses his feelings for her. Intending to take Xue Baochai as Baoyu's wife, Baoyu's mother decides to follow the plan suggested by Wang Xifeng and tells Baoyu that he is going to marry Daiyu while the bride is actually Baochai. By the time the truth is revealed, Daiyu has already passed away with regret. Baoyu rushes out of the bridal chamber to mourn for Daiyu at her spiritual seat and then leaves home with indignation.

"The Pearl Pagoda"

Date and time: August 4 (Friday), 7.30pm

Main cast: Zhao Zhigang/Wu Fenghua/Zhang Lin (as Fang Qing), Chen Fei, Pan Qin

Synopsis: An impoverished scholar named Fang Qing visits his aunt to borrow money from her to use as travel expenses for the imperial examination in the capital. However, he is met with sarcastic remarks from his snobbish aunt. Unable to stand it, Fang leaves in anger. His cousin Chen Cuie tries to persuade him to stay and offers him the pearl pagoda, her family heirloom, secretly, but Fang declines and refuses the gift. His uncle Chen Peide admires his integrity and talent and decides to offer him his daughter's hand in marriage. Fang is robbed and loses the pearl pagoda. The robber pawns the pagoda at the Chen mansion. Cuie gets worried, thinking that Fang must be fraught with ill fate. After Fang succeeds in the examination, he disguises himself and goes to the Chen mansion again. However, his aunt taunts and jeers at him like in the old days. When Fang reveals his identity, his aunt feels utterly ashamed. Fang finally reunites with Cuie.

"The Butterfly Lovers"

Date and time: August 5 (Saturday), 7.30pm

Main cast: Wu Fenghua/Chen Xueping/Li Xiaoxu (as Liang Shanbo), Chen Fei/Chen

Shi/Xie Qunying (as Zhu Yingtai)

Synopsis: Disguised as a man, Zhu Yingtai goes to study and becomes sworn brothers with schoolmate Liang Shanbo, sharing deep affection for one another. Three years later, Yingtai receives a letter from her father urging her to return home. She puts up an excuse saying she has a younger sister and urges Shanbo to send a matchmaker to propose marriage to her. When Yingtai arrives home, she is told to be betrothed to the prefecture chief's son Ma Wenchai by her father. Learning that Yingtai's younger sister is actually Yingtai herself, Shanbo is overjoyed and comes to the Zhu mansion as agreed. During their meeting at the tower, he is devastated to hear that Yingtai has already been betrothed to the Ma family. Shanbo falls seriously ill and later dies with regrets. Yingtai hears the news and arrives in mourning attire at Shanbo's grave. A snowstorm arises suddenly, followed by thunder and lightning. The grave breaks open as Yingtai jumps into it. Within an instant, the two emerge again as a pair of butterflies, dancing in one another's arms happily.

"He Wenxiu"

Date and time: August 6 (Sunday), 7.30pm

Main cast: Zhao Zhigang/Cai Zhefei/Zhang Lin (as He Wenxiu), Zhou Yanping/Chen Shi (as Wang Lanying)

Synopsis: During the Jiajing era of the Ming dynasty, the vice-minister of the Board of Rites, He Zhong, and his family are persecuted by the political clique of the powerful Yan family. Zhong's son Wenxiu brings along his wife Wang Lanying and leaves home at night to flee. On the way, they are framed by the hooligan Zhang Tang, but manage to escape fortunately. Three years later, Wenxiu wins the top honour in the imperial examination and redresses the injustice done to him.

The programme is performed by Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe of Shaoxing and Ningbo Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe as the major participating groups, while other participating groups include Zhao's Workshop, Hangzhou Yue Opera Theatre, Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe and Nanjing Yue Opera Troupe.

The four performances will be held at the Grand Theatre of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre. Each performance will run for about two hours and 30 minutes, including an intermission of 15 minutes. Lyrics and dialogues are with Chinese and English surtitles. Tickets priced at \$180, \$280, \$380 and \$480 are now available at URBIX (www.urbix.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/yue.html.

A Meet-the-Artists session entitled "Explore the Features of Yue Opera Stylistic Schools through the Classic Repertoires" (in Putonghua) will be held at 7.30pm on August 2 (Wednesday) at AC2, 4/F, Administration Building, Hong Kong Cultural Centre. The speakers include Wu Fenghua and Zhao Zhigang, while Chinese opera researcher Chan Chun-miu will be the moderator. Admission is free, with limited seats available on a first-come, first-served basis. Details can be found on the above-mentioned website.

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. The 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.

