

“Unorthodox” Musical Theater – *Mr. Shi and His Lover*

Text: Lin Naiwen (guest critic), published on Performing Arts Reviews (Taiwan), Dec 1, 2015

“When did a nation become our yearning?”

A space in Taipei, a theatre group from Macau, a story that takes place in Beijing, using Mandarin and subtitles, one piano, one xylophone and two male actors: these come together to create a piece of musical theater similar to chamber music. Its form, like its content, contains a myriad styles, yet does not fit into any specific one; the audience cannot easily judge its framework, and must constantly readjust the focus of their listening process, as if a partner in a 75-minute tango with the creator of the play. It is a mesmerizing theatrical experience.

In the unorthodox performance space, which is the size of a small theater, every slight movement of the actors can be seen clearly, affecting even the breathing of the audience. The two musical instruments occupy the rear half of the stage. The music, although simple, has the richness of a full concert, and does not play the supporting role of background music or accompaniment to the plot. The music is led by the composer, music director and pianist Njo Kong Kie.

The story is born from David Henry Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly*, which is itself inspired by Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly* from the beginning of the 20th century. From exotic unrequited infatuation to gay love story, what new ideas can this new version unearth? As the screenwriter Wong Teng Chi himself says: “Secrets, treason, cultural differences, mistaken gender... it seems that he (David Henry Hwang) already said everything, what else is lacking?” This version goes back to the original characters: Bernard Bouriscot, a French diplomat stationed in China, and Peking opera singer Shi Pei Pu (the title of this play is derived from his name); adding more details and thus inadvertently creating an entirely separate story, the whole play resembles a cross examination between two people, divided into seven scenes concerning the concepts of performance, lies, illusions (including the illusions of love, nation and gender), futility and other deep dialectical meanings.

The polemical nature of the script resembles that of a stage play, not conforming in any way to the tendencies of musical theater, such as singing about emotions or focusing on rhymes within the lyrics (fortunately there are subtitles to help). The actors also aren’t limited by any preconceived preset vocal qualities, and instead base them on their characters: Jordan Cheng, playing the role of Mr. Shi (a male performer in Peking opera specializing in female roles), borrows a vocal style from Chinese opera. When speaking or singing, his tone is soft and gentle, his demeanor calm. As for Wong Pak Hou, who plays the part of Bernard Bouriscot, his vocal style interweaves strains of classical music, musical theatre and pop, a fairly broad range. His character – that of a homosexual man who has dreamt about marrying a beautiful woman since his youth – also suits him. The mystery that Bouriscot was married for twenty years and was completely oblivious that the person he slept next to had the body of a man made society column headlines, and also became the focus of the playwright. From this mistaken identity arises the artificiality of lust, dreams, gender, national- and self-identity – often our innermost desires substitute reality. To this the playwright adds a new layer of paint: the artificiality of acting. The reason why Shi Pei Pu is able to play a woman so perfectly is because he has Bouriscot, the perfect stage. This kind of dialectic on acting itself makes fact and fiction hard to differentiate when watching the actors deliver their monologues so close to us. While they play their roles in the old story, there is also, at the same time, an analysis of the body and the present self; mapping out the plight of modern man, we get, through acting, a glimpse of the illusion of self.

Opening with the image of an embroidered opera robe on a hanger, the costume eventually becomes a symbol of the perfect mirage established between the hearts of Mr. Shi and his lover. This play with music that is not a musical, this drama that is not a melodrama, cleverly positions itself as “music theatre”, a play where the music and the plot are on equal footing. Inviting a playwright to write a script and asking them not to consider the music in their writing, is like transposing a text to the stage as it is, resulting in a theatre that “doesn’t melt in your mouth”. A multi-disciplinary concept, where each element is pivotal, is more like chamber music, having the four artistic elements of music, text, performers and *mise-en-scène* (for which credit should be given to the director Johnny Tam) stand independently while also achieving harmony.

Perhaps that is precisely the origin of this play’s “unorthodoxy”. Macau, just like Taiwan, is located on the border of China, has a long colonial history, and also faces an identity problem in this new century. I am moved by this play because it is separating itself bit by bit from existing and therefore familiar “orthodox” art, art with an aversion to the “experimental” and a lack of pursuit of “aesthetics”; by getting off the beaten track, extending its potential, and exploring new depths, this play is therefore capable of assembling its own style. From the workshops in 2013 to the present, although it has toured to several cities, this play hasn’t expanded in scale, instead the cast repeatedly gathers to further develop their work (the script is already in its fourth version). It is seemingly gentle and elegant, yet has a determination that dares to dream.