

# OPERA UPGRADE

A new production is looking to bridge the gap between the performing style of Kunqu Opera and the tastes of modern theater audiences. **Chen Nan** reports.

About a year ago, when Huo Xin started watching *Eternal Love*, a 58-episode TV series adapted from the online novel titled *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Blossoms*, he became enchanted by the bittersweet romance between the fox princess and the dragon prince.

After watching the TV series, which received more than 30 million online views on major Chinese video-streaming platforms, a question popped into his head: "Why is this TV series so popular with younger viewers?"

Then a second question came to Huo's mind: "If a similar story was told in a Kunqu Opera show, could it be as popular with younger audiences?"

For Huo, a 32-year-old Kunqu Opera director at the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater, a 60-year-old theater based in Beijing, he has been trying to connect Kunqu Opera, one of the oldest traditional forms of Chinese opera with about 600 years of history, with the younger generation.

Over the space of two weeks, he watched the entire TV series again, and realized that a Kunqu Opera performance could be a vehicle for presenting this kind of story.

He then wrote a script about a love-triangle between a man, a woman and an epiphyllum (cactus flower) fairy, which he turned into a 100-minute Kunqu Opera show, titled *Epiphyllum*.

The show will make its debut at Beijing's Long Fu Theater on May 30 and 31.

Ahead of this, Huo and his cast took the show on a preview tour of Beijing universities, visiting Capital Normal University on April 12 before going on to Renmin University on April 18.

"We are attempting to bridge the gap between the performing style of Kunqu Opera and the tastes of modern theater audiences," says Huo, adding that the three main actors in the production are of a similar age to the students they met, and that the promotional video for the show combined scenes from Kunqu Opera with hip-hop music.

He also added Western string instruments, violin and cello to the band, while retaining the major musical instrument for Kunqu Opera — the bamboo flute.

At the CNU showcase, actors from the troupe interacted with the students, painting their faces as different characters from Kunqu Opera, and introducing them to the history of the ancient art form. Scenes from *Epiphyllum* were also performed.

One of the audience members was Bai Qitong, a graduate student from the CNU's music department. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in history, Bai started up a student community for learning Kunqu Opera in 2016, the first of its kind at the university.

Initially, about 30 students applied to join the community, but now it has more than 130 members. Every week, professional actors



Clockwise from top: Actors of the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater display a new show *Epiphyllum* which will make the debut in Beijing on May 30 and 31; students of the Capital Normal University in Beijing have a facial make-up of Kunqu Opera. PHOTOS BY DU LIANYI / CHINA DAILY

“Modern Chinese theater needs something new and the art form itself needs new works to keep it alive and moving forward.”

Song Jie, scriptwriter and director

and musicians offer students training and guidance on how to perform Kunqu Opera.

Bai became interested in Kunqu Opera at the age of 11 when she began reading scripts of famous works by Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) playwright Tang Xianzu, such as *The Peony Pavilion* and *The Purple Flute*, which have been adapted into Kunqu Opera shows.

"I love everything about Kunqu Opera, such as the musicians, the actors' singing and the lyrics. They are so beautiful," says Bai.

"Some of the students had never seen Kunqu Opera shows before and just joined out of curiosity. But they soon became interested in the

art form, and some of the students are now able to sing a complete Kunqu Opera work."

Huo, whose father is a veteran Peking Opera actor, started learning Peking Opera in Beijing aged 12. At 22, he began to study Kunqu Opera at the training school of the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater. In 2017, he obtained his master's degree in directing from the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts.

"I am not afraid of experimenting with new ideas for Kunqu Opera because it is such a vibrant and valuable art form with a long history."

According to scriptwriter and director Song Jie, a retired professor formerly with the Shanghai Theatre Academy,

and artistic director for *Epiphyllum*, Kunqu Opera is the perfect medium for portraying romantic and tragic love stories because of its soft and soothing music.

"I was very excited when Huo told me about the show, because it's a new story performed by new actors. When we talk about Kunqu Opera, we always mention the classic piece, *The Peony Pavilion*."

"But modern Chinese theater needs something new and the art form itself needs new works to keep it alive and moving forward," the 71-year-old says.

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## University forged from past hardship

By LU HONGYAN in Xi'an  
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They gave up Shanghai for Xi'an 62 years ago. That is, 4,400 teachers and students traded their lives in a cosmopolitan coastal metropolis to teach or study in what was then a backward western settlement.

Xi'an Jiaotong University's early years is their story. Its future is their legacy.

"The central government made the very important decision to move our school (from Shanghai) to the western city (of Xi'an)," says 85-year-old Hu Naisai, who came to Shaanxi's provincial capital as an instructor at age 23.

Retired professor Zhu Jizhou recalls arriving with the last group of teachers from Shanghai in 1958. He worked in Xi'an for six decades.

“We had to abandon too many familiar things and transformed our lifestyles for many years.”

Zhu Jizhou, retired professor of Xi'an Jiaotong University

"We had to abandon too many familiar things and transformed our lifestyles for many years," Zhu recalls.

"The old teachers had to bring their families. Young people had to leave their parents in Shanghai to work in a strange place full of hardships."

He recalls teachers had to trek to the local flour mill with empty sacks on their shoulders and lug full sacks back when the university was under construction.

"Sometimes, we had to get flour by going to fields outside the city and helping the farmers cut wheat during the summer harvests."

Fifteen senior professors sent a letter to President Xi Jinping in November 2017 to tell their Shanghai-to-Xi'an story. Xi answered, offering his respect and blessings. He expressed hopes that the students and teachers could pass on the contemporary go-west campaign's spirit.

His words encouraged teachers, students and alumni, says deputy secretary of Xi'an Jiaotong University's committee of the Communist Party of China, Zhao Junwu.

Tan Xiaosheng, technology president and chief security officer of Qihoo 360 Co, who graduated from Xi'an Jiaotong, says his company has proposed establishing a national network-security innovation base in the university.

Its past seems worth chronicling. Its future remains unwritten yet seemingly promising.

International Education Column

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