

# YOUTH

When Tan Tianjiao posted a recruitment notice online in January, looking for like-minded people for her graduate musical project in London, she was determined that it would be a student production that didn't feel like a student production.

As a postgraduate musical theater major at Goldsmiths, University of London, Tan stamped the project with her own brand of determination and skill.

*Gabrielle*, the one-hour musical that Tan and her team finally staged in October, centers around the founder of the luxury brand Chanel — Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel.

“From the beginning, I wanted this musical to be different from other student productions, with better stage design and props, actors wearing clothes that actually correspond to the era of the play ... and for the audience to be more than just the family and friends of those involved,” says the 25-year-old producer.

“As I had participated in some professional musical productions in China, such as *Once Upon a Time in Fudeli*, I established the standards for our project,” says Tan.

“Everything — from the music to costumes for the cast — was created by ourselves,” Tan says proudly, adding that a documentary of the production has also been produced and will be released soon.

As a legend in the fashion world, there are many books and films about Chanel, but few have focused on her obscure early beginnings. It was the coming-of-age story of how the young Gabrielle became the legendary “Coco” that interested Lyu Yunqian, the writer of the musical.

“I'm fascinated by the controversy surrounding the so-called moral wrongness of Gabrielle Chanel's early life, which, personally, I believe is more about courage and creativity than outrageousness,” Lyu says.

“This kind of sophistication overwhelmed me while I was writing about it. Hopefully, that will be the one thing that lingers in everyone's mind after watching the piece.”

The musical recounts Gabrielle Chanel's story, starting from when she was admitted to an orphanage following the death of her mother. It also shows her singing in bars to make money, the romances she had with her benefactors

# An iconic performance

Musical by Chinese students that charts how legendary fashion designer overcame life's early struggles wins acclaim, reports **Xing Yi** in London.



Actors and actresses perform in *Gabrielle*, a musical produced by Chinese postgraduate students at Goldsmiths, University of London, at the George Wood Theatre on Oct 1. The musical tells the story of Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel, the founder of the eponymous luxury brand, who is played by Marcia Davies (pictured above, on the right). PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

and her early business selling hats.

Marcia Davies, who played the lead role of Chanel, says: “Her mother died when she was very young, so Gabrielle worked very hard and had a burning ambition when it came to business. The story focuses on Gabrielle trying to find her way in life.”

Lyu, also pursuing a master's degree in musical theater at Goldsmiths, says overcoming the language barrier was very difficult when she was writing the lyrics and melodies for the songs.

Yang Hanlin, music director and composer, also a student at Goldsmiths, says that 12 original music pieces were composed, one French song *Qui Qu'a Vu Coco* was rearranged, and a band was assembled in such a short time.

“Limited resources prompted us to explore different techniques and approaches to the composition process,” Yang says. “In the end, we achieved a satisfactory sonority while each piece of music only required simple technical proficiency from the instrumentalists.”

During the past eight months of preparation, the production team grew from a four-person squad into a 50-strong group, covering areas from scriptwriting, music, choreography and casting to stage, lighting and costume design. They also designed a series of peripheral souvenirs and developed a website to market the musical.

Li Guangyu, director of the musical, says that despite the short rehearsal time, all the cast did a good job.

“We wanted the musical to show the many different possibilities in the growth of a woman, and that actually growing up is a very complex process for everyone,” Li says. “We hope our show helped the audience to understand the emotional process of a girl's coming-of-age.”

The musical was a success, far exceeding the standard of a student project. It ran twice at the university's George Wood Theatre on Sept 29 and Oct 1, and had a performance at the Greenwood Theatre on Oct 6. Each time, the musical played to a full house.

“I plan to continue working on this musical, making it a two-hour show, and bring it back to an even bigger stage,” says Tan.

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