

Theater

The Shakespeare jukebox

Shakespeare's Globe is back in Hong Kong. This year is slightly special though as the company will perform what the audience demands on two nights. **Rebecca Lo** reports.



Shakespeare's Globe's upcoming season in Hong Kong features *Merchant of Venice* (above), *Twelfth Night* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Globe's actors are required to switch character fast, much like Portia in *Merchant of Venice*.



Globe's Hong Kong repertoire includes *Twelfth Night*, one of Shakespeare's most joyous and celebratory comedies.

It may well be argued that the original Globe Theatre's productions were the Elizabethan equivalent of gladiators facing off in Rome's Colosseum. Both were designed to entertain and both encouraged their audiences to participate by voicing their approval or disapproval of the action — often as loudly as possible.

More than four centuries after William Shakespeare's death, Shakespeare's Globe — which recreates the experience of watching theater in Elizabethan England and calls London's Globe Theatre its home — is reaching out to audiences outside of London.

Shakespeare's Globe has performed in front of Hong Kong audiences before. This year the company arrives here via Singapore. "We've been in Wales, Madrid, Oslo and Neuss this year," notes director Brendan O'Hea. "I find that international audiences tend to appreciate the plays more and often have a wider understanding of Shakespeare's work. International and UK audiences will often gasp or laugh in the same places, which prove that Shakespeare really does bridge boundaries."

The novelty of Globe's upcoming season in Hong Kong, opening Sept 25, is play-on-demand. On two evenings, immediately before the show starts, the audience can choose what they want to watch from among *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. The decision made, actors quickly get into character before the curtains are drawn.

"When we were planning this year's tour, we asked ourselves what Shakespeare would do," recalls O'Hea. "We know that Elizabethan touring companies left the choice of play to the most powerful person in the household. In keeping with historical tradition, we want to put the power back into the hands of the most powerful people in the house: the audience."

"Audiences love diversity," acknowledges Matthew Gregory, founder and executive producer at ABA Productions, an international theater production house which routinely hosts much-lauded shows from the UK in Hong Kong and Singapore. "With three shows, we thought it would be fun to mix things up. The same group of actors will learn their lines for three plays, but won't know what



Matthew Gregory (left), executive producer, and director Brendan O'Hea decided to empower the audiences by introducing audience-choice nights in Globe's current Hong Kong run.



IF YOU GO

Shakespeare's Globe
Twelfth Night: Sept 25, 27, 29
The Merchant of Venice: Sept 26, 30
The Taming of the Shrew: Sept 30
Audience Choice: Sept 28, 29
 Presented by ABA Productions
 Venue: Hong Kong Jockey Club Amphitheatre, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, 1 Gloucester Road, Wan Chai
www.abaproductions.com

they will be performing until five minutes before the show. It is brilliant and exciting and in line with what would have happened 400 years ago."

Up, close and personal

Gregory says audiences tend to be more vocal for Shakespeare's comedies rather than his histories or tragedies. To encourage Hong Kong people to voice more than a polite "bravo," he created his version of the "yard."

"This was the standing crowd — the cheapest seats in the house at the Globe and the closest to the actors," Gregory explains. "We have cushions on the floor to achieve a sense of immediacy, with a certain level of comfort. This year, we've booked a more intimate venue. The Amphitheatre at Academy for Performing Arts has 600 seats, not 1,100 like the Lyric Theatre. The layout is horseshoe-shaped so no one is too far away from the action."

Costumes and props are going to be shipped from the UK while the set was made here in Hong Kong. "We did our best to match the ambience and feeling of being at the Globe," says production manager Gloria Ngai. "We worked closely with the Globe team to match the set and lighting as an outdoor scene, using simple and traditional lighting plans."

Though Gregory would prefer to replicate the authentic Globe experience of performing outdoors, he says that the threat of typhoons makes all fresco shows challenging.

He puts effort into ensuring maximum understanding by non-native English-speaking audiences. "The plays are exactly the same as in the UK: same actors, same script," Gregory notes. "Before rehearsals, I sit down with the director to work on inflection, meaning and tone geared towards a non-English audience. What sets the Globe apart is how they draw in an audience so that the language never feels over their heads. I advise actors to not race through their lines the way they may at home. They should take a breath and let the language settle. Let people listen."

"Actors have to remember that Hong Kong is a busy town," he adds. "The first five or 10 minutes are the most important to get an audience hooked."

Bardolatory by HK teens

The students from *Faust*, ABA Productions' sister company, are, unsurprisingly, excited about the Globe's visit to Hong Kong.

Mark Bojan, 16, has trained with *Faust* for more than five years and performed in *King Lear*. "I love how Shakespeare twists and turns his stories, and always has a subplot," says Bojan. "It is so rewarding to perform as you really immerse yourself in the emotions that his plays evoke."

Samantha Brooks, also 16, was in *King Lear* as well. "The amphitheater style of the seating is so adrenaline-inducing because there is absolutely

nowhere to hide on stage," says Brooks. "The actors are fully submerged in who they are and what they feel in that moment, and it is an amazing experience. The pressure of having that many eyes on you is what makes it both exciting and terrifying."

Poppy Conway, 17, is excited about the audience-choice nights. "I think it allows the audience to interact with the actors," Conway says. "It's a brilliant idea, because it empowers the audience, making them feel that the performance is specifically for them." Annabel Harb, 18, has spent four

years with *Faust* and believes Shakespeare is more relevant now than ever. "Other than the tremendous impact he has had on the English language is the universality of his themes," Harb says. "Many of his plays explore the role of family and honor, both of which are integral in Chinese culture as well. But it goes far beyond culture — Shylock's desire for revenge, *King Lear*'s extreme grief — these are fundamentally human. His most poignant message is that we all reflect each other, whether we live in the fair city of Verona, or in Hong Kong."



Faust students Samantha Brooks (left) and Poppy Conway are eagerly awaiting the arrival of Shakespeare's Globe in Hong Kong.



Mark Bojan (center) acted in *King Lear* and says he enjoys the challenge of interpreting Shakespeare's plots.

Performance

Happy marriage of dance and Canto opera

By LIMENG

Hong Kong Dance Company (HKDC) in collaboration with Utopia Cantonese Opera Workshop produced an experimental work, *Waiting Heart* — a tribute to Tong Tik-sang (1917-59), the legendary Cantonese opera playwright. The 90-minute piece, based on Tong's classic opera, *The Legend of the Purple Hairpin*, premiered on August 31 at Hong Kong Cultural Centre's Studio Theatre.

Waiting Heart combines two art forms — Chinese dance and Cantonese opera — on the same stage, which opens "unexplored possibilities of presentations," according to Wilson Fung, chairman of HKDC.

The Legend of the Purple Hairpin premiered in 1957 when renowned Cantonese opera stars Yam Kim-fai and Bai Shet-sin performed in the Tang dynasty love story. In the five decades since then the story has seen many subsequent adaptations, across different art forms.

The original story ended in trag-

edy. Abandoned by her husband Li Yi, the heroine Huo Xiaoyu breaks into the mansion of the Grand Commandant in an attempt to get her beloved back. She dies. Li Yi then fails in his plan to seize power and pays a heavy price for his faithlessness and betrayal of love.

Tong gave the story a "happy ever after" ending to meet the demands of traditional viewers of Cantonese opera. In the HKDC adaptation of the story artistic director Yang Yuntao has made an audacious experiment. Tong's script was turned into a more precise and less complicated story. Both Yang and his collaborator Rex Ng, creative director of Utopia Cantonese Opera Workshop, felt a shorter version was better suited to contemporary theater and to the viewing habits of today's audiences, especially the younger generation. They also left the ending open to interpretation.

The lead pair, Huo Xiaoyu and Li Yi, is performed by dancers as well as Cantonese opera performers. In the last chapter, when Li Yi (played by Hong Hai) finally meets the dy-



Musicians and actors share space and interact with each other in Hong Kong Dance Company's *Waiting Heart*.

Waiting Heart has Cantonese opera performers and dancers showcasing their respective skills simultaneously. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



ing Xiaoyu (played by Li Pui-yan), Li Han and Pan Lingjuan, principal dancers of HKDC, perform a marvelous duet on the upper circle of the theater, reminding the audience of the couple's past romance. The simultaneous presence of two pairs of performers from different periods in the story adds to the tension, culminating in a mysterious ending.

Set designer Jan Wong too has broken fresh ground by blurring the boundary between viewers and performers. She divided the stage into four alleyways in which dancers, musicians and Cantonese opera singers perform and interact with each other. Stall seats are set back to back along these alleyways. Performers come and go, appearing from one end of the alleyway and disappearing past the other. The design seems inspired by life itself: you never know who you will meet along the way and what you will find on the journey.

Some of the arias in *The Legend of the Purple Hairpin* were borrowed from *A Moonlit Night on the Spring*

River, a famous pipa solo piece in ancient China. Taiwan-born composer Lee Che-yi rearranged the melody and combined it with modern music elements. He wrote several cello pieces to describe the romance between Li Yi and Xiaoyu, creating a sorrowful atmosphere when Xiaoyu finds that her beloved husband has ruthlessly abandoned her in pursuit of fortune and fame. Lee's work explores how different genres and styles of music can be remixed for contemporary Cantonese opera in a natural and harmonious manner.

Waiting Heart was a particularly challenging piece for Yang, Ng and their collaborators to pull off. Both Chinese dance and Canto opera are complex art forms, combining elements of music, dance, theatre and visual arts. In fusing dance, theatre and Canto opera, the biggest challenge is in connecting the concepts in a way that highlights their combined strengths while at the same time staying true to the original art forms. The HKDC *Waiting Heart* does this with great aplomb.