

ARTS

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A new production of the popular tale about star-crossed lovers has been revived as a ballet with a political twist, writes Winnie Yeung

Float like a butterfly...

IT'S BEEN ADAPTED for stage, screen, animation and even a rock concert, so you might think *The Butterfly Lovers* has been done to death. Not yet, says Yuri Ng Yuelit. The award-winning choreographer has created a 30-minute ballet, *The Story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai (Butterfly Lovers)*, which puts a fresh spin on the century-old folk tale.

The production is part of the 20th anniversary of the International Festival of Dance Academies and the ongoing Hong

Kong Dance Festival. It also marks Ng's first collaboration with the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts and his second attempt to adapt the popular classic, after he choreographed *The Butterfly Lovers* for the Hong Kong Ballet in 1998.

In the original tale, Liang Shanbo falls in love with Zhu Yingtai, a female classmate disguised as a boy because girls weren't allowed to attend school in China 1,600 years ago. He dies of a broken heart after learning that Zhu is to marry into a

wealthy family. The story ends with Zhu leaping into Liang's grave and the two souls take the form of butterflies, never to be separated again.

Ng's new piece uses *The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto*, written by Chen Gang and He Zhanhao in 1959, as his point of reference. Everything else to do with the original love story is stripped away. His production, featuring 30 dance students, is more an analysis of 1950s China, with costume from that period. "I was wondering if it was possible to use images to analyse that era in China," Ng says. "And I think [Zhu pretending to be a boy to attend school] is hardly something we understand or have a connection with because we all go to schools now."

The 42-year-old stresses that his piece is open to different interpretations, one of which will be political. In one scene, while all their classmates are holding red books, Zhu and Liang have green ones. "Those who get the symbolism will go, 'hmm'. But those who don't might just associate red with authority and green with a piece of grassland, which symbolises freedom."

To illustrate the kind of social conformity that characterised Red China at the time, all his dancers move in unison in this particular sequence. "Conformity and order represent the era and the society at that time," says Ng, a former gold medalist of the Genée International Ballet Competition.

"One may never know how strong the impact is when 1,000 people are [asked to behave the same way] at the same time. I

want my dancers to know this because it also applies to ballet training – chorus dancers should not have a sense of self, as they have to become one."

However, social conformity backfires when people rebel against such a system, as in the case of Liang and Zhu in *The Butterfly Lovers*. "That's why I don't think the piece is a love story between a boy and a girl," Ng says. "It should be about the relationship between the two characters and how the majority react against this couple during that era."

Having grown up as an obedient child, he finds the rebellious characters interest-

And to complete his deconstruction of the original, Ng changed its title to *The Story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. "I prefer to use the two characters' names," he says. "It's just like *Romeo and Juliet*, where you'd know the story of Romeo and Juliet when you saw their names, as they're familiar to us."

Ng's attention to detail goes as far as using the pinyin version of the lovers' names as they're pronounced in putonghua rather than a Romanised version of the Cantonese. "Well, you wouldn't call wasabi the green mustard," he says. "Architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe once

"THE PIECE SHOULD BE ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO CHARACTERS AND HOW THE MAJORITY REACT AGAINST [THEM]" Yuri Ng Choreographer

ing. "I was too good as a kid. I did everything my parents told me. That's why I'm jealous of Zhu because she has the courage to reject others to do what she wants."

To match the energy this youthful piece requires, Ng says it's "more appropriate" to work with students than professional dancers. He says professionals are more rigid and less malleable. Dancers for the 1998 production were asked to keep their ballet vocabulary to the minimum so they would appear less experienced.

For the APA performance, it's the opposite, as Ng wants the ballet piece to look contemporary. Student dancers are asked to strengthen and mix the vocabularies.

said, 'God is in the details,' he says. "I would feel ashamed every time if I didn't get the details right."

The Story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai (Butterfly Lovers), Thu, 8pm, Lyric Theatre, HK Academy for Performing Arts, \$80, \$120, \$260, HK Ticketing, Tel: 3128 8288

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Choreographer Yuri Ng (top) and with dancers (above) in rehearsal for *The Story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai (Butterfly Lovers)*. PHOTOS: RICKY CHUNG

SKETCHES

Painter stripped of prize
Japan's government revoked a much-coveted award given to Japanese painter Yoshihiko Wada after determining that he plagiarised many of noted Italian artist Alberto Sughis' works.

Wada, 66, was awarded the Minister of Education's Art Encouragement Prize in March for a series of oil paintings, including his 1996 work *Boshizo* (Mother and Child), according to Cultural Affairs Agency officials.

The decision to cancel Wada's award came hours after a seven-member panel screened the painter's works. It was the first time the award has been revoked since it was established in 1950. AP

State secret unmasked

The traditional Chinese performing art of bian lian, classified as a state secret, has been leaked overseas by artisans desperate to make money, mainland state media said.

Bian lian, or mask-shifting, which has its origins in Sichuan, is traditionally performed on the stage of Chuanju operas and its technique, which involves sleight of hand, has been closely guarded as a trade secret for generations.

But now bian lian, classed as a secondary state secret by the Ministry of Culture since 1987, has been sold abroad by artisans keen to cash in on the art, *Beijing Morning Post* reported. AFP

HK festival's right click

The Hong Kong Arts Festival, with international website designer and developer Ion Global, was named an "Official Honoree" at the 2006 Webby Awards, for its official site. The award goes to a website with outstanding design, creativity, usability and functionality. Kevin Kwong

Archibald in court

Sydney artist Tony Johansen is taking legal action against the Art Gallery of New South Wales over the 2004 Archibald-winning portrait by Craig Ruddy (below) because the work, he argues, is a drawing, and not a painting, which renders it ineligible. Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper reported.

According to *The Age*, Ruddy's portrait of Aboriginal actor David Gulpilil, using charcoal, won both the prestigious Archibald people's choice award and the A\$35,000 (\$200,000) portrait prize that year.



Midnight masses with a master

The British Museum said it will stay open until midnight for the first time to meet the demand for access to its Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master exhibition. More than 140,000 people have visited the exhibition since it opened at the end of March.

Now, the 247-year-old museum will remain open until midnight every Saturday until the show closes on July 25. AP

REVIEWS

Know Your Mozart
Violin Concertos
Hong Kong Sinfonietta
City Hall Concert Hall
Reviewed: June 8

This concert's title was a slight misnomer, in that many of the chosen excerpts led to discrete ends, rather than built an understanding about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's concertos.

Part of the Hong Kong Sinfonietta's education programme, the performance was based on a dialogue between conductor Yip Wing-sie and violin soloist Ivan Chan – a discussion that touched more on general technicalities such as colouring notes, intonation and instrument-maintenance than establishing an appreciation of why and how Mozart put the music's engine together.

The pair's banter raised laughs and put people at ease, but there were bumpy moments in the improvisation. Chan probably had enough on his plate playing the music, which generally received limited variation in colour and subtlety of line in the extensive extract-hopping between works.

Some movements played in their entirety spoke with more eloquence. The orchestra was at its best in the complete performance of the Fourth Violin

Concerto, playing with sensitive phrasing, excellent balance and bags of colour. The exemplary tempo in the finale allowed its grace and wit full bloom.

Chan was at his best when he was joined by Elvis Chan Tsz-shun, the orchestra's acting-principal viola, in a beautifully turned first movement of the *Sinfonia Concertante*.

The audience was at its best throughout, hanging on every word and generously applauding a concert performed in memory of violinist Chiu Sin-sing, a long-term supporter of the orchestra. Sam Olliver

aWay
1aspac, Cattle Depot
Reviewed: June 9

First-time curator and artist Jeff Leung Chin-fung has created an eclectic and engaging show. Although uneven in ability and concept, it presents an alternative cross-section of 15 of Hong Kong most interesting young artists. With video, installations, drawing, painting, photography and more, the show sprawls through the 1aspac gallery.

Leung has been active in many areas of the local art scene. In this project, he connects the work through a specific narrative thread, focusing on processes of art-making through a reflective

and self-critical approach. But the exhibition suffers because the quality of the works is inconsistent.

For example, Hanison Lau Hok-shing's *Full of Ideas*, an elegant, table-top installation of personal/found objects is sculptural and engaging. Lee Kit's *One Night: Dinner with Friends on Hand-painted Cloth* documents an "event", struggling to connect art with daily life.

By contrast, Tamshui's animations (below), although clever and funny, are out of place. Tozer Pak Sheung-chuen's piece about the warmth a body leaves on a seat, appears at once misguided and badly presented, although conceptually interesting.

Most exciting, performance-wise, is Project 226 (Clara Cheung Ka-lai and Gum Cheng Yee-man) – arguably the best performance art

group in Hong Kong. Their work is consistently entertaining and smart, pushing the boundaries between sanity, daily life, obsession/compulsion, politics and art.

This show is an ambitious first effort for Leung. As is the case with many Hong Kong group shows, it's haphazard in its installation – falling somewhere between intentionally overcrowded and cleanly installed.

A small number of the works appear to be unfinished, not thought through or just student-like, diluting the strength of the better pieces.

Still, I applaud Leung's clear curatorial strategy and selection of work, which makes an otherwise uneven show worthwhile and, hopefully, a harbinger of even better projects to come. Norman Ford



Russian Hamlet
Eifman Ballet of St Petersburg
Cultural Centre Grand Theatre
Reviewed: June 9

The St Petersburg-based Eifman Ballet returned to Hong Kong last week after a successful first visit in 2004. The opening programme was *Russian Hamlet*, inspired by the life of Prince Paul, the son of Catherine the Great, set to music by Beethoven and Gustav Mahler.

Paul was known as the Russian Hamlet due to the parallels between his life and that of Shakespeare's tragic hero, including the alleged murder of his father by his mother and her lover, and his mother's refusal to let him take the throne.

Like all this company's repertoire, the ballet (right) is choreographed by artistic director Boris Eifman. The piece bears his hallmarks: a dark, dramatic exploration of the mind of a troubled historical figure, with sex, violence and spectacular theatrical effects along the way.

At his best, Eifman produces powerful theatre, but *Russian Hamlet* is disappointing compared with the works previously seen in Hong Kong: *Red Giselle* and *Tchaikovsky*. The narrative was incoherent – without the programme notes it would be impossible to follow – and the characterisation simplistic.



Eifman prefers an impressionistic, rather than a realistic, approach (unlike works such as Kenneth MacMillan's *Mayerling*, another ballet based on a tragic, historical prince). Even so, the characters must be real enough to engage our interest and sympathy – and *Russian Hamlet* fails to do that.

The choreography is also typical Eifman: highly athletic, with big jumps and complicated lifts. There were moments of real inventiveness, notably in the combination of movement and design, with ingenious use of

sheets of fabric to isolate individuals or tow them offstage. However, it was too repetitive.

Eifman makes great demands of his dancers, and their technical and dramatic prowess is impressive. Vera Arbusova was an icily dominant Catherine, her impossibly arched back a statement of imperial power. As Paul, Aleksei Turko danced strongly, but did not generate enough emotional impact. Natalia Povorozniuk and Yuri Smekalov shone as, respectively, Paul's wife and Catherine's lover.

Natasha Rogai