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Alike in love for the theater

Faculty collaboration with China culminates in a celebrated show. JUDITH PRATT

Two countries. Two languages. Two completely different approaches to theater.

Or, to paraphrase from *Romeo and Juliet*, the play that brought Chinese Opera to Binghamton University, “Two cultures, both alike in dignity.”

This spring, Binghamton faculty, staff and students had the chance to put these words into practice by teaming with the acclaimed Chinese director Chen Lincang, creating a production of *Romeo and Juliet* that combined Chinese and Western theater.

A celebrated event, the April show was the result of a four-year collaboration between the Binghamton University Theatre Department and the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. China Central Television (CCTV) recorded the rehearsals, interviewed Binghamton University President Lois B. DeFleur and developed a documentary that aired in China in August. The Chinese Consulate in New York City sent two members to the show.

“We accomplished exactly what we wanted to,” notes theatre Professor Don Boros. “We wanted to have a fusion of Eastern and Western style. And the production really awakened people to what it’s like in China.”

ASIAN DISCIPLINE

Among those most deeply affected were Binghamton student actors. Lee Garrett '08, who played Romeo, says he had a once-in-a-lifetime experience. “Chinese Opera is an amazing discipline and a beautiful style,” he says. “The detail in



In Chinese theatrical traditions, long silk sleeves help dramatize the softness, delicacy and emotion of a character such as Juliet, played by Leanne Mercadante '08 in April on campus. Lee Garrett '08 starred with her as Romeo.

the choreography really matched up with the text, where every word is important. As an actor, I learned how to be specific and truthful.”

Boros first became entranced with China when colleague Qianghua Wang convinced him to travel there several years ago. “It was like I had been given some drug I’d been wanting all my life,” Boros says. “I said to Wang, ‘We have to go back — and take students.’”

Wang studied at the Shanghai Theatre

Academy and worked at the Shaoxing Opera in Shanghai before coming to the United States in 1987 with the help of Boros. He has been assistant technical director and scenic artist at Binghamton University for 20 years.

“When I got here, I discovered that there were very few elements of Chinese theater in Western theater,” Wang says. “Chinese people often come to the United States because they don’t really understand [this country], but

Americans know even less about China. It's been my feeling we should all have a mutual understanding."

In fact, mutual understanding developed quickly once Wang and Boros traveled there. In 2004, Boros and Wang led a group of students to visit the Shanghai Theatre Academy and the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (NACTA). Over the next few years, NACTA and Binghamton exchanged visits, teachers and workshops.

"Learning about Chinese Opera provides students with an opportunity to become aware of diverse forms of art and thought," says Boros of the exchanges. "Our aesthetic isolationism has to be cracked open."

MELDING CULTURE

The process of melding language and culture began when actor and director Chen Lincang arrived six weeks before opening night. He brought an interpreter, Su "Sophie" Feng, and a choreographer, Jiang Qian. The Binghamton Theatre Department added the language skills of artist-in-residence Andy Horowitz, who is fluent in Chinese and has traveled extensively there.

"Sophie was the liaison between the entire production and the script, dealing with Shakespearean text in both Chinese and English," Horowitz says. "I was Mr. Chen's mouth and ears."

In the process of melding Shakespeare and Chinese Opera, the troupe changed the play's ending to reflect Chinese sensibilities. "Mr. Chen believed that Romeo and Juliet shouldn't die without being united," Boros explains. "They should resurrect and get married after death." The stage became bright red, which in China is the joyous color of

AWARENESS OF ALTERNATE APPROACHES



Lee Garrett '08 and Ah Hil Kim, playing Romeo and Tybalt, rehearse a Shakespearean scene using Chinese Opera theatrical approaches.

iconic elements that emphasize the emotions of characters, such as long, silk sleeves that actors manipulate to emphasize the softness and delicacy of some female heroines.

Actors and audiences who are accustomed to shows that mimic real life can find Chinese theater to be a useful challenge. "Our training techniques are so dominated by realism that our students become unaware of alternative approaches to expression," Boros says. "We miss the value and effectiveness of symbolic and emblematic styles. Being exposed to Beijing opera can change that."

IN CHINESE OPERA, students learn a complex and highly physical style of performing, which includes singing, acrobatics, martial arts, mime and dance. "Asian theater is emblematic," explains theatre Professor Don Boros. In other words, it is choreographed, stylized and presentational.

For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, players often faced the audience, rather than each other, even in fight scenes. Costumes have

weddings. The lovers, dressed in white (a Chinese symbol for death), married on a stage filled with lanterns.

Taking this approach required new text. Visiting faculty member Gendolyn Schwinke, who served as assistant director on the Binghamton side as well as a vocal coach, suggested using one of Shakespeare's love sonnets. "The result took your breath away," recalls Boros. "You could hear people in the audience crying."

LEARNING TO LIAISE

Stage manager Brian Goldblatt, a Binghamton graduate student in theater who played a major role in the collaboration, says, "It was a huge task to bring these cultures together. For starters, they don't have a stage manager."

In western theater, the stage manager is the liaison between the technical staff, the actors and the director. "My job is to take care of everybody, and it's hard when it's a completely different set of

rules," Goldblatt says. "For example, Mr. Chen was used to a setting where all actors are available at every rehearsal. But our students had classes, finals and papers." So they compromised. Actors attended all rehearsals, but they could study while waiting to go on stage.

Although intense, added rehearsal time paid off on opening night. "Everybody who worked on the play did such a good job," says Becky Baker who played Lady Montague. "I hope there will be more collaborations like this."

Indeed, there will be. In the spring of 2010, the Theatre Department will take one of its productions to NACTA.

"China has 5,000 years of cultural history," Wang says. "This is a point of pride for Chinese people. It is not only an important national treasure; they feel in their hearts that this is something they should share with the rest of the world." For this spring's production crew, *Romeo and Juliet* was one way of helping their Chinese colleagues achieve this goal. **B**