

DESTINATION
BEIJING

Brave *new face*

Born-again Beijing
Opera captivates the
crowds once more.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DANIEL ALLEN





Caption

Backstage at Beijing's Zhengyici Theatre, young Beijing Opera performer **Chen Yan** takes a break from making up to examine her handiwork. Glossy scarlet lips and ink-lined eyes contrast sharply with a blanched face and magenta cheekbones. With 20 minutes before the evening's performance begins, she prepares to add her crowning glory – the *datou* hairstyle – made with locks, bangs and tresses of real human hair.

"*Datou* means 'big head' in Mandarin Chinese," she explains, breaking out a pot of hair glue. "This hairstyle is supposed to give all the dan (female) roles in Beijing Opera a perfectly oval face. Together with a pointed chin, curved eyebrows and almond-shaped eyes, this is the epitome of female beauty – in the eyes of the Chinese, at least."

An iconic part of Chinese culture, Beijing (or Peking) Opera – known as *jingju* in Mandarin Chinese – is more than just music and singing. Combining drama, dancing, martial arts and acrobatics, it is one of the world's richest and most multi-faceted theatrical art forms. In 2010 it was declared an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

*Nosto nostUga. Ficit
liam aut maximin
rehent fugitibus,
vendam dis sum
nonsedi acillut harchic
tor aut exerit mi*

TAILSPIN YEARS

"Beijing Opera goes back around 200 years," explains **Zhou Jiabin**, director of the first troupe of the Jingju Theatre Company in Beijing. "Most people believe it is rooted in songs and stories from the southeastern Chinese provinces of Hubei and Anhui. After operatic performers from Anhui visited Beijing around 1800, the art form quickly developed during the reigns of Emperor Qianlong (1711–99) and the notorious Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), gradually

becoming popular with and accessible to the masses." Still hugely popular in the early decades of the twentieth century, Beijing Opera then suffered years of decline. It was exploited as a propaganda tool during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when political spin muzzled artistic expression in eight, highly doctored "model operas". Genuine public interest in traditional opera continued to dwindle, as theatres eventually gave way to skyscrapers and malls, and modern entertainment, such as pop, karaoke and computer games, took over.

"At that stage, apart from tourists, pensioners and diehard aficionados, nobody was really interested in Beijing Opera any more," says **Sisi Yang**, marketing supervisor at the Zhengyici Theatre. "Many Chinese felt the stories and values portrayed by operatic performances were irrelevant. Many performers lacked motivation. Beijing Opera was in a bad way."

EVOLVE OR DIE

Across town from the cosy wooden confines of Zhengyici, Beijing's Chang'an Grand Theatre is an operatic venue on a far grander scale. With two hours to go before the start of a gala opera performance, Zhou Jiabin patrols the labyrinth of basement corridors and make up rooms in the theatre basement, meeting, greeting, and finalising the finer points of the evening's star-studded show.

"Quite frankly Beijing Opera was in a posi-

tion where it had to evolve or die," explains Zhou in between hurried mobile phone conversations. "It's all very well for traditionalists to lament change, but there wasn't really any choice. Opera has to move with the times, like all forms of entertainment."

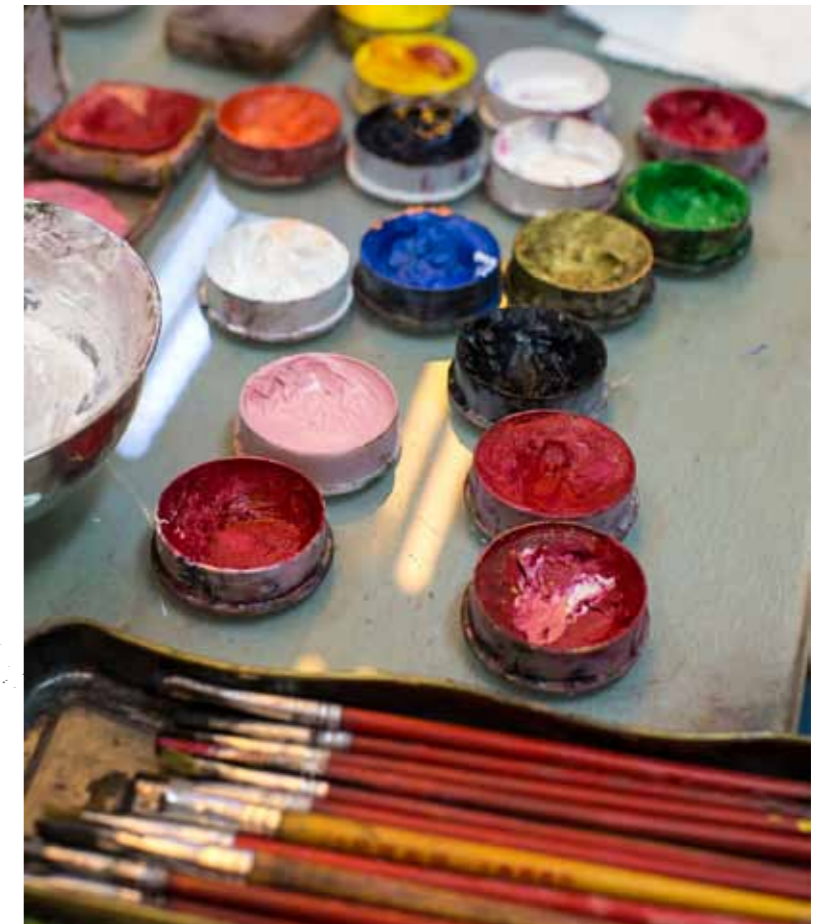
And move with the times Beijing Opera finally has. The government has introduced voluntary opera classes in schools across the capital, theatres have been revamped, and a slew of new operas by innovative playwrights and directors are entertaining an increasingly appreciative public.

FRESH DIRECTIONS

"A lot of Beijing Opera is now heading in a fresh direction," continues Zhou. "There are new stories and new takes on old stories, new performance techniques, technology is playing a part, and sometimes even Western instruments are used. It has rekindled interest. Just look at the recent popularity of *Datang Guifei* ('Royal Concubine Yang of the Tang Dynasty')."

Produced by the son of the late Beijing Opera star **Mei Lanfang**, *Datang Guifei* completely changes the way Chinese opera is presented, replacing the formality of finishing one play before another starts with a completely free-flowing stage show. A 50-strong choir accompanies the lead singers, while traditional Chinese opera instruments give way to oboes, violins and even a piano.

Caption





Caption

“This type of play has really increased Beijing Opera’s appeal,” says Beijinger **Helen Chi**. “To be honest I used to think opera was really boring. The combination of orchestras, dance and modern electronic technology are really pushing the boundaries, though. It’s exciting. There are more and more younger people in audiences.”

ENGLISHMAN IN BEIJING

Perhaps the most telling sign of Beijing Opera’s recent evolution is the sight of a foreigner performing on stage. After falling in love with the art form twenty years ago, **Ghaffar Pourazar** – a Briton of Iranian-Azerbaijani origin – has made it his dual mission to promote Beijing Opera across the world, while simultaneously reinventing it for China’s younger generation at home.

Pourazar’s story is one of dedication and an intrepid voyage into the unknown. After witnessing a Beijing Opera performance in London in 1993, Pourazar became so transfixed that he followed the troupe all the way back to Beijing. Enrolling in the National Academy of Beijing Opera, he studied for four intensive and frequently harrowing years.

“It was a challenging experience, to say the least,” says Pourazar. “There I was, a 32-year-old man train-

OPERA OPTIONS

Jingju Theatre Company Tours (Europe)

pekingopera.eu

Zhengyici Theatre

theatrebeijing.com

International Centre for Beijing Opera
(Ghaffar Pourazar)

beijingopera.info

ing alongside eight-year-old children. Many Chinese looked at me as if I was crazy. Some resented me being there. The pain of the training was unlike anything that I had endured before.”

MICKEY MOUSE MEETS MONKEY KING

Still, Pourazar persevered and truly mastered his art. Today his most popular character remains Sun Wukong, the Monkey King protagonist from the classical Chinese story *Xiyouji* (Journey to the West), while his International Monkey King Troupe performs English-language versions of opera classics around the world. In his operatic adaptations, which have hooked audiences in China and overseas, Pourazar frequently mixes in rap, jazz and rock and roll.

“In my mind, there are two ways to increase the popularity of Beijing Opera,” says Pourazar. “One of them is to find new ways to let the traditional form cross over and be understood by young people. Our innovative techniques include simultaneous translations and use of subtitles, and lectures before and during the performance which explain the plot.

“The second way is to introduce new elements which attract people into theatres,” continues Pourazar. “This could be anything from jazz and blues to characters such as Mickey Mouse. It’s definitely not for the purists, but if it keeps Beijing Opera alive, it serves its purpose. As they’re fond of saying in China, *‘liangyao kukou’*. Good medicine often tastes bitter at first.” ●



BEHIND THE SCENES

Daniel Allen

Based in London and St. Petersburg, award-winning writer and photographer Daniel Allen has journeyed widely across the globe. His work has featured in numerous publications, including the *Guardian* and the *Sunday Times*. In his spare time he likes climbing, curry and Chelsea Football Club.

Caption

