

MALE PARTS FEMALE ROLES

Cross-dressing has been an integral part of Peking Opera from the beginning and remains so today. **Zhang Zixuan** reports.

Yang Lei's thick eyebrows belie his smooth jaw till the Peking Opera performer reveals he shaves before applying makeup, to make sure there is no stubble. After all, stubble just won't do when the 33-year-old goes on stage dressed in dazzling costumes and sings a soprano aria. Yang is one of the nation's young *nan dan* (man who plays a female role), a practice forged at a time when women were forbidden to take the stage. The heyday of *nan dan* was the first half of the 20th century, when Mei Lanfang, Shang Xiaoyun, Cheng Yanqiu and Xun Huiheng — dubbed the "Four Great Dan" — established the four *dan* styles of *mei*, *shang*, *cheng* and *xun*. Bi Guyun, 80, a senior *nan dan* performer, witnessed the boom of this art form in the 1940s and 1950s.

"The four masters were all active at that time. Shows were on every night at more than 10 theaters in Beijing," Bi recalls, saying that Peking Opera was the leading form of entertainment then.

But the "cultural revolution" (1966-1976) dealt a death blow to the opera, and along with it the *nan dan*. Although the 1980s saw a gradual revival, the *nan dan* remained in the shadows with the rise of women performers on the Peking Opera stage, leaving only about 10 male *dan*.

But Yang, who belongs to the *cheng* school, believes the *nan dan* is irreplaceable, even if there are more female performers.

"Every single detail of the *dan* role presumed it would be a man playing this role," Yang says, pointing to the characteristic hand gesture that was designed to make the hand look smaller and softer.

Also, the foot-shaped stilts that male performers walked on in some plays, were meant to imitate women's bound feet.

"More importantly, men have better sounding falsettos given their wider vocal range and also have more stamina," Yang adds.

Mu Yuandi, 28, who started his *nan dan* journey when he was 9 and belongs to the *shang* school, agrees that women cannot cope with the martial arts that distinguishes this style.

"My waist and legs still carry the scars of my injuries," he says.

Hu Wenge, 44, is the only *nan dan* apprentice of 77-year-old Peking Opera master Mei Baijiu — son of the legendary Mei Lanfang.

Hu took to Peking Opera at the rather late age of 34 and therefore had to try even harder to master the repertoire.

"I may have given up but for my teacher's encouragement," Hu says.

The *dan* is the only female role of the five main roles in a Peking Opera show, so the issue of men playing these roles often gives rise to curiosity and questions about their sexual orientation.

Hu, who earned fame as a pop singer dressing

and singing as a woman, is candid about switching to Peking Opera in his quest for more respect from audiences. At the peak of his career as a singer, Chinese society was more conservative than it is now, he explains.

"Peking Opera is a stylized art," says *nan dan* performer Bi. "We don't imitate real women but only present an abstract image, based on classic novels and paintings."

Yang, meanwhile, is offended when asked about his sexual orientation, and insists it is a private matter.

"Onstage and offstage are two separate lives for me," he says.

He also stresses a real man is one who is tolerant and takes responsibility for himself, his family, and society.

Yin Jun, 23, from the *xun* school, is the youngest of the new-generation *nan dan*. An undergraduate student at the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts, he is preparing to enroll for the post-graduate exam.

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YANG LEI
PEKING OPERA PERFORMER



Yang Lei goes through the stages of transformation to play a female role.

ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY



ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY
Actress Wang Peiyu is a master at playing male roles.

The splendor of gender

By SUN LI
CHINA DAILY

Actress Wang Peiyu has an honorable Peking Opera title — contemporary China's first *nu lao sheng* — but she is clearly uncomfortable with it. "Don't get me wrong, I deeply appreciate the recognition of audiences," the 33-year-old artist says of the role that has a female playing a middle-aged or elderly man, respected for his sagacity and wisdom. "I just think the title is not appropriate," she says, pointing out that the addition of *nu* (female) to *lao sheng*

(literally, old man) is an unnecessary emphasis on the gender of the artist. Wang explains that female Peking Opera performers appeared on stage in the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). But since performing troupes then did not allow men and women to mix, the all-women troupes had to have the actresses playing the male roles too. "Toady, the title *nu lao sheng* is really intended to lure audiences to watch cross-dressing actresses," Wang says. Born and raised in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, Wang first studied *pingtan*, a traditional form of storytelling and ballad singing. Encouraged by her uncle, an amateur performer of Peking Opera, Wang began to take to it at 11, and specialized in playing the *lao dan* (old woman). "But I didn't feel right dressing in

the exquisite and colorful clothes of the *lao dan* roles," Wang says, adding she always liked to dress like a boy and play with boys, as a child. It was a veteran *lao sheng* performer, Fan Shiren, who advised her to learn this role, after watching one of her performances. "I was told that I had a natural gift for the *lao sheng* role, who always occupies center stage, while the *lao dan* is merely a supporting role," Wang says. "The desire to be under the spotlight finally won," she says with a smile. Wang credits her talent to scale a rich vocal range that can handle contra alto well and a certain panache, for her success as a *lao sheng*. It was these talents that enabled her to enter Shanghai Academy of Drama

at 14, becoming the first female student to play male roles, admitted since the 1950s. By the time she was 20, Wang had won every Peking Opera competition that she could enter. She was hired by the Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe when she was 22, and three years later became its youngest vice-president. Dismissing the challenges of playing a man, Wang says, "It didn't bother me as I received formal training on how I should raise my hand, where I should look, how I should walk, and at what pitch I should sing. "Everything was strictly formulated for the *lao sheng* role, regardless of gender."

SEE "CENTER STAGE" PAGE 20

Behind the mask

CHARACTERS

DAN (female role)
Hua dan (flirtatious, playful)
Gui men dan (young, married girl)
Dao ma dan (strong woman, female general)
Wu dan (female acrobat)
Lao dan (old woman).

THE HAND SAYS IT ALL
 The pictured hand gestures are characteristic of the *dan* role. (from top) to express joy or excitement, to identify oneself, to refer to someone else and to express salutation.

SHENG (male role)
Lao sheng, a middle-aged or elderly man
Xiao sheng, a young man
Wu sheng, a fighter

CHOU (comic role)
 The character is a wise and funny man usually with a low social status. He could be a **wen chou** or a **wu chou**. The former can read and write well, but the latter can only fight.

JING (painted-face role)
 This refers to the male roles with all kinds of painted-faces to reflect different personalities.

CHANGING TIMES

1772 Emperor Qianlong bans all female opera performers in Beijing.

1780 The "Four Great Anhui Troupes" bring Anhui Opera to Beijing, to celebrate Emperor Qianlong's birthday.

1790

1800

1810

1820 Well-known Hubei province troupes arrive in Beijing around 1796. Peking Opera emerges as a combination of the Anhui and Hubei operas and remains so till 1840.

1830

1840 Peking Opera grows quickly and troupes have star actors.

1850

1860

1870

1880 The opera hits its peak with the emergence of Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu and their innovative touches.

1890

1900

1910

1920

1930 Peking Opera declines. Debates about whether Peking Opera should be revolutionized take place.

1940

1950

1960 Inspired by the "cultural revolution" (1966-1976), Model Opera is born and monopolizes stages.

1970

1980 Peking Opera is edged out by dramas and concerts, while it attempts to modernize further.

1990 *The Fox Cat Substituted for the Crown Prince*, a Peking Opera show set in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), incorporates modern elements.

2000 1996-Present Day: Peking Opera is once again performed in small theaters and becomes more international.

2011

Let me entertain you

By SUN LI
CHINA DAILY

While most TV programs focus on the traditional aspects of Peking Opera, a variety show on CCTV-11 emphasizes entertainment. *Command in the Theater* has been airing since January 2011 and has become the top-rated show on the opera channel. The weekly show, 60 minutes long, features competitions among four guests (mainly young showbiz entertainers) who try to outdo each other in games related to Peking Opera. "Not a single program has ever popularized Peking Opera in the form of playing games that can attract young viewers, our target audience," producer Bu Bing says. "Although Peking Opera is our national artistic treasure, we have to admit not many

people, especially youngsters, appreciate it nowadays" Bu says, adding she doesn't know that much herself about the art form. "To keep Peking Opera from waning, it's important to build a following among the younger generation," she adds. "You won't love a thing unless you see it first, and you won't bother to see it if it doesn't appeal to you."

Since the program's guests and target audience are mostly Peking Opera outsiders, they don't need to be that opera-savvy. For example, in the show's first part, guests will watch a classical piece staged by a young actor/actress, who will ask five questions connected with his or her performance. "The performer may ask guests to pick which phrase appeared in the libretto or query them about such facts as names, time and location," Bu says. "As long as you are attentive, there is no difficulty answering the question correctly."

There are also some misleading elements so answering the question correctly involves some guesswork, even for the best-informed competitors. "The intentionally misleading elements add some fun and I always feel a sense of satisfaction when I learn about the context of a story through the quiz," says Zhang Yuan, a 24-year-old TV series actress who started watching Peking Opera after joining the show. Other sections of the show that arouse Zhang's interest include a contest spotting differences between two versions of a Peking Opera segment. "If it is the usual teach-and-learn style thing, I may not be so interested. But when it comes to a game, I feel more energized," Zhang says.



Colors again symbolize various personalities:

- Red:** Brave, faithful and wise.
- Purple:** Wise, brave and steadfast.
- Black:** Upright and outspoken.
- Blue:** Brave, upright, but obstinate and unruly
- Green:** Chivalrous but with a feisty attitude.
- Yellow:** Valiant military men, or crafty civil officers.
- White:** Insidious and treacherous.
- Gold and silver:** Mysterious monsters or gods.