

ACROBATS

GREAT LEAPS IN EVERY DIRECTION

A famous troupe from Shandong pulls out all the stops as performers create a show that excites a new audience, Chen Nan finds.

Over 10 years ago, Shandong Acrobatic Troupe, one of China's best, was in trouble. Like many traditional art forms of China, acrobatics faced losing audiences, especially the younger generation.

But during the last few years, people have been flocking back to the theaters. The troupe's director, Yao Jianguo, says more than 3,500 shows are held every year — not just domestically but worldwide.

"Acrobatics has to reinvent itself to be alive in the contemporary scene," says Yao, who was born in Jinan, Shandong province, and has been committed to the centuries-old art form since he was 10 years old.

For his troupe, one of the best ways to preserve this iconic part of China's national identity is to combine solid Chinese acrobatic skills with successful Western show formats, which have developed a proven fan base.

The troupe will stage a new production, titled *China Goes Pop!*, which blends Broadway-style music, dance, Chinese acrobatics and multimedia technology.

To produce the show, the troupe cooperated with China Arts and Entertainment Group, the first large-scale state-level arts and entertainment association founded in 2004 under China's Ministry of Culture, and Broadway Asia Company, whose productions include Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Sound of Music* and DreamWorks' *Madagascar Live*.

The show will make its debut in Beijing's Tianqiao Performing Arts Center over Aug 5-7.

The Shandong troupe was founded in 1959. Based in Jinan, it has won three top Golden Clown awards at the International Circus Festival of Monte Carlo.

With around 150 performers, the troupe is one of the top five among China's nearly



The Shandong Acrobatic Troupe has toured around the world and won three top Golden Clown awards at the International Circus Festival of Monte Carlo. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Performers rehearse for *China Goes Pop!*, the latest production by Shandong Acrobatic Troupe.

If you go

7:30pm, Aug 5 to 7.
Tianqiao Performing Arts Center, 9 Tianqiao South Street, Xicheng district, Beijing. 400-635-3355

200 professional acrobatic troupes. Since 2008, it has been collaborating with Western performing arts companies, such as the established Montreal company Cirque du Soleil.

In 2012, nine performers of the troupe performed at the Kodak Theater during the Academy Awards for the first

time. Last December, the troupe staged a traditional Chinese drum dance acrobatic performance in Johannesburg as part of the closing ceremony of the "Year of China" in South Africa.

"Chinese acrobatic shows put an emphasis on agility, power and balance. We maintain our tradition while learning that storytelling and the portrayal of roles are also crucial to attract audiences besides colorful acrobatics and gravity-defying stunts," says Yao.

China Goes Pop! tells the story of a heartbroken young talented artist and his pursuit of true love.

Besides practicing traditional Chinese acrobatic acts,

such as contortions and cycling, 11 actors from the troupe dance and perform in Broadway style.

Meng Yan, a 29-year-old performer of the troupe, plays the second female lead in the show.

Born in Jinan and studying acrobatics since she was 10, Meng has performed in *Dr. Lion*, a touring production by Cirque du Soleil, since 2010.

"It's quite a challenge to perform in a Western production. In Chinese acrobatic shows, we focus on our moves but in the Western production, we portray the roles with emotions and interact with the audiences," says Meng.

Marc Routh, co-founder of Broadway Asia Company and

a four-time Tony Award-winning producer, says: "Chinese acrobats are some of the hardest-working performers in the world. They train from a very young age and yet are very willing and excited to take on the additional challenges that this show requires."

As the producer of *China Goes Pop!*, he says that his company has been working in Asia for 20 years — bringing shows to Asia, creating shows specifically for the Asian market, and creating Asian shows to export to the world market.

"We have been working on the show (*China Goes Pop!*) for 18 months. The performers have trained to add dance, acting and physical comedy skills to their acrobatic skills, which have been developed both during our rehearsal and workshop periods and during the time between these rehearsals," he says.

Routh also says that by adding elements of Broadway-style storytelling as well as dance, martial arts, and physical comedy and refreshing them with contemporary pop music and exciting visuals, his team hopes to succeed in putting a spotlight on acrobatics that will appeal to a younger audience worldwide.

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Online
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ON STAGE



War Horse, a Sino-UK coproduction, will be staged in Beijing this summer. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

War Horse coming back to Beijing

By CHEN NAN

The Chinese version of the drama *War Horse* will return to Beijing from Friday to Aug 14.

A collaboration between UK's National Theatre and the National Theater of China, the hit stage production was first performed in Beijing last fall and then toured around China, going to Shanghai, Guangzhou and Tianjin.

Staged nearly 200 times and attracting more than 200,000 viewers, the production has been acclaimed as a phenomenon by critics and audiences.

Zhou Yuyuan, president of the National Theater of China, says the production will celebrate its 200th show in Beijing this summer.

"The show caters to people of different ages and is one of the most well-received productions," says Zhou.

Besides theater stages, the Chinese version of the drama was staged as part of the closing ceremony of the "Year of China" in South Africa in December 2015 and was featured at CCTV's Spring Festival Gala, one of the most watched TV shows in the country.

"With *War Horse*, we are not simply coproducing a play. By working with the National Theater of Britain for around three years, we have learned a great deal about staging techniques, theater management and actor training," says Zhou.

Based on Michael Morpurgo's 1982 novel, *War Horse* has proved to be the British theater's most successful play.

It was first performed by the National Theatre at the Olivier Theatre in London in 2007 and had a seven-year run in the West End, toured 10 countries and was seen by more

than 7 million people in the world.

The Hollywood filmmaker Steven Spielberg turned the World War I story about an English farm boy Albert and his beloved horse Joey into a movie of the same title in 2011. It became a box-office success and was nominated for six Oscars, including best picture.

Li Dong, a producer with the National Theater of China, says he first watched the play at the West End in August 2011 and was so impressed that he decided to bring it to China.

One of the biggest challenges for anyone putting on the play is coming to grips with the life-size horse puppet created for it by the Handspring Puppet Company of South Africa. It takes three actors to manipulate the 2.4-meter-tall horse, weighing 54 kilograms.

At performances in Beijing last year, many schoolchildren watched the drama and went backstage to find out about the production, Zhou says.

This summer, more children will be invited to join in the training of puppeteers, who manipulate the "horses."

If you go

2 pm and 7:30 pm, Friday, Saturday, Aug 6 and Aug 13.
7:30 pm, Sunday, Aug 5, 7, 12 and 14.
National Theater of China, 277 Guang'anmenwai Street, Xicheng district, Beijing. 400-610-3721.

Online
Watch the video by scanning the code.

MUSIC

Beyonce top nominee for MTV's awards

By AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE in New York

Beyonce on Tuesday led nominations for the MTV Video Music Awards as she basked in acclaim for her film-album *Lemonade*.

The pop diva was in the running for 11 awards at MTV's annual extravaganza, which will take place on Aug 28 in New York's Madison Square Garden, a shift from the more usual venue in Los Angeles.

Adele came in second with eight nominations.

All but seven were for the chart-topping English balladeer's *Hello*, which with more than 1.6 billion views is the fifth-most-watched video on YouTube.

Hello, filmed by the Canadian director Xavier Dolan, shows Adele on the phone with a younger version of herself and was the first music video created for the high-resolution ImaX format.

Hello was in the running for video of the year against Beyonce's *Formation*, the most overtly political work of the pop diva's career as she aligned herself with the Black Lives Matter protest movement.



Beyonce grabs 11 nominations for the MTV awards. AFP

Shot in New Orleans, *Formation* marked a shift in the southern city's bounce hip-hop scene.

Formation was her first single off her album *Lemonade*, which she released in April to accompany a film that she made for HBO.

SILK ROAD LEGEND

Princess painting becomes new dance show

By CHEN NAN

Legends say that a Chinese princess secretly took the silk-making technology out of the country to her husband, the king of ancient Khotan.

The story is elaborated in a woodcut painting that is around 1,400 years old. It's known as the *Legend of the Silk Princess* and it is now in the British Museum after being found in a Buddhist shrine in modern-day Hotan, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

The story has been adapted into a dance drama *Silk Princess* by the Xi'an Song and Dance Ensemble, which premiered in Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi province, in March.

The dance drama will be staged at the National Center



Silk Road Princess combines Chinese folk dance and contemporary dance. LIU HAIDONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

for the Performing Arts in Beijing this weekend.

"We considered different art forms to tell the story of the Silk Princess, and dance drama, which breaks the bar-

rier of language, is the most suitable form," says the director Zuo Qing.

This was just one of many stories from the Silk Road, where silk and other goods

If you go

7:30 pm, Saturday and Sunday, National Center for the Performing Arts, 2 West Chang'an Avenue, Xicheng district, Beijing. 010-6655-0000.

Online
Watch the video by scanning the code.

were traded along this ancient route that connected China with Europe.

Zuo, a Shaanxi native who has directed many national galas, hopes to use the legend

to do more than just explain how the secrets of silk production, a Chinese monopoly for thousands of years, spread along the ancient trade route. He's also eager to introduce audiences to the lively characters who were the most important part of the Silk Road.

According to Fang Ming, the manager of the ensemble, preparations for *Silk Princess* took three years. The ensemble was founded in 1959 and is known for presenting stage productions with distinctive Shaanxi local culture.

The production team designed the stage set with elements from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907). The dance drama combines traditional Chinese folk dance and contemporary dance.