

LIFE



# Tale of intrigue and love in classic opera

Chinese-Italian production of *Tosca* three years in making, **Chen Nan** reports.

“She is passionate, devoted, feisty and jealous. She is a lot of different women,” said Monica Zanettin, an Italian soprano.

She was describing the role she plays in *Tosca*, an opera in three acts by master Italian composer Giacomo Puccini. The role is that of Floria Tosca, a Roman opera star. It will be Zanettin’s debut performance at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing.

From Tuesday to June 18, the opera will feature Chinese and Italian performers at the NCPA.

“Any woman can see herself in the role. And every soprano can bring a part or parts of herself to the role,” she said recently at the performing arts center.

With a combination of love, lust and murder, Puccini’s *Tosca*, which premiered in Rome in 1900, is one of the world’s most loved and most performed operas.

It tells the story of opera singer Tosca, who is deeply in love with an artist, Mario Cavaradossi. The artist hides an escaped political prisoner named Angelotti. When they are arrested, Scarpia, the chief of police, wants to execute Cavaradossi and the escapee he has hidden.

Tosca makes a deal with Scarpia to give herself to him to save her lover. After Scarpia promises to conduct a fake execution, Tosca stabs him before he can claim his part of the deal. However, Cavaradossi is actually executed. Scarpia has intended to trick her all along. In despair, Tosca takes her own life.

Zanettin, who was born in Treviso, Italy, and now lives in Venice, has played the role of Tosca many times. “It’s a tragedy but very romantic,” she said, calling the role one of her favorites and “a dream role for every soprano.”

“It’s not just about the pursuit of voice but also about acting, since she is a very complicated woman,” Zanettin said.

The opera is also a longtime favorite thanks to its stunning arias, such as *Vissi d’arte* (I Lived for Art), sung by Tosca at a heartbreaking moment when Scarpia, with Cavaradossi as his hostage, poses his ultimatum to her. Also impressive is *E lucevan le stelle* (And the Stars Were Shining), when Cavaradossi is told that he has an hour left to live and the only thing on his mind is Tosca, so he writes a letter to her and sings the aria.

Alessandra Panzavolta, the opera’s director, said in a video greeting to Chinese opera aficionados that the presentation, lighting and props by set designer William Orlandi will help make the version of the classic opera more updated and recognizable than the usual presentations,



“Collaborations between multiple art institutions are very important and have become a new trend for Chinese artists. We share resources and make the best use of them.”

**Zhao Tiechun,**  
vice-president of the NCPA



**From top:** Italian soprano Monica Zanettin and baritone Ambrogio Maestri rehearse for the opera *Tosca* at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing on May 29; Zanettin and Maestri share a humorous moment at a news conference at the NCPA; Chinese tenor Han Peng, who plays the role of Cavaradossi in the opera, during rehearsal with Zanettin; conductor Xu Zhong speaks at the news conference.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

which rely on historical scenes mirroring June 1800, shortly after the French Revolution.

Soprano Sun Xiuwei also will take to the stage to play the role of Tosca. In 2011, when the NCPA produced its own version of *Tosca*, she took on the role, Sun said, adding that she has played in 15 opera productions by the NCPA.

“Through working with Panzavolta, who is a female director, I have gained a detailed understanding about the role. Panzavolta brought a woman’s perspective to the opera, which is much deeper and sensitive,” Sun said. “The character herself is an opera singer, just like me, allowing me to get closer to her and be myself in some parts.”

Baritone Ambrogio Maestri will play the role of Scarpia. He has portrayed that character many times, such as at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan.

“I am very happy to be an Italian appearing in an Italian opera in China. Though I have performed at many theaters in Europe and the United States, this is the first time that I will perform at the NCPA,” Maestri said.

Chinese tenors Han Peng and Wang Cong will also play the role of Cavaradossi and baritone Zhang Yang will also play Scarpia, making the production a joint effort between Italian and Chinese performers.

The China NCPA Orchestra and China NCPA Chorus will perform under the baton of conductor Xu Zhong, who is the director of Shanghai Opera House.

The presentation of *Tosca* has been a cooperative effort of the NCPA, Shanghai Opera House and Shaanxi Opera House, according to Zhao Tiechun, vice-president of the NCPA. The opera was streamed online in December 2022 by the NCPA as part of the celebration of the venue’s 15th birthday and was viewed over 20 million times.

From Feb 24 to 26, the opera premiered at Shanghai Opera House, and in July, it will be presented at Shaanxi Opera House in Xi’an.

“Our collaborations with art institutions from home and abroad have never stopped, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. We started to prepare for *Tosca* over three years ago,” Zhao said. “Collaborations between multiple art institutions are very important and have become a new trend for Chinese artists. We share resources and make the best use of them. It also benefits the audiences of different parts of the country.”

Contact the writer at [chenman@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:chenman@chinadaily.com.cn)

## Artist in wheelchair inspires others facing challenges

GUIYANG — Ling Runzhi, 41, who has used a wheelchair ever since she was 6, listens to an online class about modern Chinese landscape painting with rapt attention.

With a few deft strokes of her paintbrush, Ling skillfully brings to life a black-and-white work of art, adorned with delicate textures and captivating contrasts. Despite the loss of sensation in her lower body from congenital spina bifida, this talented artist refuses to let her physical limitations hinder her creativity.

Ling’s art has not only helped her fulfill her own dreams but also offered a window to a broader world for others like her. Through her art, she helps them experience the beauty and wonders of the world on a broader scale.

“There was once a dark phase in my life. My parents were busy with farmwork and my sisters were at school, so I had to stay at home by myself. Constant loneliness and fear were my only companions,” said Ling, who is from the village of Bianshan in Guiyang, capital of Guizhou province.

During that time, without access to a wheelchair, Ling resorted to sitting on a simple wooden upright chair at home. To maneuver, she would painstakingly edge the chair forward, which often resulted in her hands and legs getting scraped and bruised.

Guided by a supportive sister, Ling learned to read characters. Her sister also purchased a collection of ancient paintings by Chinese women, which helped inspire Ling. “I started to replicate the paintings myself. Books and the world of painting soon dispelled my gloom,” she said.

In 2003, captivated by the intricate and exquisite patterns of embroidery, a signature craft in Guizhou, Ling began to explore the art of conveying traditional elements of Chinese landscape paintings through stitchwork.

With a keen eye for detail, Ling delved into the techniques of presenting elements such as flowers, birds, insects and fish in her needlework, adding a new dimension to her artistic repertoire.

She later went on to hone her skills by participating in several competitions for the handicapped in Guiyang, winning more than 40 awards. The growing recognition of Ling’s art has

not only bolstered her confidence but also brought a renewed sense of hope and joy to her life.

During her pursuit of a deeper understanding of modern Chinese landscape painting, Ling came to know Fang Guocheng, a painter from Heilongjiang province who is also paralyzed, in her case as the result of a car crash.

“Through meaningful online interactions, I established profound connections with more and more people who faced similar situations. As I freely shared my own learning and experience with these people, I embarked on a remarkable journey of mutual enrichment,” she said.

Since then, Ling decided to create more painting and embroidery to capture the vibrancy and beauty of the world for people who find themselves challenged by adversity, particularly those who are paralyzed.

May 21 marked China’s 33rd national day of assisting disabled persons. This year’s goal is to improve social security programs and services for persons with disabilities and promote the all-around development of their undertakings.

“After my embroidery and paintings were exhibited in Guiyang, many people with disabilities became familiar with my personal experience, which inspired them to take up art and enrich their own lives through traditional handicrafts,” Ling said.

Her care and concern for others and unwavering passion for artistic expression have instilled within her a new dream of setting up her own studio. Through this endeavor, Ling aspires to cultivate an increased interest in Chinese traditional culture and foster the inheritance of valuable cultural heritages.

Adorning Ling’s window ledge is a flourishing planting of green copper coin grass, nurtured in a swanlike flowerpot meticulously carved by Ling herself from a humble plastic box. The grass serves as a reminder of the resilient and unwavering strength inherent in life.

“Every single plant and its growth represent power and hope in our life. As long as we live, we must strive to grow like plants, which will surely lead to favorable turns someday,” Ling said.

XINHUA



Ling Runzhi (top), an embroidery artist and painter in the village of Bianshan in Guiyang, capital of Guizhou province, has won more than 40 awards for her artworks (above) in several competitions in the city. SCREENSHOTS FROM XINHUA VIDEO