CULTURE

Directing Ibsen in rural China

The opening production of Huichang Theatre Season reimagines *Hedda Gabler* through modern staging, **Bai Shuhao** reports in Huichang, Jiangxi.

Before entering the theater, audience members receive a brief warning: there will be two gunshots.

When the lights come up, the guns are already present. Tucked inside an elegantly tailored overcoat hanging above the stage, they remain visible reminders of a fate waiting to unfold. As relationships unravel and tensions mount, the pistols hover over the production like a Greek chorus of doom — silent, yet inescapable.

This year's opening production of Huichang Theatre Season 004 is *Hedda Gabler*, Henrik Ibsen's 1891 masterpiece, directed by American theater director Travis Preston.

The story remains familiar. Hedda, the daughter of a military general, finds herself trapped in a suffocating marriage to the uninspiring scholar George Tesman. When her former lover, Ejlert Lovborg, reappears with a manuscript that promises to secure his future, Hedda's jealousy and desire for control set a tragedy in motion. She destroys the manuscript, encourages him toward a "beautiful" death using one of her late father's pistols, and ultimately becomes ensnared by Judge Brack, who discovers her role in the affair. Cornered and humiliated, she turns the second pistol on herself.

Preston, artistic director of the CalArts Center for New Performance and a longtime interpreter of Ibsen, has little interest in reproducing the realist drawing-room drama audiences might expect.

At the beginning of the performance, Hedda lies inside a giant gilded picture frame like a stranded mermaid. Nearby hangs her father's overcoat. Suspended above the stage is a piano. Tesman and his aunt chatter about domestic trivialities in which Hedda has little interest. At one point, Tesman notices the dust gathering on the old piano and remarks that, if they had the money, he would buy Hedda a new one.

"The frame, the coat, and the piano are all things her father left behind," Preston says. "Not just the objects, but the name Gabler itself. She remains her father's daughter."

By the final scene, Hedda has climbed onto the piano wearing her father's coat. When she raises the pistol, Preston sees the act as more than suicide.

"She kills herself, but she also kills her father, and she kills the child she refuses to acknowledge."

Preston does not excuse Hedda's cruelty. She manipulates, destroys, and deceives. Yet he views her as a tragic hero.

"She does terrible things, and she's deeply contradictory, but society has always judged women differently. Marriage is harder for women. The expectations placed on them are different from those placed on men. I think that's still true today."

The production reinforces those themes through distinctly contemporary theatrical devices. Actors sometimes speak into handheld microphones as if whispering private confessions. At other moments, cameras zoom in on performers and project their faces across the stage. The result is a world of surveillance and manipulation, where power operates through watching and being watched.

The production itself emerged from an unusually immersive process.

Preston spent two months living in Huichang, Jiangxi province, a quiet riverside county that has become increasingly known for its ambitious efforts to establish itself as a center for theater. Actor recruitment began last December, followed by rehearsals and workshops in the spring. The cast and creative team lived together as part of the town's artist residency program.

For Preston, who does not speak Mandarin, the undertaking initially felt risky.

"In a sense, it was a gamble," he says.

However, he struggles to think of another place in the world that offers artists such a concentrated environment for creation, particularly at a time when funding for the arts is shrinking globally.

Each day, he walked along the river that runs beside the theater village.

"Sometimes I'd walk into town, sometimes through the fields, sometimes to a temple. It connected me more deeply to the project. We were in a truly supportive environment, and all the actors were living here together."

Rather than beginning with a fixed interpretation of the text, Preston developed scenes collaboratively with the cast.

"My definition of directing is creating a context in which other people can be creative," he says. "My job is simply to decide what belongs and what doesn't."

Fei Baijun, who plays Judge Brack, describes the process as liberating.

"He encouraged us not to worry about how other actors were performing. 'Just follow your instincts'," Fei says.

The cast reflects the festival's broader blending of professional and local traditions. Among them is a practitioner of Jiangxi's tea-picking opera, who plays Julle, Tesman's aunt. The moment she begins speaking, local audiences recognize her distinctive southern accent. Preston cannot grasp those linguistic nuances himself.

"That's wonderful. The audience immediately understands that she comes from a different world than Hedda. And she's a wonderful performer."

The same cultural layering appears in the costumes. Long Chinese gowns and *qipao* (traditional dresses) share the stage with Western suits and capes. Preston readily acknowledges one influence: his admiration for the elegance of 1930s Shanghai. But the costumes also serve a social function. Tesman, dressed in traditional attire, embodies continuity and convention; Lovborg, in a Western suit, represents modernity and the future.

Preston resists framing such choices as a contrast between the East and the West.

"I don't think there's that much separation anymore. There have been so many years of mutual influence. Everything is mixed."

That sentiment may also describe Huichang itself. Here, a 19th-century Norwegian drama directed by an American is staged in a rural Chinese county and watched by audiences arriving from Shanghai, Taipei, and San Francisco.

Playwright and director Stan Lai, one of the founders of Huichang Theatre Village, says *Hedda Gabler* was chosen as the festival's opening production for two reasons: Ibsen remains accessible to broad audiences, and this version of the play was created in Huichang itself.

Lai's connection to the town spans continents. His father was born in Huichang; Lai was born in the United States and raised in Taiwan. He first visited his ancestral hometown in the 1990s after receiving a family letter. Since 2015, he has regularly returned to present work there. In 2024, he and his collaborators formally launched the theater season, which this year features nearly 30 productions and roughly 400 performances.

For many Chinese audiences, Ibsen is still best known for *A Doll's House*. In 1924, writer Lu Xun delivered his famous lecture "What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?" using Nora's departure to critique the constraints of Chinese society.

Preston sees a similar radicalism in Ibsen.

"Nora doesn't simply leave her house," he says. "She leaves an entire civilization.

"The slam of the door isn't just a woman leaving home. It's Ibsen closing the door on Western civilization."

That capacity to challenge social structures, he believes, explains why Ibsen continues to resonate in China.

Among the works he would most like to introduce to Western audiences is Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman*, particularly its recurring image of barking dogs — a metaphor, he says, for a society consuming its own kind.

The connection is not as unlikely as it may seem, but in Huichang, the conversation between Ibsen and Lu Xun continues to find new meanings for audiences from this rural town.

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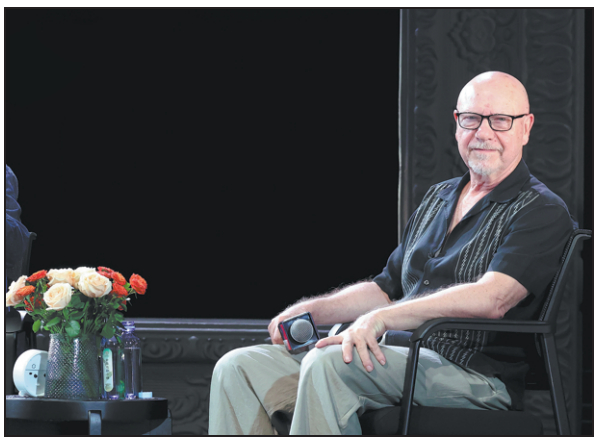
Online
Scan the code to watch the video.



Top: Travis Preston, director of *Hedda Gabler* and artistic director of the CalArts Center for New Performance, has staged numerous works by Henrik Ibsen. **Left:** Hedda (played by Jin Jing) points a camera at Taya (played by Lu Hongzhu), asserting her power and control over her. **Far left:** Judge Brack (played by Fei Baijun) stands beside the long coat inherited from Hedda's father, with two pistols hanging from it. **Above:** Dusk falls over Huichang Theatre Village.
PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Viral Monkey King performer expands career beyond the zoo

By XING WEN
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The Monkey King of *Journey to the West* is a rebel who once crushed heaven's army.

The "Monkey King" of the Changchun Zoological and Botanical Park in Changchun, Jilin province, complains about dry snacks while trapped under a fake mountain.

Wang Qingfeng, 27, better known by his down-to-earth stage name Tie Zhu, plays the Monkey King — one who doesn't fight.

Dressed in a silicone mask and a red-and-yellow costume, he spins a red handkerchief, gets fed by tourists, and delivers stand-up-style banter from inside his enclosure.

His performances have made him a national sensation, with more than 4.6 million followers on Douyin and crowds of tourists traveling across China just to be entertained by him at the local zoo.

At 11, Wang was sent by his father, a devoted *errenzhuan* fan, to an art school to learn the traditional folk song and dance art form popular in Northeast China. He soon won top prizes in children's competitions and earned spots on television, becoming the pride of his home village. But 2011 brought a string of setbacks: his father died in a traffic accident, and his house burned down.

"The *errenzhuan* red handkerchief is the only thing my father left me," he recalls.

Back at the art school, he threw himself into intense practice, using it as a way to catch his breath amid the pain.

"Maybe that's why I improved faster and became more motivated than others," he says.

Wang later gained admission to Jilin University of the Arts.

In 2023, the Changchun Zoological and Botanical Park was hiring actors for a *Journey to the West*-themed show.

A fan of the classic novel, Wang applied for the position.

He performed a series of somersaults in front of the interviewers to demonstrate his monkey-style kung fu skills and won the role.

The following year, clips of him hilariously complaining that the snacks tourists fed him were too dry went viral on Chinese social media.

More people began to notice the monkey-style performance skills he brought to the character, and they started to follow his antics.

Left: Wang Qingfeng, professionally known by his stage name Tie Zhu, plays the Monkey King in his debut appearance on the reality show *Memories Beyond Horizon*. **Right:** Wang, a zoo employee, is striving for a bigger stage. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

After rising to fame, he actively participated in livestreams, variety shows and cultural events to promote tourism in Changchun and Jilin province at large.

Most of the time, however, he stayed in his monkey persona.

Recently, on season four of the reality show *Memories Beyond Horizon*, he got to take off his silicone mask and Monkey King costume to portray different roles.

The show gathers young actors to re-create classic film and television scenes under the instruction of veteran practitioners from the film industry.

Wang says that performing with a mask on gives him a comfort zone, where he has a fixed performance formula with references for expressions, body language and tone.

But without the mask, there is nowhere to hide.

"The micro-expressions on my face and emotions are all exposed. Every stray thought, every slightly off move, is magnified by the camera."

Having spent years performing stylized monkey character performances and getting used to that comfort zone, he admits that suddenly having to abandon all the tricks, step into a stranger's inner world and express genuine joy and anger, is a completely new challenge for him.

In his first impromptu test, he was asked to perform a scene in which the Monkey King finishes work, takes off his makeup and makes a video call with his mother.

His rich, layered five-minute performance moved the mentors to tears, including A-listers Liu Tao and Hao Lei.

"That test gave me a huge boost in confidence. In that performance, I was completely immersed in the character. I used a natural, understated approach to portray the emotions and story of an ordinary person," Wang says.

"After receiving praise from the mentors, that performance helped me break through my psychological barriers. I am no longer bound by the label I have been stuck with, and it has strengthened my resolve to cross over into film and television acting."

He says the reality show taught him that acting for the camera values subtlety, naturalness, and a lifelike quality, which is completely different from the exaggerated, stylized approach he had been practicing before.

He also learned that acting is about collaboration — listening to your partner, supporting each other, and blending into the scene, rather than performing alone.

This fresh experience made him hope that in the future, he could move beyond his current image by refining his screen-acting skills and taking on more roles, evolving from an opera actor into a versatile performer.

"I also want to give back to my hometown's cultural scene and inspire young people to carry forward traditional performing arts," Wang adds.