

AND...

PRESS CONFERENCE with Meng Jinghui,
July 8 at 11:00, cour du Cloître Saint-Louis

THOUGHT WORKSHOP with Meng Jinghui
Contemporary Chinese theatre and its directors: a new "avant-garde"?
July 15 at 14:30, site Louis Pasteur Supramuros - Avignon Université

ELECTRONIC GLASSES   

Personalised service of French and English surtitles from July 10 to 19

Other shows with personalised surtitles on electronic glasses :
Architecture (French and English), *Love Triumphant* (French and English),
Points of no return [Quais de Seine] (English),
We, Europe, Feast of the peoples (English et Polish)

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- October 2 and 3, 2019, St.Petersburg State Budget Cultural Institution
« Theatre Festival Baltic House » (Russia)
- 2019/2020, tour in China

茶馆 - TEAHOUSE

"Be careful not to speak of affairs of state!"

On the stage, a huge circular and metallic structure symbolising a Beijing teahouse reveals a microcosm where people of diverse social backgrounds come to mingle. A dialogue between three periods and three generations, struggling against the assault of time, revealing the upheavals that have affected Chinese society and the immutability of human nature. The wheel of fortune turns one way, then the other, as we stand in the wake of human destinies. Time passes, power changes hands, and the teahouse alone endures. Between humour and tragedy, the owner and his customers share their struggles and hopes to counter corruption and oppression in a great show of humanity. Accompanied by live electro-rock music, Jinghui Meng adapts this great classic of Chinese theatre to the excesses and rhythm of the modern world in a larger cultural context, making it resonate with other humanist and social texts. A poetic and exhilarating journey in which the artistic gesture is never far from the political.

MENG JINGHUI

Born in 1965 in Changhun, Meng Jinghui studied direction at the Central Academy of Drama in China. In 1997, he founded the Meng Theatre Studio, and is also the director of the Beehive Theatre in Beijing. He also serves as artistic director of several festivals in China and has directed several films. A pioneer of avant-garde theatre, he has been recognised since the 1990s for his political, creative, funny, and ironic adaptations of classic (Samuel Beckett, Dario Fo, Eugène Ionesco, Tang Xianzu) and contemporary plays (*Rhinoceros in Love*, *I love XXX*) alike. His shows have been performed throughout the world.

LAO SHE

Born in 1899, Lao She, the writer of the "little people of Beijing," is famous for his many remarkable novels, poems, and plays. He taught in London and in the United States before coming back to China in 1949 to serve the communist regime. One of his most important works, *The Teahouse*, was published in 1956. He was one of the first victims of the Cultural Revolution and died in 1966, officially committing suicide by drowning.

73rd
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OPÉRA CONFLUENCE

INTERVIEW WITH MENG JINGHUI

For this adaptation of Lao She's classic *Teahouse*, you worked with German dramatist Sebastian Kaiser and chose Chinese actors who are also, for some of them, theatre or cinema directors. How did you work with such a unique team?

Meng Jinghui : We first got together without talking about the play. We just talked about current events and social questions, and discussed the idea of collective identity. We talked about our personal anxieties and our everyday material preoccupations. Then we started reading the play, cutting it up and reorganising it, leaving aside the things that didn't resonate with us. At the same time, with the support of music, dance, or contemporary installations, we started improvising and developed a fragmented and messy dramatic structure, to the point that it spun a little out of control. We combined the frenetic performances of the actors to express what we wanted to say, also using concrete methods to support the meaning of some scenes. The ten days leading up to the premiere were very important and exciting. Every day came with its share of successes and failures. Artists and actors who work with me are used to creating this way.

You wanted to transpose the play, written in 1956. What did you want to shine a light on in Lao She's writing, with its popular language, seemingly simple and familiar, but in fact exquisitely precise?

I chose an expressionist style full of contrasts, combining surrealistic visuals with an effect of spontaneous improvisation. I hope in that way to make the dialogue at once sharp and poetic, and to show the division between body and mind. Lao She's writing is clear, fluid, natural, and without flourish, but what's most important is the humour that always runs through it. Lao She's first works were actually full of poetic emotion. During rehearsals with the actors, I realised we could add more texts to the show, to create an effect of montage and make the simple, refined writing even more complex and deep. Onstage, I want the audience to see not only the actors under the lights, but also the myriad shadows, distinct or blurry, that they cast. Shadows are dark, but I think they're beautiful. We can use humour to enter the shadows, to inject comedy into tragedy, to replace cruelty by the absurd and to express our powerlessness against the passage of time.

***Teahouse* is a rich gallery of characters in which almost all human archetypes are represented. The structure of the play, with three different time periods, echoes the realities and upheavals of Chinese society. What characters were you most interested in, and how did you place them within this chronology?**

Wang Lifa, Fourth Elder Chang, and Qin Zhongyi are three roles which represent the complex mentality of Chinese society. They're at once individual and universal. The flow of life never ceases to make them look tiny when compared to the weight of History. Their lives end in hunger and madness, revolution and dreams, struggle and compromise, contempt and hope. Life is a wheel which never stops spinning. Time, love, and anger are all entangled in the tumult and the silence of humans. Zhang Wu, our scenographer, once told me: a circle has neither beginning nor end. It's the same for time and for people.

The wheel turning forward, and the one turning backward, seem to symbolise progress, but also the reactionary forces at work within man. In my direction of *Teahouse*, the characters on the stage don't change between the beginning and the end of the play. Their personality, their impulsiveness, their thoughts, their confusion, their indulgence, their hope, none of that changes. Three periods, three maelstroms, three possibilities are visible onstage thanks to a crosswise cut. I've come to believe that everything that happens in the teahouse is a dream. And the dream is the only reality, that is, an authentic and disinhibited reality.

One sentence can be heard throughout Lao She's play: "Be careful not to speak of affairs of state!" The posters for the play show faces with a finger on their lips. Do you think the artistic gesture is inherently political?

There are a lot of things in China that can be understood but cannot be said. Putting a finger on your lips can mean keeping silent out of fear, but it can also mean having a word on the tip of your tongue. Politics is always present in artistic creation, but its presence can be heavy, relaxed, urgent, or distant. We just pretend not to see it.

You have Lao She's text enter into a dialogue with others by Fyodor Dostoevsky or Bertolt Brecht, authors who also explored the human condition and the question of free will. Is that a way for you to talk about the political and social problems of China, or is it a larger reflection on our societies in general and on human condition? Do you think theatre has a social responsibility?

When I was young, in the 1980s, Chinese culture was influenced in a direct, global, and deep way by culture and art from the West. Our education told us to turn our hearts towards our country and our eyes towards the world. Artists of my generation working in theatre aspire to represent in their work a form of humanism, a heroic spirit of freedom and romantic idealism. I think that what artists manage to express is the clash between antagonistic sentiments which exist beyond reality, beyond any specific time or space. Theatre can't change society, but it can change people. I also work with contemporary references, and references to other artistic fields, here with rock and electro band Nova Heart. I like this sensation of a free, brutal music onstage. In a way, live music is necessary. Nova Heart is a young band, dynamic and communicative; I need that. I see music not only as the external envelope of the stage, but also as one of its actual organs.

You like to work with young actors. What does your "experimental" approach to theatre provide compared to more classical training?

I see avant-garde experimentation not only as a constant movement of advancement and exploration, but as proof that one's still young. To me, experimentation is the aesthetic movement of a never-ending youth: enthusiasm, ideals, vigour, chaos, and lack of restraint. Silence is a terrible thing, and the silence of youth is even worse.

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Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz,
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and into English by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach