

Kung Fu Theatre

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Beijing Opera comes to Seattle. In its first performance in Seattle, theatre company StrangeCandy presents its original blend of comic and dramatic scenes, together with Chinese music, dance, and acrobatics, in "Kung Fu Theatre: Tales from the Beijing Opera."

StrangeCandy Artistic Director Merriane Moore describes her company's adaptations of Beijing Opera stories as accessible to a wide range of American audiences. "I think people are surprised that it's so easy to understand and that the humor is so international," Moore says.

StrangeCandy tours primarily in the United States, and Moore is American, so the performances reflect those roots.

"My intention is not to replicate the Beijing Opera for American audiences, but to find where the stories and style of Chinese theatre can be interesting and meaningful for American audiences," she says.

"I feel that, being American, I should keep in mind my background and not try to erase it or pretend that I'm Chinese."

Moore didn't encounter Beijing Opera until she had already graduated from UCLA with a degree in theatre. "The Beijing Opera I saw in Taiwan seemed very remote," Moore says, and pursuing education in this dramatic form in Taiwan did not seem feasible.

"It wasn't until I saw Beijing Opera in Beijing that I began to be seriously interested in studying. That was 1988." But Moore's path was neither direct nor easy.

"There was no clear template to follow and most people, whether western or Chinese, were a bit mystified by my determination to learn something so obscure," Moore says.

"The Beijing Opera School was not open to foreigners so I enrolled at the

Central Academy of Drama, which had a Beijing Opera program for foreigners," Moore says. "This program was mainly academic and therefore not as satisfying."

Only after the Beijing Opera School began accepting Americans in 1990 did Moore begin classes there. But without a scholarship, her initial road was rocky.

"There was a lot of anti-American news in the papers and on TV at the time," Moore says. "I didn't read it directly, but could feel it in the way people talked and treated me."

Americans were no more encouraging of her goals. "I also approached the culture division at the US consulate about a Fulbright or something sponsored on the US side," she says. "Frankly, they were just as unwelcoming."

Only Wu Jiang, the head of the Beijing Opera School who had initiated the foreign student program, provided support. He arranged a scholarship that enabled Moore to complete her studies.

Moore now brings this emphasis on mutual support to her work. "Kung Fu Theatre," like all StrangeCandy performances, is created and performed by the ensemble.

"The biggest challenge is keeping everyone engaged in a creative process and working together," Moore says.

The theatre company's ten-year longevity is a testament to this engagement. "When you travel the way we do, it's important that people are respectful of each other and are capable of teamwork."

Moore places her trust in her ensemble, involving them in the company's growth as well as its creative work. "All of the performers have come by recommendations from those already in the company."

Following her extensive education, Moore appreciates serving as a mentor. "I'm working on an arts in education program," she says. "I love the teaching component of what we do and I think there are a lot of possibilities with this."

Seattle wraps up the final date of StrangeCandy's current 2008-09 performance schedule. Next up, Moore plans to revive a performance called "The Queen Says Farewell To Her Favorite."

That piece combines Moore's memoir of her days at the Beijing Opera School with Beijing Opera performance styles. "We performed it a few years ago in New York as an experiment, but it really needs another round of development," Moore says.

True to StrangeCandy's method, Moore hopes to include members of her current ensemble in that workshopping process before bringing the show to American audiences.

"Kung Fu Theatre: Tales from the Beijing Opera" runs on April 17, 2009, at the Moore Theatre, at 1932 Second Ave, Seattle.