

## Still Don't Know How He Did It: Wu Hsing-kuo's one-man 'King Lear'

By Donald Brown *eave a Comment*

Wu Hsing-kuo, as King Lear, performs once more -- tonight. Don't miss it!

The production of King Lear by Contemporary Legend Theater of Taiwan mixes the ancient and the modern to startling effect. As a one-man show featuring Wu Hsing-kuo, who also directed the show and adapted it from its source, King Lear becomes a series of vignettes that dramatize both the high theatricality of Shakespeare's play as well as what might be thought of as its folklore elements, and ends with a reflection on theater itself.

The story of a king who ill-advisedly chooses to divide his kingdom among his daughters -- Goneril, Regan and Cordelia -- King Lear is also a story of the aged being mistreated by the young. The harsh treatment of Lear by Goneril and Regan is matched by the story of Gloucester, who foolishly trusts his illegitimate son, Edmund, and becomes a blind and broken man, assisted by his legitimate son Edgar in the disguise of a mad beggar.

Condensing the plot and subplot into a three-act structure running under two hours in length requires a certain skill in dealing in broad strokes. Wu Hsing-kuo's Lear begins with the madness of Lear, and the scene of his frantic condition in a thunderstorm. Having banished his loyal daughter, Cordelia, and been mistreated by his other daughters, Lear wanders a heath, calling on the gods for comfort. Screens to the right and left of the stage translate the Chinese dialogue, but words are less important in this opening scene than the stylized acting, an interplay of gesture and

music. The rapid rhythms of the Lee Yi-Chin's score create an anxious texture that seems to surround Lear, producing an atmosphere of confusion and conflict.

Costumes (by Tim Yip) are also of great importance to the production, as the long flowing hair and beard of Lear are expressive devices as used by Wu, as are his truly majestic robes. Seeing such an impressive figure flail about the stage, wringing his hands, doing flips and falls, we know at once he's mad and the entire scene becomes a great man's struggle with his own nature. If the great can become the low, where can certainty be found? Wu's Lear is a study of warring mannerisms that finally ends with the king humbled, placing flowers in his hair while recalling giving a flower to his youngest daughter whose loss he now mourns.

At this point Wu emerges from his King Lear costume and speaks to us an actor or, as he says, Lear's storyteller. Having set aside the costume of Lear he indicates that there is more to the story, and the first act ends.

The second act is all about transformations as Wu begins in the character of Lear's Fool who enlivens the tale from the perspective of the lowly. At first he was no better than Lear's dog, but now he sees Lear as a foolish king, reduced to a figure of fun. Wu's monologue as the Fool skillfully establishes satire as an attitude toward Lear's court, and this view is extended into his enactments of the three daughters. This part of the play, in which Wu costumes himself in the regal trappings of the emperor's daughters, and depicts the vain and deceitful characters of Goneril and Regan, with all the grace of Beijing opera, is striking, creating a world of ritual manners, in contrast to the lowly Fool's bent-knee postures, that is beguiling but also comical.

After Cordelia strikes a sincere contrast to her sisters, Wu transforms again -- giving us in brief the story of Edmund's false defense of his father Gloucester, Edgar's transformation into "poor Tom," and finally, and most dramatically, Gloucester's search for death on a high cliff. Having said that, I still don't know how Wu managed to recreate all these scenes in such rapid succession; I do know that the image of Gloucester on the

rocks surrounded by mist and the surging sounds of the ocean will stay with me for a while.

Gloucester's leap to darkness is followed by a voice narrating the eventual reconciliation of Gloucester and Edgar, and this introduces the last act: Wu Hsing-kuo in his own character as the Actor. Speaking still within the stylized context of the play, Wu addresses us as an actor who is a character and a character who is an actor. At once, the skillful transformations we have watched become a series of artificial identities that trap the Actor.

The final speech comments on a quality of the play that is hard to pin down: these roles are not only Shakespeare's, but were selected by him from older sources, and, in this current form, now translated into the words and rhythms and costumes of Chinese theater, they take on a wider application, a global reach we might say. And this new formulation of Lear shows how the situations in the play—the family drama, the generational tensions, the class elements, the archetypal nature of a blind man being led by a mad man—have become emblematic myths told about the human condition. Wu's final statements struck me as a realization not only of the tragedy of Lear, but of the sorrow of theater itself as a world that can only pretend to be true.

Wu Hsing-kuo and the Contemporary Legend Theater of Taiwan have memorably transformed King Lear into an experience of theater as both timeless and contingent.



## 個人資料

中文名: 吳興國 (Hsing-kuo Wu)

民族: 漢族

出生地: 台灣高雄

出生日期: 1953年04月12日

職業: 演員, 藝術總監

畢業院校: 中國文化大學

代表作品: 《青蛇》, 《賭神2》

吳興國在台灣復興劇校坐科八年期間,專攻武生,因成績優異保送中國文化大學戲劇系。就讀文化大學期間加入雲門舞集,開始了對當代表演藝術的初步探索;著名的演出有《白蛇傳》、《奇冤報》等等。吳退伍之後即加入陸光國劇隊,拜師台灣四大老生之一 - 周正榮先生(1925年 - 2000年6月),改唱文、武老生,漸于京劇界闖出名號,受歡迎之戲碼包括:《大伐東吳》(一趕四)、《通濟橋》、《陸文龍》、《烏龍院》、《野豬林》、《四郎探母》。1986年,吳興國結合一群青年京劇演員,創立當代“傳奇劇場”,導演及主演多出融合舞臺劇及京劇的作品。創團作品《慾望城國》改編自莎士比亞四大悲劇之一的《麥克白》,一個把莎劇和京劇結合的獨角戲,吳興國自編自導自演了這個作品,一舉成功,《慾望城國》成了當代傳奇劇場經典劇目,多次受邀于各大國際藝術節演出;而後,共創作了四出改編自莎士比亞與希臘悲劇的戲劇作品,成為傳統戲曲藝術發展與創新掌旗的“先鋒”人物,每推出新作皆引起熱烈的迴響與討論。

**成就榮譽:** 吳興國曾受到英國泰晤士報褒揚:“他使我們想起英國著名演員勞倫斯·奧立佛”。而日本讀賣新聞也曾贊賞“作品深厚有力,演出層次豐富,技巧高超”。在《李爾在此》中,吳興國一人飾演十角演出一百二十分鐘,獨力挑戰高難度的舞臺表演極限,法國陽光劇團藝術總監亞里安·莫努虛金 (Ariane Mnouchkine) 稱讚:“一位偉大的表演者在舞臺上尋找李爾王”。《李爾在此》的演出大獲肯定,曾應邀前往法國、日本、新加坡、美國、韓國、中國香港、中國澳門等地演出,2004年10月《李爾在此》應邀赴丹麥參與歐丁劇場四十周年慶演出,其後有在捷克布拉格雅卡劇場及英國倫敦 I.C.A. 當代藝術中心演出,其表演感動無數熟悉莎士比亞傳統的歐洲觀眾。

2002年底,吳興國接受了諾貝爾文學獎得主高行健的邀請,出演了由高行健親自編劇、導演的《八月雪》一劇中六祖慧能一角。

2004年底,當代傳奇劇場改編莎士比亞劇作《暴雨》,吳興國邀請香港知名武俠電影導演徐克擔任總導演,吳興國則飾演劇中魔法師波羅一角。

2005年,吳興國擔綱導演並主演了全新創作的貝克特名劇《等待果陀》,今年月將于上海話劇藝術中心參與“貝克特百年誕辰”活動的演出。

2011年10月,吳興國上演跨國歌劇《康熙大帝與太陽王路易十四》,這不是他頭一回唱歌劇演“皇上”。

**榮獲獎項:** 曾獲得傅爾·布萊特獎學金、亞洲文化協會獎學金赴紐約大學戲劇研究所選修理查·謝喜納環境劇場課程;並曾榮獲台灣電影金馬獎最佳男主角提名及香港電影金像獎最佳新人獎。

1994年香港電影金像獎(Hong Kong Film Award) 最佳新人演員《誘僧》(1993) 1994年香港電影金像獎(Hong Kong Film Award) 最佳男主角(提名)《誘僧》

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