

## Wu Rujun's new avatar

09:13, June 10, 2009

Musician and male Dan performer Wu Rujun is scheduled to stage his new Peking Opera play *The Three Movings of Mencius' Mother* Wednesday at Chang'an Grand Theater in Beijing.

The play was adapted from a famous story in which Mencius' mother changed dwellings three times to find a better location suitable for her son's growth. It is also the first time to be staged as Peking Opera.

The audiences will get access to the art of female impersonation through Wu's playing of Mencius' mother, a technique that has long been boasted as a rich style of traditional Chinese Peking Opera.

Wu Rujun.(Global Times Photo)

Known as male Dan, the role has a long history in Peking Opera, as women were not allowed to take to the stage in imperial China and so all female roles had to be filled by men. Male Dan has long been regarded as one of Peking Opera's most difficult roles, as actors are required to master the mannerisms and higher pitches of female personas.

Acclaimed as "the only male Dan on stage in Asia," Wu is one of the few prominent male Dans still performing. Wu deftly captures the female essence through his expert vocal impersonations and convincing feminine stage presence. Wu has directed and starred in at least ten classic Peking Operas and each performance has been a huge draw.

In addition to his famous acting skills, Wu has also attempted to break new ground in other areas, such as experimenting with modern musical instruments and incorporating traditional performing styles with new plays. Wu's innovations have created a stir in both China and Japan, where the actor spent nearly 20 years.

Born in Nanjing in 1963 as the son of a musician and an actor, Wu graduated from the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts in 1984 with a major in traditional music, and later was admitted to the prestigious China National Peking Opera Company to play the jinghu, a two-stringed fiddle used in Peking Opera.

As a master of the jinghu, Wu quickly became known in the opera world and in 1996 made music history by composing the score for the classical story *Three Kingdoms* with only the jinghu.

Wu specializes in both the jinghu and on-stage performing, and is the first artist who has combined the two different roles in such a natural way.

Asked why he chose to become a male Dan, Wu said, "I have the qualities of a male Dan actor, especially my voice and facial features, and most importantly I am very lucky to have had the opportunity to receive tutoring from relatives and my parents."

Wu added that he discovered his talent by chance. "At our graduation performance, I happened to be entrusted with the role of the female actor and I impressed everyone, including myself, with my performance," he added.

In 1989, Wu left behind a promising opera career in China to go to Japan. During his nearly two decades in Japan, the actor staged many traditional pieces of Peking Opera and cooperated with several top musical producers, including well-known Kitaro on the acclaimed opera *The Silk Road*.

Wu's achievements were widely recognized in Japan, drawing fans as diverse as former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and greatly helped to promote cultural exchange between the two countries.

"Wu Rujun has made a huge contribution to cultural dialogue between China and the world and played an especially unique role in Sino-Japanese bilateral relations," Zhang Yonghe, a senior Peking Opera theorist told the *Global Times*. "His achievement on the stage for female impersonation enriched the development of Peking Opera with his innovative performance."

Wu now spends his time traveling back and forth between China and Japan, performing on both the mainland and throughout Japan.

Wu has selected and updated 10 classical Peking Operas that he hopes to perform in both countries. Wu said that his biggest hope is that these operas will popularize Peking Opera and the male Dan performance, whose popularity has sagged in recent generations.

With the passing away of China's last generation of legendary male Dan performers from the 1930s, which included the late Mei Lanfang, fewer and fewer performers have shown an interest in the role due to its artistic and vocal difficulty. It takes at least ten years for a male Dan to master the role and it is estimated that no more than ten male Dans are performing today.

"For a male Dan to be successful and accepted by the audience, the performer must have a combination of qualities, such as a pretty face, slender figure and beautiful voice. It is rare

for one actor to have all of these attributes and this is one of the main reasons for the present situation,” added Wu.

"Source: Global Times"