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Puppetry festival at MOA exhibits a unique Taiwanese cultural practice

by DONGYUE SU

Politicians play puppets in their campaign to impress voters, students cosplay as their favorite puppet characters, and a superstar puppeteer drives a Ferrari. These are street scenes in Taiwan, and Vancouverites will have a rare opportunity to see this puppet art form at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) Nov. 4, when the Ouxi Taiwanese Puppetry Festival kicks off.

The festival will feature two puppetry groups from Taiwan: the Taiyuan Puppet Theatre and the Chin Fei Feng Marionette Theatre Troupe. The former group features glove puppetry and has toured over 30 countries, while the latter company specializes in string puppetry.

Ying-yuan Shueh, a puppeteer from the Chin Fei Feng troupe, is excited to present his work to Vancouver audiences and experience the city himself.

"The key point of appreciation is the exquisite technique of the puppeteering," says Shueh. "Every country has a different culture, and I see my trip to Vancouver as an opportunity to learn from other cultures, so as to enrich my performance."

A symbol of Taiwanese culture

A traditional performing art since ancient times, puppetry has been in decline worldwide, giving way to modern entertainment and the internet. Puppetry in today's Taiwan, however, is swimming against the tide.

"Puppet theatre is considered a symbol of Taiwanese culture. It is a truly indigenous," explains Robin Ruizendaal, a Dutch scholar who is globally-recognized as an authority on Asian puppet culture, in a 2013 lecture at the University of Scranton.

Ruizendaal has been living in Taiwan and China for more than 20 years researching Asian puppetry. He has published several scholarly books on this subject,



▲ According to puppeteer Ying-yuan Shueh, the key point of appreciation about a Taiwanese puppet show is the exquisite technique.

and is also the managing and artistic director of the Taiyuan Puppet Theatre.

According to Ruizendaal, although Taiwanese puppetry has its roots in Mainland China, Taiwanese puppetry has developed its own style since 1949, the year when Taiwan and Mainland China were politically separated. While puppet theatre in the mainland was banned under Communism, the puppet theatre managed to survive in Taiwan and began to thrive in 1987, when martial law was lifted in the country. At the time, the Taiwanese were seeking an identity and they found in puppetry one form of cultural representation.

The fusion of many cultural elements

In Ruizendaal's view, one of the unique characteristics of Taiwanese puppetry is the fusion of many cultural elements. The big eyes of some female puppet characters are an influence from Japanese manga. The pointed chins are the imprints of the plastic surgery appeal from South Korea. Some puppet shows even incorporate American music. Some troupes go further to include lasers and explosives to amplify the visual

experience. Ruizendaal characterizes this practice as "post-modern."

"Taiwan's rich and complex history has had a major impact on its unique identity," writes Jill Baird, curator of Education and Public Programs at MOA, in the announcement of the event.

She cautions that some Canadians oversimplify Taiwan and subsume it under a stereotypical understanding of China.



An interactive experience with the puppeteers

Besides staging a puppet show, the festival will include interactive activities and school workshops for younger audience to experiment with puppets. Visitors will also be invited to dine with the puppeteers, in homage to Taiwanese tradition. The festival ends on Nov. 9 with a collaborative performance between the Taiwanese puppeteers and two Haida artists, storyteller Kung Jaadee (Roberta Kennedy) and visual artist Gwaii Edenshaw.

"Live performance of puppetry is rare today," says Baird.

She expects that tickets will sell out quickly as there are only 90 seats at the MOA theatre. ☞

MOA presents Ouxi Taiwanese Puppet Theatre Nov. 4–9 Museum of Anthropology, UBC 6393 NW Marine Dr., Vancouver www.moa.ubc.ca

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conceited enough to ever think I will," says Basu.

Still, Basu's views of Canada come from a sense of belonging. To him Canada is modern, and based on sharing. A place where people from many nations and backgrounds come and participate in the building of a national identity.

"From foundation myths to history, from the oral traditions of the First Nations to the words that fill our libraries, Canada – like other countries – is built up as a collective of all our stories," says Basu.

Indigenous ink

From just outside the mountains in Kamloops, British Columbia, writer Richard Wagamese has published 12 novels and several memoirs. From an Indigenous point of view he sees our national identity differently than others.

Wagamese says that Canada's story should be of its relationship with Aboriginal people, and as long as this is denied

there is no Canadian identity.

"The [story] that persists is built upon a lie – that there [are] two founding nations here. From the very beginning Aboriginal people were a Canadian motif – but now only we have the beaver and hockey," says Wagamese.

He thinks that inclusion is what Canadian identity is lacking. He wants Canada to be recognized as a treaty nation – its development contingent on the participation of Indigenous people. So, Wagamese's work tries to better educate and inform people of Indigenous lives and culture.

Online reviews of his latest novel, *Medicine Walk*, reveal that a cursory read of his latest novel might read like it is based on a simple father-son relationship, but a deeper analysis reveals a look at the formation of identities and how ancestry plays a role.

"I try to show sides of our Indigenous realities to bring mainstream Canadians more understanding of history, poli-

tics, racism and misinformation," says Wagamese.

Festival volunteers and readers are all eyes and ears

Jane Slemon, 57, is not only the longest serving volunteer of the Vancouver Writers Fest, she's an avid reader. Without knowing it, she's also a part of Wagamese's intended audience.

Her time poring through literature, proximity to notable authors, and her yearly exposure to new writing allows her to form her own view of Canada's identity. "I don't see any clear identity emerging in Canadian literature," says Slemon. "No handsome hero lives here. No brute is coming at the last minute to save the damsel, wherever she has gotten to in the vast genderless landscape," says Slemon.

Slemon says that there is much to learn from Indigenous people. She admits that some of our literature reflects this, but not enough. More non-Aboriginal people should be asking questions, so as to continue to shape our identity and discover true inclusivity.

"Are non-Natives smart enough and humble enough to ask 'How did you care for this land for so long without wreaking havoc, anyway?' [Or] 'what First Nations writers and storytellers haven't I yet read or heard?'" says Slemon.

With these questions possibly absent from many people's minds and mouths, Slemon concludes that "our search for our identity, is our identity."

She says that Canadian literature celebrates both questioning and responsibility in the face of Canadian history.

"The story that unfolds creates the storyteller, that creates an audience, that creates a national community," says Slemon.

Although she has not read any of Wagamese's or Basu's work, she is eager and open to what they will have to say at this year's festival.

"Still, we who try our best to listen must remain open as each new novel and book of poetry emerges in print to challenge and revisit what has come before," says Slemon. ☞