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A Rare Treasure of Three Roads Meeting at Kennedy Theatre, UHM

Community Reviews

Fights and Delights: Three Chinese Comedies playing at the University of Hawaii’s Kennedy Theatre through February 25th offers Honolulu audiences the rare opportunity to see authentic xiqu (traditional Chinese Theatre, literally “theatre of song”). In Hawaii, UHM’s Kennedy Theatre is the only theatre currently offering a program of xiqu—and these intensely impressive productions are only staged once every few years: your next opportunity to experience xiqu in English, in Hawaii, will be 2021. This stunningly remarkable production is especially exciting because it is also the product of an unprecedented collaboration between the Theatre Department’s Asian Theatre program and the Theatre for Young Audiences program—thus East Meets West Meets Theatre for Young Audiences.

In the first of the three xiqu comedies, Treasure in the Chest, Michelle Huynh plays Yulian a charming, vivacious young woman soon to be married—and longing for a scholar husband. Yulian is a huadan role and Huynh plays the role-type with a lively, appropriate and enthralling grace. Janica Sison and Nicholas Brown are excellent in their comic chou roles and Yunshan Feng, as Yulian’s mother performs as a laodan (older woman role type) with tremendous intensity and a powerful voice. Maseeh Ganjali, as Yulian’s brother, in another chou clown role, has two memorably hilarious scenes as well.

Marvellously, the orchestra plays with the actors’ movements (one of the many striking differences between western theatre and xiqu.) Led by Xi Yang, Ken Fong, Christopher Lai Hipp, Yan Ma, Jiwon
Kang, Chiao-Wen Chiang and Yuan-Hsin Tung provide exhilarating traditional music and percussion. In the second piece, *Pi Jin Rolls the Lamp*, Sarah Swilley (double cast with Donovan Oakleaf) performs a series of acrobatic tricks and feats of coordination and strength, with a candle balanced perfectly on her head, egged on by a tyrannical wife and mother-in-law.

In the final piece, *Where Three Roads Meet*, the creative brilliance of *xi*qu as an art form is categorically showcased. Alston Albarado, Ganjali, and Hunter Kaye perform an astonishingly intricate and exceptionally entertaining fight-acrobatic-combat movement sequence ostensibly in the dark. Within the remarkable convention of *xi*qu, the audience is complicit in the creation of the piece: a stylized gesture indicating a candle being blown out allows us to watch the ensuing hilarity characters gingerly searching a completely darkened room for a foe, accidentally avoiding each other, and suddenly fighting blind. The spectacular skill of the actors, the immense complexity of the choreography, the riotousness of the situational comedy and the extraordinary genius of *xi*qu as an art form are all highlighted in this piece.

*Fights and Delights: Three Chinese Comedies* is a unique and successful meeting of youth theatre and traditional Chinese Theatre performed by western actors for English-speaking audiences. Immerse yourself in another world and another style of theatre, while delighting in superb fighting scenes, sophisticated movements, well-acted character-types, singing and comedy.

Written by Taurie Kinoshita.

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