

YOUTH

The vicissitudes of a social structure from a bygone era, a bildungsroman about an individual caught between being either an idiot or a prophet, love writ in water versus blood and feuds spanning generations — a new play, titled *Red Poppies*, presents all these facets in three hours.

Produced by Joyway production company and performed by Sichuan People's Art Theater, the play will make its Beijing debut on Saturday, with a second performance on Sunday, before touring Shanghai, Zhejiang province, Jiangsu province and Guangdong province.

The play is adapted from the 1998 eponymous novel written by Alai, a Sichuan-based writer from the Tibetan ethnic group. The book won the Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2000, making Alai, then 41, the youngest winner of the prize.

Having grown up in the Tibetan-inhabited area in Sichuan, Alai zooms in on the former clan structure of the ethnic group before the founding of New China.

The story focuses on a chieftain's son who is widely considered to be an idiot that is out of step with the real world. However, he is gifted with a vision that allows him to make wise decisions at crucial moments.

In one such example, when other chieftains are all growing poppies, the protagonist suggests growing food crops instead.

Later when a widespread famine hits the area, grains become more valuable than opium. The clan therefore takes the opportunity to expand its wealth, population and territory.

The story also addresses family feuds between clans, the relationship between power and desire, and the ups and downs of clan structure.

"Seeing the book adapted into the play, I felt a sense of refreshment," says Alai, who serves as the literary consultant for the play.

"It's been almost 30 years since I finished the book. Hearing some of the lines onstage, I recalled that I wrote them."

He says that, compared to novel-writing, which does not necessarily have a length limit, a play is



Red Poppies, a play adapted from Alai's award-winning eponymous novel, will be staged in Beijing this weekend. Tibetan ethnic culture is a major feature of the production. PHOTOS BY WEN LU AND WANG XUFENG / FOR CHINA DAILY



restricted by both time and space, hence presenting an interesting challenge.

"The novel is almost 300,000

words. It's reinvigorating to see how the play condenses and represents the story. It seems like a novel, but somehow different."

According to the play's script-writer, Cao Lusheng, it preserves a lot of the book's original features, such as following the narrative of

the "idiot" protagonist, but also making adaptations with regard to female characters.

As the story is based on Tibetan

ethnic culture, the crew made an effort to research how to truthfully represent Tibetan culture while telling the story.

The movements for the performers were conceived by dance director and choreographer Yu Chenxi, who says he integrated ethnic characteristics into the body movements seen onstage, including gestures from the *jingangwu*, a dance performed during festive occasions.

"I felt that it was serendipitous for me to join the play. I started learning folk dance at the age of 12 from a teacher of Tibetan ethnicity, so I have learned a lot of regional dance styles," Yu says.

"When I joined the crew, I went to Chengdu and visited the streets where Tibetan people gather and dance together every night. I stayed there for seven days and observed them. From their postures and our conversations, I extracted the features of their mannerisms and integrated them into my choreography."

The play's musical director, Shi Yicen, also visited Tibetan-inhabited areas to conduct field study. The production includes indigenous Tibetan music and folk instruments, and a singer of the Tibetan ethnic group was invited to record a few sequences to provide transitions for the play.

"Many details in my music are inspired by the monologue of 'the idiot' from the original novel, which is expressed in an acutely sensitive way. For instance, a series of variations are designed for him to set off his complicated emotions when interacting with the female characters," Shi says.

According to Alai, the story should not be seen as being about a single ethnic group, but as one that deals with the issues relevant to all, such as power, money and happiness.

"This play shows that the crew has a good grasp of the spiritual core of the original book. It highlights the individual and the group in that particular era, presenting the ups and downs of their fate and emotions in the progress of history. I think it's a soul-stirring production," Alai says.

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