

## TIBET SPECIAL

## Troupe celebrates 60 years of Tibetan Opera

A grand performance of Tibetan Opera was held in Lhasa, capital city of the Tibet autonomous region, on Nov 25, to mark the 60th anniversary of the founding of the leading local performing team — the Tibetan Opera Troupe.

In addition to performers from the Tibetan Opera Troupe, the gala was also attended by artists from the China National Peking Opera Company, who performed an innovative version of *Princess Wencheng*, in the styles of both Peking Opera and Tibetan Opera.

*Princess Wencheng* is one of eight renowned traditional Tibetan operas created in the autonomous region. It tells the story of Tang Dynasty (618-907) princess Wencheng, who traveled from the Chang'an — today's city of Xi'an in Shaanxi province — to marry Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo more than 1,300 years ago.

Known as one of the living fossils of ancient Tibetan culture, Tibetan Opera has a history of more than 600 years.

Tibetan Opera, one of the most popular traditional operas of ethnic groups in China, is a comprehensive art combining folk songs, dancing, storytelling, chanting, acrobatics and religious performances.

Popular in the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, the performance begins with a prayer ceremony. At the heart of the opera is a drama narrated by a single speaker, enacted by performers and supported by groups of singers and dancers. Actors wear traditional masks of a variety of shapes and colors. Performances may take place in public squares and in temples — or on stage nowadays.

Rooted in Buddhist teachings, the stories told in Tibetan Opera recount the triumph of good and the punishment of evil. This multifaceted representative of Tibetan art and cultural heritage also acts as a bridge among Tibetans in different parts of the country, promoting ethnic unity and pride.

Over the six centuries, Tibetan Opera has developed into four main sects — Kyumolung, Jungba, Shangba, and Jangkar, according to its different regional characteristics.

In 2006, Tibetan Opera was included on the national intangible cultural heritage list, and was recognized as an item of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2009.

In the past six decades, the Tibetan Opera Troupe has been a major force in the Tibet autonomous region contributing to the preservation and development of the centuries-old art form.

Sangbo, deputy chief of the Tibet Culture Department, said the Tibetan Opera Troupe has helped to bring the ancient art to as many people as possible



**Clockwise from top: Artists from the China National Peking Opera Company perform a Peking Opera version of *Princess Wencheng* during the 60th anniversary celebration of Tibetan Opera Troupe; a Tibetan Opera show is staged in Lhasa; the celebration features a performance by both Tibetan and Han artists; a traditional mask is typical for Tibetan Opera.**

PHOTOS BY DAQIONG / CHINA DAILY

over the last six decades.

"The troupe has gained wide popularity and a good reputation both in China and in other countries, and it has helped to promote exchanges among various cultures," Sangbo said.

He noted that the troupe has fostered a new era for Tibetan Opera to learn from different operas of various regions and countries, making it a brilliant part of the Chinese culture.

Tibetan Opera, combining storytelling, singing and dancing, can evoke a strong emotional resonance among audiences, according to Sangbo.

Over 60 years, Sangbo said the Tibetan Opera Troupe is a household name among residents in Tibet and neighboring regions.

Palden Wangchuk, head of the Tibetan Opera Troupe, said that since its official founding in 1960, it has been working toward the goals of preserving traditional forms, while innovating in new forms to adapt to modern times.

"Through the great efforts made by all the troupe mem-

bers, we have become a leading professional opera troupe in the Tibet autonomous region, which integrates the missions of creating, directing, performing and researching Tibetan Opera," Palden Wangchuk said.

He said the six decades marked a new era for the development of Tibetan Opera and the troupe.

"Over the 60 years, the troupe has been performing different plays based on the life stories of the locals, and it has greatly enriched their spiritual well-being and everyday life," said Palden Wangchuk, adding the troupe has been promoting Tibet's traditional culture throughout the world by its frequent participation in international and Chinese art events.

"At the beginning, the troupe was poorly equipped due to the lack of musical instruments, stage equipment and talented performers. And there were fewer performance opportunities," said Phurjung, a veteran actor in the troupe. "But today we have grown into a large troupe with more qualified, pro-

fessional artists, who can offer a broad range of options for audiences."

The 61-year-old artist said what makes him proudest is Tibetan Opera's richness in expression in modern times. "Today, Tibetan Opera can be presented in the forms of Beijing Opera and other local operas in China, as well as in modern dramas," Phurjung said. "On the other hand, a lot of other Chinese operas have been rendered into Tibetan Opera."

He added that the diversified performing styles have made Tibetan Opera popular among audiences not only in Tibet, but also in the rest of the country. Phurjung said that behind the innovative development of the ancient Tibetan Opera are the great efforts of the troupe's artists in collecting, inheriting and researching the artworks scattered on the vast land of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, as well as their creativity in developing new styles and new ways of expression.

Over the last 60 years, the

average age of the actors and actresses in the Tibetan Opera Troupe is 30 years old. "The traditional way of presenting Tibetan Opera requires a longer time, which is acceptable in outdoor performances. "For modernized operas, the duration of the performance is reduced to less than 150 minutes from several days. It is more acceptable with the performances on indoor stages," she said.

"In addition to the shortened period, there are also special requirements with roles, lighting and stage set-

As an example, she said

troupe has received more than 50 national awards.

The opera of *Drova Sangmo* was awarded the 11th Wenhua Prize in 2004 by the then Ministry of Culture. The Peking opera-styled Tibetan Opera *Princess Wencheng* won several high-level national prizes, and Palden Wangchuk, the opera's leading actor, became the first person in the Tibet autonomous region to win a Plum Blossom Award, one of China's top dramatic honors.

Over the past 60 years, the troupe has performed in more than 30 overseas countries and regions, including Japan and the United States. In 2014, it was listed as one of China's 39 key creating and performing opera troupes by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Namkar, former leader and member of the Tibetan Opera Troupe, said she had worked in the group for 40 years since 1972, when she was 16. She has observed the troupe's growth as she served multiple roles, including actor, director and head of the troupe.

"I feel proud and honored to have seen all the achievements the troupe has made over the past six decades, and I would like to say thanks to all my colleagues for the great efforts they have been making for the development of Tibetan Opera," she said.

"Our team has grown from small to big, from weak to strong. It has kept growing with new achievements and more professionals," Namkar said.

Over the six decades, the troupe has created more than 100 volumes of original works including traditional and modern operas such as *Princess Wencheng*, *The Spring of Doshong*, *Tsering Lhamo*, *Thangton Gyalpo*, and *Drogon Phagpa*.

Namkar said serving the people and drawing inspiration from the people are the major reasons the centuries-old art maintains its vitality.

The Tibetan Opera Troupe has traveled extensively on the world's highest plateau to perform for herders and farmers. It has provided an average of 120 performances annually for local residents.

"We have learned from many years of experiences that only when we regard the people as our own brothers, sisters and close friends, can we create works to touch their hearts and evoke their emotions from the deep," Namkar said.

Phundron, a young Tibetan Opera actress at the troupe, said she is fully aware of the importance of her mission as a successor of Tibetan Opera.

"I recognize I must have a solid belief in this art. Only with a firm loyalty in Tibetan Opera can this centuries-old art be passed down from us to future generations," Phundron said.

— DAQIONG AND PALDEN NYIMA

## Rave reviews for revamps of old classics

A modern version of traditional Tibetan opera *Princess Wencheng*, which features a shorter duration and employs digital technologies in its presentation, was staged recently in Lhasa, capital of the Tibet autonomous region, another new step for the adaptation of Tibet's traditional operas.

In 2013, led by Palden Wangchuk, an outstanding Tibetan Opera artist, the Tibetan Opera Troupe began adapting and modernizing the eight Tibetan Opera masterpieces, including *Princess Wencheng*.

Traditionally, a Tibetan Opera takes several days to perform, and Palden Wangchuk believes that is one of the reasons why the art form is in danger of dying out.

"Performers need to have exceptional willpower and great energy to perform an opera for several days. And the audience doesn't have the time and patience to watch for several days," explained Palden Wangchuk, who is also the head of the Tibetan Opera Troupe.

As a pioneer in modernizing the art, Palden Wangchuk and

his colleagues began to adapt and update Tibetan Opera classics in 2013, in the hope of preserving and developing the centuries-old art for future generations.

According to Palden Wangchuk, the troupe has finished six of the eight traditional Tibetan operas in the last few years, including *Drova Sangmo*, *Nangsa Vobum*, *Pema Voibar*, *Sugkyi Nyima*, *Chogyal Norsang*, and *Princess Wencheng*.

"The ancient operas were made in accordance with the needs of the ancient people, and the operas performed now should meet the needs of modern people," he said.

Traditional versions can last from several hours to seven days, while the adapted versions usually last less than 150 minutes.

"The duration of operas is getting shorter for stage performances, either in the countryside or in cities. This is an inevitable trend for the development of Tibetan Opera."

Palden Wangchuk asserted that the length of traditional operas must be shortened to

maintain their vigor and vitality, while new operas must be created to satisfy modern tastes.

Originated 600 years ago, Tibetan opera is a synthetic art that integrates singing, dancing, dramatic performances and storytelling. It was shaped into four main sects in its development in different regions.

According to Palden Wangchuk, adaptation is concurrent with digitalization that features making digital and online versions of operas.

"After the work of adaptation and digitalization is completed in the next few years, Tibet's rural residents will be distributed with free DVDs of the modernized operas and will have a better opportunity to learn the popular ancient art at any time and in any place," Palden Wangchuk said.

Yudron, director of the modernized Tibetan Opera *Princess Wencheng*, said it was a clear trend that the young people have become the main force in inheriting Tibetan Opera.

As an example, she said



**While maintaining traditional elements, artists in Tibet have adapted and modernized Tibetan Opera, marking a substantial reduction in the durations of performances and improvements in stage sets.**

DAQIONG / CHINA DAILY

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"For modernized operas, the duration of the performance is reduced to less than 150 minutes from several days. It is more acceptable with the performances on indoor stages," she said.

"In addition to the shortened period, there are also special requirements with roles, lighting and stage set-

ting for modernized operas," Yudron said.

Tsering Palchen, a Lhasa resident, who watched a performance of *Chogyal Norsang*, one of the versions adapted years ago, said the modern version is easy to understand, and the lighting and the stage setting are in accordance with modern aesthetic standard.

"Without getting tired and bored, I watched the whole play of *Chogyal Norsang*," he said.

"I had a fun time, and it was an unforgettable memory."

— PALDEN NYIMA AND DAQIONG