CULTURE

Acrobatics takes a leap

Young athletes push traditional performance into new territory, combining physical skills with fresh ideas and modern stagecraft, **Chen Nan** reports.

Top: A scene from *Multidimensional Space — Aerial Rope*, performed by the Shanghai Acrobatic Troupe and the Shanghai Circus School, during the 12th China Acrobatics Golden Chrysanthemum Awards in Puyang, Henan province. **Above:** Two of the competition's 10 award-winning programs: *The Path — Group Men's Rope Tricks* by the Shandong Acrobatic Troupe (left) and *Ode to Mountains and Rivers · Russian Swing*, by Henan Acrobatic Group and the Puyang Acrobatic Art School. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

At 23, Cao Wenhao has spent most of his life learning how to fly, tumble, and balance onstage.

Born into a family of acrobats in Jining, Shandong province, he began training at age 6, following in the footsteps of his grandparents and uncle. His latest challenge was unlike anything he had tried before: turning an ordinary skipping rope into an acrobatic prop.

The Path — Group Men's Rope Tricks, by the Shandong Acrobatic Troupe, made its debut at the 12th China Acrobatics Golden Chrysanthemum Awards, held from Sept 13 to 19 in Puyang, Henan province. The competition brought together 26 acrobatic troupes from across China.

When Cao joined the project, he thought some of the movements were almost impossible. Nearly three years later, he and 26 other male performers were leaping over ropes, tumbling through the air, and climbing into human towers.

"It was really tough," Cao says backstage after the performance, still visibly excited. "But through constant attempts and training, we gradually overcame the difficulties."

The 10-minute production, one of the competition's 10 award-winning programs, combines traditional acrobatics with freestyle rope skipping.

For Cao, the hardest part was not mastering a single trick, but making more than 20 performers move as one. The troupe spent nearly three years developing the production, often training for about 10 hours a day. During the final two years, Cao spent another two to three hours each day working specifically on the finale.

"The most comforting thing was that everyone made it through the training healthy and safe," he says.

Ropes become art

For the Shandong Acrobatic Troupe, the production is an experiment in turning a familiar everyday activity into demanding stage art.

"We wanted to bring something new to Chinese acrobatics," says Zhao Jinlong, 39, captain of the troupe's performing team.

The idea emerged after coaches came across short videos of freestyle rope skipping on social media. Inspired by its visual appeal, they began exploring how its movements could be combined with acrobatic techniques.

There was no ready-made template. The performers first had to learn the basics of freestyle skipping before developing their own movements. They sketched ideas by hand, tested them for safety and discarded those that failed to meet their expectations. The production gradually took shape through repeated experimentation.

One of its most demanding sequences, Zhao says, has an acrobat performing a side somersault over another performer's shoulder. The finale involves two consecutive backflips from the top of a three-level human tower, while the rest of the team jumps in unison over a rope.

The sequence requires more than individual strength and courage.

"The base needs to be strong, the performers in the middle need to have excellent overall abilities, and those at the top need courage and a strong sense of their bodies in the air," Zhao says.

The troupe plans to continue refining the work. After three decades in acrobatics, Zhao has seen audiences look beyond technical difficulty to the overall stage experience.

"Ultimately, what matters is whether a work can move people," he says.

The production was directed by Liu Mengchen, a dance-trained choreographer who joined the project after the troupe had already spent about a year and a half experimenting with the idea.

Rather than imposing a fixed plan, Liu developed the work with the performers, revising it six or seven times as they discovered new ways to combine rope skipping with acrobatics.

"Acrobatics remains at the heart of the work," Liu says.

For Liu, the production also speaks to how acrobatics evolves over time, with each generation building on what came before while creating something of its own.

"I deeply admire the spirit of acrobats and the way this art is passed down from one generation to the next," Liu says. "That is something truly precious in any era."

Breaking with convention

Established in 1997, the China Acrobatics Golden Chrysanthemum Awards are held every three years and are the country's highest professional awards for acrobatics.

"These acrobatic programs represent the highest level of Chinese acrobatics," says Yu Yigang, chairman of the China Acrobats Association.

"It is a form of entertainment that crosses borders. We have taken Chinese acrobatic troupes overseas to perform and compete, and they have received warm feedback and many awards," Yu says.

Chinese acrobatics has a history stretching back more than a thousand years. Like many traditional art forms, however, it has had to adapt as audiences gain access to an ever-growing range of contemporary entertainment.

That search for renewal was also evident in another award-winning production, *Ode to Mountains and Rivers · Russian Swing*, by the Henan Acrobatic Group and Puyang Acrobatic Art School.

When the five Russian swings begin to move, the performers have only seconds to make their choices.

They leap from one swinging platform to another, twisting through the air before landing on a narrow board held by their partners. Among the most demanding sequences are five backward somersaults and six forward tucked somersaults, with some performers reaching heights of 8 to 10 meters.

Behind the breathtaking movements lies a tradition deeply rooted in Puyang, a city in Henan known as an important center of Chinese acrobatics.

According to Li Weichao, head of the performance troupe of Henan Acrobatic Group, the northeastern village of Dongbeizhuang in Puyang is known as a "hometown of acrobatics". The local tradition dates back to the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, when villagers passed acrobatic skills down through generations.

Li grew up locally and began training before he was 9. He has spent 37 years in the profession, including three decades with the group. For him, the tradition is not simply part of history. He has lived through it — and now watches a new generation carry it forward.

The performers in *Ode to Mountains and Rivers · Russian Swing* are mostly between 18 and 20.

The production itself has evolved from earlier traditions. In the original version, the swings were fixed in place with screws. For the new production, the team has removed the fixed mechanisms and placed the swings on movable platforms, allowing them to change direction during the performance.

The original two swings were expanded into five — two on each side and one at the back — creating more possibilities for movement while significantly raising the technical difficulty.

The program also breaks with the traditional image of Russian swing, which has often been dominated by male performers. Three women were added to the cast, with two performing aerial somersaults.

Among them is Xu Duoduo, 17, who performs a triple backward somersault. At an earlier provincial competition, she performed the move with a safety rope. This time, the rope was removed.

"Sometimes you miss the board," Xu says. "You may not land where you are supposed to. You have to keep practicing with your partners and teachers, finding the right rhythm and feeling for your body, until you can complete the movement."

The physical cost can be high. Performers have suffered injuries during training, including twisted ankles, but Li says the young artists have continued despite the setbacks.

The show is also a tribute to the Chinese Air Force. Inspired by the aerial formations of the Bayi Aerobatic Team of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force, it traces the development of China's air force from its early aviation schools to today's modern aircraft, honoring those who have protected the country's skies.

Carrying it forward

For Li, the evolution of the show reflects the changing nature of Chinese acrobatics.

In the past, he says, acrobatics was largely about completing difficult technical movements. Today, performers are expected to understand dance, music and stage performance, while lighting, sound, stage design and new technology have become part of the art.

Yet, amid all these changes, one thing remains: the passing of skills from one generation to the next.

The competition also brought together acrobatics experts, scholars and creative teams for discussions on the art form's inheritance and innovation, as well as the use of technology in creation.

"It gives professionals around the world a close look at the creative landscape of Chinese acrobatics," Yu says.

Helmut Grosscurth, managing director of the European Circus Association, watched performances by Chinese troupes and shared his views at a forum on Sept 17.

He was struck by the scale and quality of the competition.

"I have never seen so many acrobats on one stage," Grosscurth says, adding that the performances combined the high level of Chinese acrobatic training with a strong spirit of innovation.

He says most of the programs he saw could fit into major European commercial productions or international arts festivals, although some would need to be adapted to fit European venues.

For Grosscurth, education is another starting point for cooperation. After visiting the Puyang Acrobatic Art School, he was impressed by its size and training facilities, which he said would be difficult to find on a similar scale in Europe.

He was particularly struck by the inventive use of technology and unusual stage structures in some of the Chinese programs.

"The Chinese programs offer the kind of fresh ideas the industry needs," he says.

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Scan the code to watch the video.

A dragon child travels beyond language

SYDNEY — No spoken dialogue. No translation. Just puppetry, music and movement. A drama inspired by the Chinese zodiac drew more than 2,000 people to two performances in Sydney on Sept 26, bringing a story conceived through Chinese-Australian collaboration to audiences of all ages.

"It was a cute show. I like the characters, and the costumes were amazing. I thought it would be a bit tricky to understand, but it was quite clear with the different characters and what they were about," audience member Tony Rudolph said after the performance.

Children in the crowd sat transfixed as the zodiac animals moved across the stage.

The Dragon Child and the Twelve Animals of the Zodiac, a Sino-Australian collaboration, was directed by Australian director, producer and puppeteer Peter Wilson, who also directed segments of the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2006 Asian Games in Doha.

Performed by the China National Theatre for Children, which celebrates its 70th anniversary this year, the production premiered in Beijing on Chinese New Year's Day in 2008, the beginning of the Year of the Rat. Since then, it has toured widely, including stops in Vietnam, Australia, Mexico, the United States and Japan, winning audiences in countries far beyond its place of origin.

Recalling the production's beginnings nearly two decades ago, Wilson said he would never forget the freezing winter of 2007 in Beijing — something, he joked, "Australians are not particularly famous for their ability to cope with" — but the cold did little to dampen the team's creative energy.

"We were already working across two languages. So why not find a theatrical language that could speak beyond both of them? Movement, image, puppetry, design, and music — each will help tell the story," said Wilson. "That possibility excited me enormously. If we could find it, perhaps we could create a world that didn't need translation, a story that a child in Beijing, or Sydney, or New York, or anywhere else in the world could simply enter."

The production, Wilson said, was never intended to be distinctly Australian or Chinese. "The work never set out to be an Australian show. The work never set out to be a Chinese show," he said. Instead, the Chinese zodiac provided something "deeply rooted in Chinese culture" while remaining "wonderfully accessible" through its 12 animal characters.

The story follows a child born to a dragon and raised under the care of the 12 zodiac animals. Along the way, it explores themes of growing up and protecting the natural environment.

"I have always believed there is something incredibly powerful about bringing artists from different cultures together, and simply allowing them to share — ideas, traditions, skills, stories, and different ways of seeing the world," Wilson said. "It's not to change one another, nor to decide which way is better, but to listen, to remain curious, and then to make something together that perhaps none of us could have imagined alone."

The Dragon Child, he said, became one of those rare opportunities. "Through that sharing, we created something unique, something that would eventually travel far beyond us, finding audiences across cultures, languages and generations.

Audience members pose for photos with actors of *The Dragon Child and the Twelve Animals of the Zodiac* in Sydney, Australia, on Sept 26. GONG BING / XINHUA

"The little dragon we first imagined nearly 20 years ago in a rehearsal room in Beijing is still traveling. And somehow, wonderfully, it has found its way here."

"To see it come alive again on stage is really wonderful," said Richard Jeziorny, creative stage designer of the drama. "It's still so relevant, and an audience can still connect and relate to it. It's just very emotional."

XINHUA