

THEATER

The Bard meets a Ming playwright

A stage production combines the works of Shakespeare and Ming Dynasty playwright Tang Xianzu.

Chen Nan reports.

When Li Ruru first read William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, she didn't quite like it — she was then 11 years old, and the complicated relationships and dramatic tragedy were too much for her to comprehend.

But 50 years on, Li, now 64, teaches comparative and intercultural theater studies, including researching the works of Shakespeare, all thanks to her family.

Her mother, Li Yuru (1923-2008), was a famous Peking Opera actress and her stepfather, Cao Yu (1910-94), a renowned Chinese playwright.

Li Ruru, who acquired her bachelor's and master's degrees at the Shanghai Theater Academy, is now professor of Chinese theater studies at the University of Leeds, where she obtained her doctoral degree in drama and theater in 1993.

And, she has spent the last two years shaping an ambitious project — a stage production called *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming Under the Southern Bough*, which combines the 17th-century masterpieces of Shakespeare and the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) playwright Tang Xianzu, both of whom died in 1616.

"I knew that 2016 would be a great opportunity to celebrate these two literature giants. You cannot wait for another 100 years," Li Ruru says in an interview with China Daily in Beijing. "For me, it's also a wish to introduce Chinese theater to the foreign audiences because people don't know about it."

The collaboration compris-



“It's also a wish to introduce Chinese theater to the foreign audiences.”

Li Ruru, producer of *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming Under the Southern Bough*



The theater play *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming Under the Southern Bough* features young students from China and the United Kingdom, most of who are not theater majors.

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es of two parts: Chinese students from the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing interpret Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and students from the University of Leeds perform Tang's play *Record of the Southern Bough*. The production premiered at the University of Leeds on July 27 and moved to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

Last week, the production

was staged in Shanghai and Beijing. Its run ended in Fuzhou, Jiangxi province, Tang's birthplace, on Sept 25, as part of a series of events commemorating Shakespeare and Tang.

When Li Ruru initiated the idea of the production, it was considered "daydreaming" and "unachievable". But she went ahead and chose students who are not theater majors.

"The most interesting part

of the project is to have young people without theater knowledge to learn and perform works of Shakespeare and Tang," says Li Ruru.

One of the most challenging parts of the project was to shorten Tang's *Record of the Southern Bough*, a 22-hour, 44-scene work, which is about a drunk man's journey in his dream.

Adam Strickson, one of the co-adapters of Tang's *Record*

of the *Southern Bough*, says: "It's the longest play I've ever read. We had to find what matters to the audience.

"So, while retaining the differences, we look for what we have in common, such as where we go in life and the value of living in today's society as an individual."

Li Jun, who teaches European and American drama at the Beijing-based university and who co-wrote the script of *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming Under the Southern Bough*, says it's challenging for Chinese performers to make Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* relevant to a contemporary society.

"We made some changes to Shakespeare's original version from a Chinese perspective. For example, there are two men who love the same woman in the play, but we have two women who fall in love with the same man in our version. It's a way of showing the rise of women in Chinese society, with specific reference to urban young women," says Li Jun.

For Steve Ansell, the director of the production, his journey with the project could be said to have started in Shanghai in 2012 when he first visited China.

He first worked in Li Ruru's play *The Sun Is Not For Us*, which was inspired by Cao Yu and brought together characters and stories from the playwright's four most famous theater works in a one-hour production.

"The 400th anniversary presents the perfect opportunity to revisit, re-imagine and reposition Tang for a contemporary audience both in China and the UK as a contemporary of Shakespeare and as a master storyteller in his own right."

Rachel Turner, a 21-year-old student from University of Leeds, plays three roles in the production.

She decided to extend her stay in China for a year to study at Shanghai Theater Academy.

"This is a new experience for me and I hope that this performance will be the start of joining our cultures as well as our societies," says Turner.

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CULTURAL ICON

Leonard Cohen at 82, darker and solitary

By AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE in New York

Leonard Cohen has spent a lifetime meditating on his relationship to God and, at 82, he finds himself solitary as he wrestles with the ultimate metaphysical questions.

You Want It Darker, the 14th album by the Canadian singer and poet, brings out Cohen at his most classic and at his most probing as he ponders the nature of the individual and of the Almighty.

Celebrating his 82nd birthday on Wednesday, his record label announced that *You Want It Darker*, produced by his musician son Adam Cohen, would come out on Oct 21.

The album immediately opens with a flashback to the cultural icon's Montreal childhood with a rich yet mournful chorus from his hometown's Cantor Gideon Zelermyer and Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue choir.



Canadian songwriter Leonard Cohen will release a new album in October. AFP

Yet the signature sound on *You Want It Darker* is sparse, with resonant acoustic guitar and string bass, the music reinforcing Cohen's lonesome spiritual quest.

Cohen — whose best-known song, the oft-covered *Hallelujah*, explored God and the meaning of music — returns to biblical heritage on the title track of *You Want It Darker*.

Cohen in the song struggles to reconcile with the existence of evil — and how his life's own bourgeois concerns stack up in comparison.

Cohen, his influence and legacy undisputed, had unofficially retired in the 1990s and retreated to a Buddhist monastery in the Los Angeles area.

He initially resumed music for an unspiritual reason — his longtime manager was found to have stolen much of his savings.

But Cohen has found a new burst of creative energy since his return, with *You Want It Darker* following the emotionally intense yet more musically diverse album *Popular Problems* in 2014.

After the death in July of Marianne Ihlen — the Norwegian woman with whom he lived on the Greek island of Hydra and who inspired his song *So Long, Marianne* — her friend revealed a final letter from Cohen in which he declared his "endless love" and wrote, "I think I will follow you very soon."

With the seriousness on *You Want It Darker*, Cohen shows little of the more ironic side that gave him a pop culture mystique in the 1980s.

Yet there may be a hint of his old playful side. After releasing his last album, he joked that his resolution at age 80 was to resume smoking after years of depriving himself for health reasons.

The cover of *You Want It Darker* shows a grim, unshaven Cohen sporting a top hat — and a cigarette dangling between his fingers.

TOUR

Ma Di makes waves as US fans lap up his music

By CHEN NAN

The night before Ma Di performed at the Modern Sky Festival — an outdoor music event launched by Beijing-based indie label Modern Sky — on Sept 17 at Governors Island, New York, the Chinese folk singer-songwriter headed to Hotel Chelsea.

The 125-year-old hotel, a landmark of New York, is known for having hosted celebrated guests like Mark Twain, Bob Dylan and Andy Warhol.

But for Ma, this was a trip into his past.

Ma has a song called *Is There A Room 8301 at Hotel Chelsea*, which is in his debut album, *The Lonely Island*, which was released in 2014.

The song is full of melancholy and nostalgia and is about a girl and the passage of time.

Recounting his visit to the hotel, he says: "It was very

dark and it (Hotel Chelsea) is closed for renovation." And, he does not know if the hotel had a room 8301.

But despite this "setback", Ma is gung ho as he continues to tour the United States until Sept 30. He expected to visit Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles, among other US cities.

"This is my first America tour. I am more excited than nervous," says Ma.

"Most of the audiences, I guess, will be Chinese or Chinese-American, who listen to my music on the internet. But I am also looking forward to feedback from those who have never heard my songs before."

The Beijing-born singer-songwriter who comes from the indie music scene in China is one of his generation's most popular stars.

Since founding the indie-folk label Sesame Leaves in 2011, Ma has gained millions

of followers thanks to the internet.

His composition, *Nan Shan Nan* (South of the South Mountain) won rave reviews.

Its smooth melody and lyrics resonated with music lovers after it was performed by Zhang Lei, the winner of the popular TV reality show *The Voice of China*.

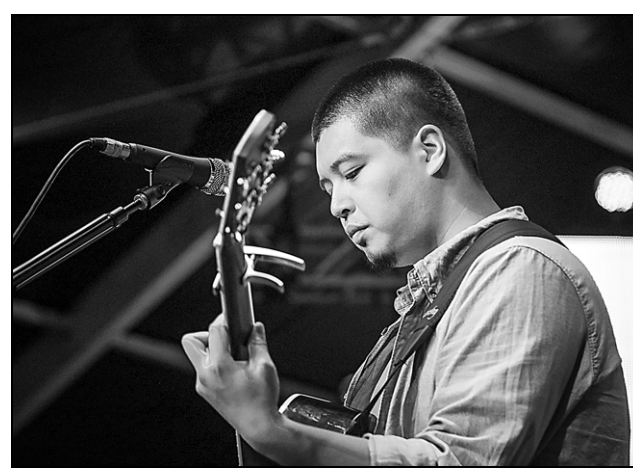
Ma launched his debut tour in China in 2015 and his latest single, *Jie Fei*, was released in June this year.

Speaking about *Nan Shan Nan*, he says: "For me, it's just one song, which is known by so many people.

"It does not have a big impact on me, and the only thing about it is that it has helped me to build a large following who listen to my other songs.

"I write songs for fun and for myself. I do not plan anything. It (the fame) just happened."

Ma has more than 800,000 followers on his Sina Weibo



Folk singer-songwriter Ma Di is on his US tour.

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account.

Before he became popular, Ma's dream was to release an album and perform onstage in Beijing.

Recalling his early days, he says it was his love for music that sustained him.

"I was a quiet child and unlike my classmates, who listened to pop music, I felt connected only when I listened to folk songs.

"Though the lyrics of those folk songs were difficult to understand, I found that I