



Magical meeting of the *MASTERS*

**Zhang Qian
and Hanna Eberli**

The "Shakespeare of the Orient" met the Bard of England in a production of "A Midsummer Night's Dreaming under the Southern Bough" at a theater in Shanghai last week.

The show combined the 17th-century masterpieces of Shakespeare and Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) playwright Tang

Xianzu, who both died 400 years ago this year.

"Shakespeare and his Chinese contemporary Tang Xianzu are the greatest playwrights of their respective theaters," said Li Ruru, professor of Chinese Theater Studies at the University of Leeds. "Their plays make us weep, laugh and imagine. They also touch our hearts and souls."

Last week's performance at the New Space Theater of the Shanghai Theater Academy was the

result of a two-year collaboration between students and staff from the University of International Business and Economics in China and the University of Leeds in Britain. In a twist, the Chinese side interpreted Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and their English counterparts tackled Tang's play "Nan Ke Ji," drawing on the theme of dreaming in both dramas.

CONTINUES ON B2

The Bard shares stage with Tang Xianzu

FROM B1

After Shanghai, the show moved on to Beijing for performances tonight and tomorrow night. It will end its run in the city of Fuzhou in Jiangxi Province, Tang's birthplace, on September 25.

The Chinese cast rendered the idea of a dream in the choices, confusions and hopes of contemporary youth pursuing true love and identity. The British side interpreted the social critique of Tang's play through the contemporary story of British soldier.

The show played to rave reviews earlier in Leeds and Edinburgh.

"The coincidence that Tang and Shakespeare died in the same year blessed the idea of doing something interesting," said Professor Li, who teaches at the School of Languages, Culture and Societies in Leeds.

With dreams as a major theme in both works, a thread existed for cross-cultural collaboration.

Students who were not theater majors yet were interested in it were selected for the project as a way to promote the great works of drama among ordinary young people. The Chinese team is comprised of students majoring in English, law and business. Eight of the 10 students from the British team have never had any exposure to China or Chinese culture.

"That makes the project much more interesting and significant, rather than just a usual student stagecraft," said Li.

Most Chinese are familiar with Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The task was to make the play relevant to contemporary society, according to Li Jun, who teaches English drama at the University of International Business and Economics in China.

That required a lot of constructive brainstorming.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream' is

a romance as much as a fairy tale," said Wang Bingying, a 21-year-old law student who worked as co-adaptor of the play. "Yet, we decided to make it more down-to-earth."

Apart from shifting Shakespeare's traditional "two men for one girl" pattern into a more modern "two girls for one man" model, the team created four trendy "coats" for the main characters. Lysander is portrayed as a chauvinist; Demetrius as a "spare tire," or back-up; Hermia as a daddy's girl hiding her rebellious nature; and Helena as a willful girl with an ego problem. Items like Facebook, Google map, rap and pearl bubble tea were there to provide contemporary fingerposts.

"We were thrilled to see the show so well-received both in Britain and China, though, interestingly, the different audiences seemed to respond to different jokes," said Han Nianxin, a 20-year-old majoring in business and English, who played Lysander.

"The Chinese students' work just seemed to perfectly tickle the audiences at the right spots," said Professor Li Ruru, "but it is



Students from the University of International Business and Economics in China and the University of Leeds in Britain reinterpret Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu's masterpieces in a new play "A Midsummer Night's Dreaming under the Southern Bough."

undeniable that their success stems from the fact that Shakespeare's work is so well known worldwide."

Li said she recently typed "Shakespeare" in the searching engine for the online catalogue of the China National Library and came up with about 23,000 references. When she typed in "Tang Xianzu," she only got about 3,000.

"A huge gap exists between the popularity of Shakespeare and familiarity with Tang in China, and it would definitely be much greater in Western countries," Li said. "The challenge was much harder for the British team."

When Steve Ansell, director of "Dreaming under the Southern Bough," first visited China, he worked on a play commemorating Chinese playwright Cao Yu's centenary. At that time, he noticed the wealth of wonderful stories and classical Chinese plays that were unknown in the West and often overlooked by audiences in China.

"When learning about theater in Europe, one never touches on Chinese theater, despite the complexity and long history of the Chinese culture," said Ansell.

The British team had to study Tang's work in an English translation. Even then, it was hard to grasp the exact meaning of the Chinese proverb "*nanke yimeng*," or "dream under the southern bough."

"It was like a 400-year-old wall

standing in front of us," said Liam Ashmore, who played Sam in the production, a friend of the hero Chun Yu. "But we were determined to scale it."

Professor Li, who worked on the creative team, tried to provide as much explanation of Tang's play as possible without foisting her own ideas on the British students.

"It would have been just meaningless for the British team to follow a Chinese understanding of Tang's work," said Li. "I think they did a great job interpreting the ancient Chinese tale in their own way. They gave Chun Yu an understandable background as a drunkard by depicting him as a soldier who lost his best friend and will to live during the Iraqi war."

Ansell said it's important to bridge the divide between cultures, exploring their differences with sensitivity.

"We always see differences as some sort of barrier, when, in fact, the opposite is true," said Ansell.

Rachel Turner, the 21-year-old who portrayed Prince Rattan Sandalwood in the play, decided to extend her stay in China for a year of study. "I am fascinated with Chinese theater, and I think it's a shame that it is not taught in drama schools in England," Turner said. "I want to study Peking Opera and take it home to introduce to a wider audience."

