

CULTURE

Aranya fires up theater festival

Visitors flock to seaside community for 11 days of art and performances, **Cheng Yuezhu** reports in Qinhuangdao, Hebei.

The seaside Aranya community in Qinhuangdao, Hebei province, has been a popular retreat since its founding. A library, a community hall and an art museum—all featuring minimalist architectural styles and restrained aesthetics, align a strip of beach.

The inaugural Aranya Theater Festival in 2021 kicked off an annual 10-day some summer celebration, and this year's festival once again took on a striking new look. From June 19 to 29 this year, the streets are dotted with dramatic installations and floats, avant-garde theater productions from around the world, and diverse activities.

This year's festival parade featured 14 futuristic floats presenting artists' works, performers of different genres, and countless visitors. As the procession reached its destination, a massive bonfire installation inspired by Indian literary giant Rabindranath Tagore's *Stray Birds* was lit, with the crowd singing along to music.

Audience members gathered at 3 am with the beach still enveloped by darkness to watch director Chen Minghua's *Eurydice and Sisyphus*. After the play, they ate dough sticks for breakfast, deep-fried by the director, and stepped out of the theater just in time to catch the first rays of sunrise.

Each June, the city's outdoor invited production at this year's festival, is also its first street theater production in its five-year history. Created and performed by Electro 28, comprising artists from Austria and Spain, the production is an observational, or even dissection, of human activities on an ordinary street or square.

Josep Cosials Montoliu, one of the creators behind the project, says that before work started on this production, the troupe already had a tradition of performing in public spaces, with a shared love for the

observations of everyday life. Each found inspiration in the book *Am Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* by French author Georges Perec, who sat on a square in Paris for three days and made notes of everything he observed.

"In this entertainment society, people expect many things to be happening. We explored the other way. Yes, mobile phones are interesting, but sometimes it's good to just sit on the street and watch what's going on," Cosials Montoliu says.

Performers hold up cardboard signs to pedestrians passing by or people nearby for relaxation and who mill about out of curiosity, with words like "waiting," "wailing," and "smiling." Sometimes, they point a microphone at passersby to capture the sound of footsteps or the whirring of bicycles, which are transmitted live to the audience's headphones.

There is also the element of connecting with people in the production, he adds. The performers interact with those nearby, asking them what they are doing or how they're feeling. The random responses given by the responders, caught off guard or came prepared, can often incite smiles or laughter among the audience members and onlookers.

"The Chinese audience is super open and curious. They are interested in what's going on," he says. The troupe has performed this creative project in more than 10 countries since its premiere in 2020, and has adapted the show to the local languages.

Each evening, the show is similar yet unique. The team usually selects a pedestrian zone with audience members seated on a side street that creates visual limits. The audience can view the movements from a certain section of the street as if looking into a frame.

Staged in different countries with different mentalities and knowledge of street theater, the performances elicit various responses. "Each time we perform, we learn more about the culture, the values, how people work, what they need, and what they like or don't like. We



Top: This year's Aranya Theater Festival presented 29 productions with a total of 94 performances in June. **Middle left:** Yu Ergo Dance Theater brings *Strange Tales*, inspired by classic novella Pu Songling's eponymous work. **Middle right:** *The Frame* is the only outdoor production this year. **Above:** The festival features theater sets up on the beach of the Aranya community in Qinhuangdao, Hebei province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

learn how to contribute to creating these little moments in the streets, making them shine a bit — to see each other more clearly," says Ana Redi-Milatovic, another performer.

This year, the theater festival included 29 productions with a total of 94 performances brought by 40 directors from China and abroad, among which 16 were international shows.

According to theater critic Zhang Zaitu, compared with other major

theater festivals in China, the Aranya Theater Festival has gradually developed a distinct style in terms of its program, aesthetics and theater venues.

Held inside a small community, the festival offers a dense, celebratory atmosphere with events such as invited productions, script-reading sessions, panel talks, and screenings taking place just around the corner.

"Visitors can enjoy a high density

of performances and information in a short time and fully immerse themselves in art without distractions, as if in a utopia cut off from reality," Zhang says.

An international scope, diversity, and hybridity are among its most notable features, Zhang adds. Not only is the percentage of international productions at a leading level in Chinese theater festivals, but many productions are known for

being bold and innovative.

In the dance theater production *Strange Tales*, dancer and choreographer Yu Ergo drew the audience into surreal and nightmarish scenes from Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) novelist Pu Songling's eponymous work.

The book is a collection of nearly 500 fantasy tales with supernatural characters, such as ghosts, fox spirits and divine entities. From the book, Yu and other members of the troupe selected several visually evocative stories and wove them into a dance piece primarily centered on human desire. "I was interested in the book, especially because it is classic Chinese literature. I'd never merged Chinese culture with contemporary dance before, so I wanted to try something new," she says.

The selected tales are deconstructed and reinterpreted into a nonlinear narrative. On stage, Pu is portrayed as sitting in a chair and slipping into a web of fantasies. As all the stage props are taken away, everything around him disperses at the end of the show.

The dance piece retains its contemporary qualities while adopting traditional Chinese aesthetics in terms of movement, stage and sound designs.

For the choreography, Yu explored a physical language that is representative of Chinese expressions yet rooted in contemporary dance. For the music, composer Jiang Weixin fused a range of genres, folk instruments and traditional Chinese opera singing styles.

"In Pu's mind, the ghosts and fox spirits speak to modern audiences, because they aren't just tales of the past; they resonate today," Yu says.

Contact the writer at chengyuezhuchina@china-daily.com.cn



Laughter and fear in equal measure in absurdist play

By CHEN NAN
chenan@china-daily.com.cn

In a dimly lit psychiatric hospital, three men claim to be insane.

One says he is Albert Einstein. Another insists he is Sir Isaac Newton. The third, more unselfishly quiet, is the actual physicist Johann Wilhelm Möbius.

As a comedy troupe, a classic European absurdist play meets the Chinese stage with gripping freshness, stirring both laughter and deep reflection.

The National Theatre of China unveiled a new staging of the Chinese stage adaptation of *The Physicists*, a "twisted comedy" by Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt.

Directed by stage veteran Wang Jianan, the production explores timeless questions of knowledge, responsibility, and the perils of scientific advancement — now against the backdrop of a rapidly modernizing world.

From the coming Wednesday to July 27, the Chinese play will be staged at the National Theatre of China in Beijing.

"We didn't just translate the play; we translated its central moral and philosophical tension," Wang says. "The heart of the play lies in the idea that knowledge is not neutral. Those who possess it bear moral responsibilities. This is especially powerful at a time when technologies like AI, nuclear energy, and biotechnology are rapidly advancing.

"We ask questions like: What happens when science outpaces ethics?" the director adds. "Theater doesn't solve problems, it asks questions and invites reflection."

Dürrenmatt's original script, written at the height of the Cold War, imagines three brilliant physicists hiding in an asylum to avoid unleashing potentially catastrophic knowledge.

When Wang first directed the play back in 2008, he was a 26-year-old



A scene from National Theatre of China's stage production *The Physicists* in Beijing. ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

young director just starting his career with the National Theatre of China. Over the years, he gained more experience in both theater and life.

He says that this new version will keep the audience engaged through humor. "When humor is woven into a

play like this, it doesn't dilute the message; it deepens it," says Wang, adding that in the play, the absurdity of three geniuses pretending to be insane in an asylum is funny, until it becomes terrifying. The humor heightens the contrast between what seems ridiculous and what is actually tragic.

Actor Zou Yidao, who plays the role of Möbius, says: "What attracts me most to this character's life is that he constantly shifts between 'madness' and 'brilliance.' Beneath that lies an incredibly complex game of human nature.

"It's this deep exploration of humanity that makes Dürrenmatt's work a timeless classic. I deeply resonate with the play's themes of scientific responsibility and social duty — questions that remain powerfully relevant as our society continues to evolve," Zou says.

It's also known for his comic timing, reinvents the role of Einstein as a

tery tech savant, while actor Wu Junda's Newton is utterly manic and unhinged in the first act but in the second, he becomes extremely calm and astute.

The Physicists is one of the eight productions that the theater is staging from June 20 to October 15 by Tian 80th anniversary of the victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45) and the World Anti-Fascist War.

Other highlights include *The Red Starving Prince*, co-edited by Tian Qinxiu, which focuses on the turbulent years from 1919 to 1921 and vividly portrays the birth of the Communist Party of China; and *Live Broadcast: The Founding Ceremony of the PRC*, also by director Tian, which tells the story of the technologists, engineers and radio broadcasters of Yan'an Xinhua Radio Station who were tasked with the live broadcasting of the founding ceremony of the People's Republic of China, which was held in Tiananmen Square in Beijing on Oct. 1, 1949.