

**Reopening of the Museum der Kulturen Basel
6 September 2011**

On Stage – The Art of Beijing Opera

The exhibition "On Stage – The Art of Beijing Opera" is thematically divided into two blocks. Exhibits highlighting the various elements of Beijing opera will be shown on the Museum's impressively designed top floor with its irregularly folded roof. The second part of the exhibition presents works by contemporary Chinese artists on subjects inspired by elements and aspects of Beijing opera.

Comparisons between Beijing opera and opera as understood in the west can only go so far. In western opera, music acts as the medium driving actions, moods and emotions. By contrast, Beijing opera combines singing, speech, acting and pantomime with combat, acrobatics and dance. The performers use these artistic skills to present historical stories and myths, contemporary dramas and adaptations of western plays.

Another distinguishing feature is the body of formal, stylistic and symbolic conventions that defines Beijing opera. Accordingly, knowledge of these codes is indispensable to an understanding of Beijing opera. Each costume, each type of face mask, each element of mime, each gesture, movement and colour has its own special meaning. Consequently, content and performance have equal standing. All of the stories are extremely well known. The excitement and interest lies in the presentation and interpretation and the performances of the individual actors.

Exhibits and audiovisual media

The exhibits on the top floor all have to do with elements of Beijing opera: splendid costumes and accessories, make-up masks, musical instruments, props and photographs, just to mention a few of the objects. They highlight the continuities and changes in the history of the development of Beijing opera. The exhibition accentuates both the material aesthetic and the conventions and stylizations used to mediate intangible emotions and characters. Gradually we find them working their spell on us as well. To complement the objects, a media station plays recordings of music and song to enable visitors to adjust acoustically to the sounds that are initially strange to western ears. Jürg Neuschwander's 12-minute film about "The Upright Judge Bao" takes us into rehearsal rooms that are otherwise closed to the public. It shows the cast's strenuous rehearsals and accompanies the Shanghai Beijing Opera Ensemble to the traditional Yifu Theatre in Shanghai.

From artist to role to stage

In Beijing opera, audiences learn about the location, plot and drama of the tale through the actors' costumes and performance. Many of the great performers enjoyed a cult status well beyond the borders of China. A magnificent painting from the late nineteenth century shows the 13 most famous actors of the age. In the course of the exhibition, visitors can follow the transformation of a performer into the role of a character step by step, from the dressing room to the stage. The individual exhibits are presented in coherent groups to enable visitors to perceive Beijing opera as the sum of harmonizing and mutually reinforcing individual elements.

How is Beijing opera staged?

The programmatic focus of the exhibition is the staging of Beijing opera. The focal point of Beijing opera is the performer caught between role and personality, between identification and identity, and between performance and reality. Each performance explores different influences, structures and prerequisites as well as the relevance of roles, codes and rituals. In the final analysis, it is a question of generating identity by the manner in which we speak, think and act, and of changing this identity solely by consciously challenging one's self-image and other people's perception of that image.

Exhibition publication

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated publication with complementary material for further reading. The first section provides an historic overview of changes and continuities in Beijing opera and its communication techniques in the context of social, cultural and political development processes. The second section examines the nature of Beijing opera as performance, focusing on the interaction between the performer and the role he or she embodies. The individual elements (costumes, make-up masks, music and movements) and their function are explained here. The third section deals with the reception of traditional and foreign elements. It discusses the recent history of the reception of Beijing opera, examines contemporary "experiments" and ventures a tentative look at future trends. The sections are linked by groups of images and reproductions of contemporary artworks.

The exhibition is being organized in conjunction with the Mei Lanfang Memorial Museum in Beijing.