

## Ya-Ling Peng

# Turning the Tables Around

Uhan Shii Theatre Group focuses on oral history theatre. Our group members come from all over Taiwan. They can be old performers of traditional folk opera, house-wives or retired businessmen. These people do not live on or around the stage. I have travelled throughout many towns and villages to find, interview and invite them to come to Taipei for training and rehearsals for the *Echoes of Taiwan* series.

### WARM-UPS

When the members of my group first came into our studio, I received the greatest shock of my entire career. The women all had outlandish hairdos, long dresses and strong perfume. The men all had greased-up hair, suits and dress shoes. I, on the other hand, had only a t-shirt and a pair of shorts on. When they showed up dressed like movie stars, I quickly re-programmed all the warm-up exercises I had been doing over the past ten years. All the routines were either cancelled, changed or re-constructed. But still, it did not work out. They didn't like the warm-ups at all. Their feet hurt while standing; they fell asleep sitting; their blood pressure went up lying down; they got dizzy; they were too stiff to move around... Some people even began to come in half an hour late just to avoid the warm-ups.

To solve this problem, I started to get up early in the morning, go to the park and observe how ordinary citizens work-out. Of course, it was a far cry from the theatre training I had been used to. So, I invited the instructor in the park to come and teach us. The movements were simple, sort of like a watered-down version of Tai Chi and Qi-Gon. The instructor used popular music for the tempo. We only had to follow him, breath in and out and feel good. It worked. They all got warmed up. Then I invited a traditional Chinese doctor to teach us simple Qi-Gon movements for various ailments, such as stomach-ache, lower back pain, common colds and fatigue. We used these simple Qi-Gon movements to ease any discomfort there was. They worked wonders, especially when we did it together with

enough Chi in the room.

## GAMES

When their bodies were finally warmed up, we started to play games. These were simple games like "Tom and Jerry" or "1, 2, 3, Freeze". I introduced different elements to create a new accent within the games, such as different tempos and new levels of status, different rules for winning and losing. At this point, it was getting close to the activities common in theatre. I even took them to sing in Karaoke pubs, barbecue in the park, enjoy hot springs - all in the hope of rekindling their memories of the songs, games and culinary delights of the years long past.

Then, I turned the table around and asked them to teach *me* games instead; games that belonged to their own era. Since we could not find such toys any more, we had to rely on miming. We pretended to be throwing mud pies on the ground and see whose mud pies were stronger. We played football with imaginary tin cans. We rolled imaginary iron wheels uphill, downhill or several at a time. Besides playing to my heart's content, I also introduced different elements into the games to change them and give them a new twist. This approach helped me a great deal during the rehearsals later on. Group members felt that they had taught me all these games and hence they were truly the focus of our play. This allowed them to feel at ease and be able to present themselves comfortably.

## INTERVIEWS

A lot of people had asked me: "How do you conduct interviews?" I know how to conduct interviews, but I don't know how to tell people how I do it, because there are all sorts of variants due to the different times, different places and different people. My attitude is always "listening and being there with them". After all, all I had to give in

exchange for their life stories was my sincerity. My goal was to let things happen without pushing. They didn't have to use tear-jerking and heart-wrenching stories to please me. I am not a journalist. I don't have to meet deadlines. My way of doing things is to be there with them through long periods of time and to keep listening. I don't rob them of their stories, nor do I prey on their privacy. I am an editor. It is as if I opened a treasure chest which contained thirty or three-hundred stories. I picked the one that shone most, small fragments that were the most original, the simplest, the ones they found most inspiring in their lives.

I remember once I asked a member to tell her story in her mother-tongue, the Shen-Tow dialect. She said she had forgotten the dialect and refused. I called and asked her daughter. She said: "My mother lied to you." It took me four years to do this interview. With support from her family and other group members, at last she spoke in her mother tongue and told the story in a game of "Who is the bride?"

Once, I was in a military village putting stories into Boxes of Memories, stories about their struggle to survive from mainland China to Taiwan after the Second World War. An old man kept switching the photos and stories stealthily. He wanted to show us the story of having five well-educated children and a pretty good life. But I wanted to present the story about him fifty years ago. He bought two comic books with the five dollars he had left and hung the books on the lamppost for rent. The next day, he bought more comic books with the money he earned. In two years, he had accumulated forty thousand comic books. This is the story I wanted to tell. He must be one of the most resilient veterans there ever was. He kept this stealth operation up from March until July. The two of us went back and forth like a cat and a

mouse doing a tango together. Finally, I allowed both stories to be present and he rested his case happily.

Although I was doing an interview with one individual, the whole family often became my greatest support and ally. They helped to reconstruct old memories, offered emotional support, and joked around. There was one family with five grown children. The kids talked about the extra-marital affair their father (my subject) had had and made the whole thing seem funny. Even the wife seemed to forget the pain and joined in the conversation jokingly. Yes, I want my subjects to still have a warm understanding from their family after they pour out their memories long ago in my theatre. Moreover, the families became our volunteers and drivers. They made props and served as stage hands.

## REHEARSALS

I wrote the script according to the members' stories. Even when I already knew what I wanted to do, I waited for my group members to show me how. They taught me how to work in the rice field, how to run for shelter during an aerial attack, how to do the laundry by the river. I could transform all these experiences into stage performances. But, they did not want to present anything they considered negative. For this, I had to use daily codes as rituals. For instance, at the beginning of *Story of the Taiwanese Men*, the wife bathed her husband continuously for five minutes. Five minutes is a long time on stage. The smooth music and the ritualistic daily movements mesmerized and captured the audience and made their hearts full. Through this daily activity, the relationship between men and women was presented in the most natural way.

Another example is that they told me that their strongest impression of their mothers was "hands stretched out for

money". So I used the repetitive image of a mother standing, head down, child on her lap, with her hand stretched out for money. She was almost like a live statue and made the audience breathlessly moved.

*If You Had Called Me* tells the story of the day when people left mainland China to come to Taiwan. There were a lot of separations. The performers repeated the same movement: they raised their hand, pulled out a strand of hair, waved in the air and then let the hair fly away. At the same time, there were some kids on stage playing "1, 2, 3, Freeze". When they called out the word "Freeze!" these old men and women froze in position and we could see what was happening at that particular moment.

I also search for everyday objects to be used as metaphorical props. In the Hakka play *We Are Here*, the blue scarf represents Hakka, a migrating people. When they left a place, they needed the blue scarves to wrap things in. Carrying the blue scarves on their backs is also a burden. From these, the blue scarf became a metaphor for self-discovery and self-recognition.

My group members are not professional performers. I had to make all the movements common to daily life. In the Hakka plays, there was an old woman with a face and body sculptured by age whom I especially liked. She could just sit there quietly and was full of stories already. When the curtain was raised, I arranged for her to sit in the middle of the stage, folding nine layers of blue scarves, one after another, as if she was going to take off. At the end of the play, she opened up each layer of the blue scarves, as if smoothing over all the pains in her bitter and difficult life.

I also found sensual rituals from their stories. A little girl who missed her mother held her own little clothes, smelled them and called out for Mum. An old man who missed his wife sniffed the grocery

basket looking for familiar scents. A woman who had lost her mother held on to her mother's clothes and kept sniffing. Aroma is a very unique experience in our memories. Visual and audio elements are always present in the theatre. The element of aroma adds to the personal flavour. I have to reserve a large enough space in my rehearsals for the performers to get ready both physically and emotionally. Plus, they might, at any given time, add more personal experiences, or experiences they had come to accept during the process.

Childhood games are my favourite rehearsal tools. In the Hakka plays, a lot of the group members came from large families with forty or fifty family members. The scene was in the kitchen. These people who came from large families claimed that they got along so well that they never fought. This surprised me a great deal. My parents have been fighting in the kitchen for the past fifty years. My husband and I have been fighting in the kitchen for the past ten years. How come a family of forty or fifty people could live like angels in heaven and not fight in the kitchen? So we played the game of "Tom and Jerry". Each one of us had a white towel on our back, stuffed around our waists. The point was not so much grabbing the others' towels, but to intimidate them. Eventually, aunts, cousins and uncles all joined in the fight. That's how we worked out the scene for a fight in the large family.

### EXPLORATION

Although I had lots of stories to choose from and I knew which ones were the best, after I intuitively made my choices, I still often asked myself: "Why this one?" "What are you trying to tell me?" "Why should I hear about this story?" Very often, I realised that something about the story had touched a certain place in my soul. This particular place might represent a void in my life, even a black

hole. When the person told the story bravely, they forced me to face the void myself. Every story brought me into a room full of mirrors of humanity. Amongst the mirrors' reflections, I had to find myself, without hiding, without pretence, in order to present it on stage for the audience. Therefore, choosing and rehearsing the stories became my own journey of self-discovery.

YA-LING PENG (Taiwan) has been an actress, director and playwright since 1981. She is a founding member of Square-Round Theatre. From 1988 to 1991, Ya-Ling studied acting in London and joined the professional touring theatre, Tragic Carpet. Ya-Ling co-operates with many professional groups and also helped the cities of Kau-Sheion, Shin-Chong and Shin-Jeou to start their own community theatres, directing their first performances. After founding the first elder's theatre, Modern Form Theatre Group, in Tainan, in 1993, Ya-Ling Peng founded Uhan Shii Theatre Group in Taipei in 1995. The performances usually refer to real stories told in the first person by their protagonists, mostly people who are not professional actors. Past performances have touched on mother-daughter relationships, emigration and the consequences of Taiwan's separation from China.