



hile many *laowai* make a beeline for the Peking opera when visiting China on account of its sheer exoticness, it is actually now regarded as terribly uncool by young Chinese - and sure enough, when I arrive at the Yifu Theatre near People's Square, the median age of the audience seems to be about 85. As I begin to wonder whether I can learn to become a Peking opera singer without sacrificing my Shanghainese street cred, I am whisked backstage to meet the person who has agreed to mentor my rise to stardom, the award-winning actress Tian Hui, who is performing in a production of the classic drama A Substitute for a Prince.

In preparation, I have been reading up on the history of Peking opera schools, where students were plucked from their families, made to practice for up to 18 hours a day and were regularly caned by their masters, and so I am eyeing Tian suspiciously when I approach her in the make-up chair. Thankfully, the 29-year-old actress-who herself entered training at the age of 11 with the renowned performer Mei Baojiu - seems like a good egg, and it's difficult to be afraid of someone sporting a bright pink face. The make-up signifies which sort of character she is playing, as in Peking opera there are four main types of roles: the

She tells me that I am to learn the role of the dan; I'm assured that like in Jacobean drama, men often take the roles of women (in the early days they did so

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dan (female), sheng (male),

jing (general or warrior with

a painted face), and chou

(the clown).

exclusively). I realise that this will be my only chance to try on one of the magnificent fake beards hanging on a big rail backstage but unfortunately the guy who looks after the beards - a whole job in itself, it turns out - isn't there, so I'm not allowed.

The plot centers on an Emperor Zhao Heng, who tells his two concubines that whomever can produce him a male heir first, can sit at his side as Empress. When Concubine Li finds out that Concubine Liu has All it seems to borne a boy, she swaps be is twirling the newborn baby for a skinned cat and tells the Emperor that Liu has given birth to a 'devil'. Chaos ensues.

The performance goes down a treat, and especially good bits - expressive movement, or humour - are met with shouts of 'Hao!' (bravo!) from the audience. Of course, everybody is wearing outlandish costumes and huge headgear and singing in

an extraordinary fashion. I surmise that it really can't be too difficult: after all, all it seems to be is

twirling your hands around a lot and widening your eyes to the point where you look like a mad person. When I arrive at the Shanghai Jingju Theatre Company two days later to train with Tian Hui, she thrusts a costume into my hands, a robe with impractically long sleeves. Known as shuixiu, or 'water' sleeves, their function is to exaggerate

trying to create, and are especially important for the dan character.

It fast becomes apparent that it isn't really as simple as twirling your hands around a lot. Getting the shuixiu right proves to be a massive pain in the arse. There are particular finger formations and ways of flinging the fabric around your wrists that are considered beautiful - and being beautiful, it turns out, is the main point of Peking opera. According to Tian, it's also what's going to get old men shouting 'Hao!' at me (at least more than they do already).

'Beautiful' is a whole sub-move in itself, in fact, and involves pointing your right foot and placing it behind the left, and holding both your hands up to one side. We do it repeatedly, chanting 'Beautiful!' each time we do so, and it feels empowering, like the sort of thing I should be doing in the mirror first thing in the morning. Then, we move onto sadness, which is communicated by lengthening the right sleeve between your two hands, holding it in front of your face, and making sobbing sounds. We also practice shyness and anxiety.

Tian continually repositions my elbows, as Peking opera values 'round' bodily movements, and reminds me to adjust my face. 'Whether you are beautiful depends

on your face,' she says, 'so you really need to care about your eyes and expression.' I also have to make sure to dramatically stare off into the distance while executing all of these moves. It's a lot to remember and to be perfectly honest I'm

quite shit at it.

vour hands

around a lot

We decide to work on getting my voice stage-ready. Tian says that to sing the part of the dan I must perfect a 'fake voice', which there is some confusion over until I realise she means falsetto. Bizarrely, Tian is bowled over by the alleged strength of my falsetto. So much so that we spend almost an hour practicing and

listening back to recordings of myself reciting 'Niang, Niang!' (Empress, Empress!)

as well as a musical phrase in classical Chinese that I am required to sing over and over with no idea of its meaning.

I ask Tian if it would be feasible for me to become a Peking opera star aged 29, and she responds in the negative. 'You can practice for fun, and make it your hobby,' she tells me, 'but to be a professional you must start from an early age.' I respond by making the 'sadness' gesture at her, and she looks at me impassively and tells me I'm doing it wrong. At least she doesn't cane me.





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