

THE SHANGHAI ACROBATS  
and  
IMPERIAL WARRIORS  
OF THE PEKING OPERA

Sunday Afternoon, October 28, 1990, at 3:00  
Power Center for the Performing Arts  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

*The Company*

**Male Acrobats**

Pan, Lian-Hua  
Pan, Lian-Qing  
Zhang, Jia-Cheng  
Zheng, Jian-Qing  
Jiang, Song-Xian  
Lu, Wei-Zhong  
Tang, Wei-Feng  
Zhao, Ping-Sheng

**Female Acrobats**

Xing, Wei-Lian  
Ni, Jing  
Zhu, Wei-Zhen  
Yu, Wen-Tong

**Actors**

Zhao, Lei  
Zhang, Yong-Liang

Xu, Bin  
Wu, Shuang  
Zhu, Jun  
Zhang, Chong-Yi  
Liu, Cheng  
Yan, Qing-Gu  
Zhang, Fan  
Zhang, Xin-Tian

*Xu, Zhi-Yuan, Leader*

*Yang, Zhen-Dong, Leader & Make-up for the Opera Company*

*Zhang, Shun-Di, Wardrobe Mistress*

*Huang, Xiu-Zhen, Interpreter*

*Fan, Yang-Long, Chef*

The Shanghai Acrobats and Imperial Warriors of the Peking Opera are represented by Columbia Artists Festivals, a division of Columbia Artists Management Inc., New York.

**Special thanks to:**

Xiao, Yan, *Deputy Director, Shanghai Cultural Bureau*; Wu, Dun-Hong, *Manager, Shanghai Cultural Exchange Agency*; Zhang, Jian, *Vice Manager, Shanghai Cultural Exchange Agency*; Li, Wei-He, *Director of American Affairs Section, Bureau of External Cultural Relations*; Chen, Shu-Yu, *Cultural Consular, Consulate General of the P.R.C., Los Angeles*; Liu, Maoyou, *Advisor, Shanghai Cultural Exchange Agency*

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# PROGRAM

## Fighting at the Crossroads

In the "Fighting at the Crossroads," a heroic soldier, traveling in disguise as he escorts an exiled general, stops at an inn for the night and is attacked by a patriotic innkeeper who mistakes him for an enemy. The entire fight is set in the room of the inn in the pitch dark of night, although the action is completely visible to the audience. With a combination of grace and comedy, the soldier and the innkeeper, and subsequently the general, continually attack and miss each other. Once the candle is relit, illuminating the scene, they discover to their astonishment that they are actually old friends.

Yan, Qing-Gu; Zhang, Fan; Wu, Shuang

## Barrel Plunge Contortionist

Yu, Wen-Tong

## Pagoda of Bowls

Zhang, Jia-Cheng and Ni, Jing

## Jar Juggling

Zhao, Ping-Sheng

## Kitchen Calisthenics

Pan, Lian-Hua and Xing, Wei-Lian

## The Young Monkey King Disturbs the Dragon Palace

This scene is from the opera *Havoc in Heaven*, which is based on one of the stories in the sixteenth-century fantasy novel *Journey to the West*. Its protagonist is the ever-popular folk hero, the cheerful and disrespectful Monkey King, whose magic wand throws back the swords of almost any number of enemy soldiers, and whose somersaults and intricate steps entrance the members of the audience while his complete effrontery always reduces them to mirth.

The Monkey King's adversaries in a battle at the bottom of the sea are two of the Dragon King's generals, one in the form of a shrimp, and the other a turtle.

Liu, Cheng as the Young Monkey King  
with Xu, Bin and Zhao, Lei

## Lion Dance

Jiang, Song-Xian; Zheng, Jian-Qing; Tang, Wei-Feng;  
Lu, Wei-Zhong; Zhang, Jia-Cheng; Zhu, Wei-Zhen; Ni, Jing



## INTERMISSION

### Complaining to the Devil

The minions of the King of the Underworld perform intricate acrobatics to impress their master and to urge him to uphold justice in his realm.

Wu, Shuang; Zhang, Xin-Tian; Zhang, Chong-Yi;  
Zhao, Lei; Zhu, Jun; Zhang, Yong-Liang

### Nose Balancing

Xing, Wei-Lian

### Vaulting Bar Act

Zhu, Wei-Zhen; Lu, Wei-Zhong; Tang, Wei-Feng

### Bench Balancing

This act features an acrobat who was declared the "Strongest Man in Shanghai" by competitive weight lifting. He places one bench upon another atop his head, creating a tower of nineteen benches weighing over 400 pounds.

Pan, Lian-Qing

### More Kitchen Calisthenics

Pan, Lian-Hua and Xing, Wei-Lian

### The Monkey King in the Heavenly Palace

Prior to this scene, also from *Havoc in Heaven*, the Jade Emperor tries to win the Monkey King over by granting him the grandiose title of "Great Saint," but conferring on him the insignificant chore of watching over the Peach Garden of Heaven. Then, because of not being invited to a feast given by the heavenly Queen Mother, the Monkey King starts out on an escapade of insubordination and vandalism. He eats the sacred peaches and other rare delicacies and drinks the celestial wine, all of which had been reserved for the Queen Mother's guests of gods and fairies. He continues by swallowing the most precious elixir of life and reduces the planned banquet to a shambles. Having destroyed his surroundings, he retreats to his cave on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit.

Our action begins with a great stir in the court of heaven. The Jade Emperor orders his heavenly generals to capture the mischievous monkey. But the Monkey King uses his tremendous magic power, as well as his mischievous martial wizardry, to frustrate Heaven's attempts to crush him.

Yan, Qing-Gu as the Monkey King  
with all the Imperial Warriors of the Peking Opera



## About the Artists

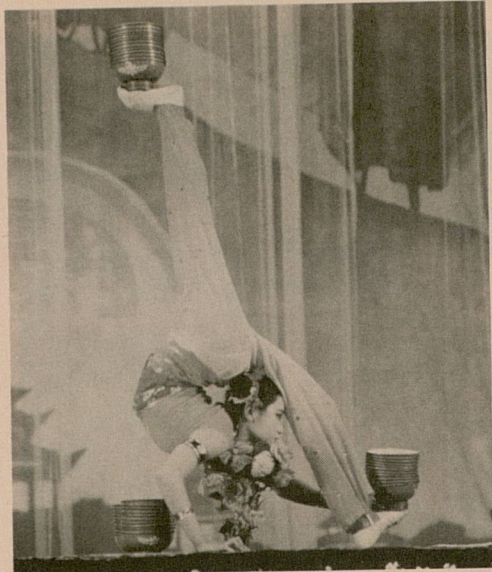


**E**stablished in 1951, the Shanghai Acrobats have toured more than twenty countries and have won many awards in national competitions. Many experienced travelers throughout Asia consider them to be one of the greatest tourist attractions of China, if not the entire Far East. The troupe maintains a 1600-seat acrobatic amphitheater in Shanghai, where they perform six sold-out shows each week. A training center is located just outside Shanghai where acrobatics, animal training, and aerial acts are taught. Membership in this prestigious company is a coveted honor and a lifelong occupation. When a member becomes too old to perform, he or she is given another job in the theatre, such as costume design, training of young acrobats, or administration of troupe affairs.

Joining the Shanghai Acrobats for this tour are the Incredible Acting Acrobats of the Peking Opera. The classical Peking Opera is grand opera, ballet, an acrobatic display, and an historical play rolled into one, and has remained unchanged for generations. The Imperial Warriors will recreate four of the most popular martial sequences in the Peking Opera repertoire, including two battle scenes from the famous opera *Monkey King Creates Havoc in Heaven*. All of these excerpts are fully staged with elaborate costumes and the spectacular make-up associated with this colorful art.

Together, the Shanghai Acrobats and Imperial Warriors of the Peking Opera bring an exciting presentation of two art forms that require absolute discipline and represent a centuries-old cultural tradition.

## A Brief History of Chinese Acrobatics



Chinese acrobatics was at first a folk art that originated from the daily lives of the people, including their work, battles, and sacrificial rites. During the Warring States period (770-476 B.C.), acrobatics became widespread, and it was believed that the required discipline could steel people's will, as well as increase their physical strength and accuracy of movement.

During the peaceful years of the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220), acrobatic arts flowered into a form of entertainment. They became part of the celebration of a good harvest, and folk performers were summoned to the imperial courts to amuse visitors with a variety of feats. Next came years of chaos, during which acrobatics were almost forgotten; however, in A.D. 589, there was another upsurge in popularity that led to the best acrobats being registered as professional performers and traveling to other countries as part of a huge cultural exchange called the "Hundred Entertainments." Many acrobatic feats were expanded upon during this time, particularly the human pagoda, rope-walking, and the dancing horse.

After the collapse of the Tang dynasty, China once again fell into a state of confusion, and of all the arts included in the "Hundred Entertainments" only acrobatics continued to thrive. Spinning tops and jug-

gling with both hands and feet were added to the repertoire of the acrobats. During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, acrobatics were scorned by the rulers as an unrefined form of entertainment, but the townspeople loved it. Consequently, acrobats gave most of their performances at local open-air festivals and, by 1949, the art had been transformed by this change: performances were designed for large arenas, feats of physical prowess were added, and acts became shorter and more flexible.

In 1950, after the founding of New China, reconstruction took place, and the Ministry of Culture of the Central People's Government set about establishing an acrobatic troupe to revive the traditional acrobatic arts. Outstanding acrobats from major cities in China came together in Beijing, and each performed his or her own masterpiece. Soon China's acrobats were organized into large professional troupes, and today there are over 250 acrobatic arts organizations in China.

Acrobats are held in high esteem by the Chinese community, receiving the same kind of respect that is bestowed upon ballerinas and opera singers in the United States. Training for an acrobatic troupe starts as early as age eight. The first two years are spent in basic training, which focuses on balancing, tumbling, dancing, flexibility, and strength training, and the next three to five years are spent training for a specific act. Acts may be selected by students, but are most often assigned by the troupe's instructors according to need and recognized ability. Before becoming performers, students spend one year perfecting their acts. The average age of first-time performers is about fifteen. Students are also given academic training, and they must pass an academic examination in order to perform.

For some of the performers, the acrobatic tradition often has been passed from generation to generation in their family. Others gain admission to the troupe with an audition or are singled out in a gymnastic school.

The decision to join an acrobatic troupe is a lifetime commitment; the troupe becomes the performer's life.

## Peking Opera, Then and Now

**A**theatrical complex that integrates literature, fine art, dance, and martial arts, Peking opera is performed by means of singing, acting, recitation, and acrobatics. The Yuan period (1279-1368) — the Mongol period of which Kublai Khan was the first emperor — is considered the golden age of the classical opera in China, though in various forms it dates back as far as the Zhou dynasty (771-221 B.C.). During numerous dynasties since then, the form has evolved and grown, but throughout, the role of the classical Chinese opera has often been to sustain the morale of the common people. It was condoned by the authorities because it placed the desire for change in an historical setting rather than a contemporary one and was woven around legendary or historical happenings. The chief figures are beings from another world or characters from the ancient periods of China's history.

Along with the political and artistic elements in Chinese opera, the authors and directors always kept foremost in their works the concept of entertainment. Acrobatics was the favorite medium of popular entertainment, so acrobatic martial conflicts and acrobatic comedy form the basis of many of the great Peking opera "hits," such as the Monkey King dramas.

The Monkey King is a truly popular hero. No adversary is too big or too pompous for him to take on — even the whole court of heaven. In the minds of the Chinese people, the Monkey King has always represented the common man, winning victories that the common people would like to achieve, against all obstacles placed before him.

Today, the old stories have become even more meaningful to the Chinese people, who have themselves struggled heroically against aggression, producing a new generation of heroes and heroines.

In Peking opera, the story and characters are revealed through stylized movements. Each actor has to perfect an immensely intricate series of body movements, such as staggering steps, slipping steps, jumping, mincing, cross steps, and ghost steps. There are over fifty sleeve movements to be learned

— the sleeve that repulses, that hides what is being said, that disguises the actor, that greets or says farewell, that calls attention to the character, or that is used for shading the face.

Acrobatic fighting consists of the hand-to-hand fight without regalia (combat on foot) and the fight in full regalia (armored senior warriors on horseback). In these hand-to-hand fights, using all kinds of ancient weapons, the actors do not touch each other, but give the whirlwind effect of a tremendous battle. They require a physical and mental precision that can only be acquired through extremely rigid and careful training.

The rich and varied melodies and rhythms of the singing help to bring out the thoughts and feelings of the characters in different dramatic situations. Recitation of soliloquies and dialogues, marked by rhythmic intonation and musical modulation, are sometimes sonorous and forceful, sometimes melancholic and moving.

The magnificent embroideries and brilliant colors of the costumes come from the Ming period (1368-1644) when the official world did actually indulge in very splendid robes, though operatic costuming is really a mixture of styles. Every costume has meaning. A blue-lined coat denotes a student, a cream-colored one is worn by ancient villagers, etc. In addition, a beard divided into three indicates the righteousness and integrity of the wearer. A short moustache shows that the wearer is somewhat crude and rough, and one that sweeps upward belongs to a tricky, slippery fellow.

A fascinating custom is that of painting the faces of the actors. Masks are worn only to represent animals; the highly developed art of painting the face conveys more subtle meaning. Admirable characters are painted in relatively simple colors. For example, a lot of red indicates courage, loyalty, and straightforwardness; more black denotes impulsiveness. A blue face is a cruel one. A crook who is completely untrustworthy is given a white, often twisted face.

Currently, all of the larger cities in China have permanent "Peking" Opera companies, recovering and preserving more of this art form.