

Helsingin Sanomat: The Last Warrior review
Culture 20.8.2015
Jussi Tossavainen



Wusheng Company's virtuoso founder, Antti Silvennoinen plays the part of the stubborn General Gao Chong.

The Last Warrior

Performed by: Antti Silvennoinen, Tero Saarinen, Elias Edström, Ville Seivo, (troops)
Venue: The Finnish National Theatre

If Wusheng Company's last Beijing Opera, The banishing of righteous General was an event, the Festival Weeks' Last Warrior is an Event.

The Performance group has grown and one new name for it could be a Cluster of Talent. Do they perform Beijing Opera anywhere outside China, other than in Finland? Not as skilfully and as in earnest?

The oddly titled art form demands versatile skills and is by nature one complete art form in itself, if anything.

Last Warrior, directed by Lü Suosen is one of the more well-known Beijing Opera combat plays. With its entirely male cast, the show focuses on combat and fight preparation.

Naturally the show includes acrobatics and battle simulated scenes.

Despite the masculinity, everything is performed elegantly and stylised in true Beijing Opera fashion. No blood on stage. Brecht in his day was also impressed by alienation.

Co-founded by the brilliant Antti Silvennoinen and Elias Edström, the performance does offer some surprises. In traditional Beijing Opera the stage is simple, scenery representational and the whole show fully lit. In this show, the atmosphere is more tense with smoke, awesome lighting and reflections on mystical landscapes. Created by none other than the Lord of lights, Mikki Kunttu.

A surprise name is also Tero Saarinen, making his debut in Beijing Opera. His dancing and choreography talents are already well-known, but this discipline is a new world for him.

As expected, Saarinen shows physical expression skilfully. His very presence carries the role of Commander-in-Chief with the necessary reverence. All the details are there, such as his delicate handling of loose sleeves and clothes. He doesn't sing the "Aaria" section so we can only read it from the captions shown.

No great loss. Besides being charismatic, Saarinen doesn't show off, but is a natural member of the ensemble.

One more surprise was in the prologue with its delightful retro-styled map-animated and narration. I wondered who was narrating this with such pleasant and correctly pronounced Chinese names. It's Ismo Alanko, of course!

I marvelled at the previous show as to how the script, translated into Finnish, works not only linguistically but also culturally. Intonation, foreign to Finnish language didn't worry me at all, rather the recitals sounded like a discipline in their own right, an archaic style.

Add a war party to the performance, who, with their acrobatic skills, provide plenty of pace, action and danger.

The show's climax comes when stubborn General Gao Chong goes against orders and starts to fight the troops on his own. The precisely choreographed battle is circus, physical expression, mime and dance at their very best. Stylized and aesthetically brilliant. Antti Silvennoinen, who studied this discipline in China, is the shining star of the show.

Silvennoinen gives a virtuoso performance in the scene where Gao is wounded. The thud of his death is even comical. And Tragedy and comedy don't cancel each other out in any way.

The dramatic final scene brings the whole story together and graces the hero, the final warrior.