

Peking Opera a renewed attraction for young learners

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Peking Opera remains an attraction not only for traditional culture enthusiasts but also for preschool children and young learners who consider it a fashionable art form that stands out from other activities for children.

“For this generation of children, Peking Opera shares a similar position as other hobbies like piano, ballet, street dance and painting,” said Peking Opera artist Wang Peiyu, who has been introducing the traditional Chinese art form to youngsters and school students in Shanghai over the years.

“Unlike their parents who tend to prefer Western culture, teenagers nowadays find learning and practicing Peking Opera cool. Some show off by taking a bow or posing in front of their classmates,” she said. “All of this has come with a changing social environment over the decades, which benefits the popularization and development of traditional Peking Opera.”

Wang set up her Yuyin Society at the cultural complex of The INLET in Hongkou District last year, popularizing the traditional Chinese opera genre with courses, exhibitions and cultural salons.

Earlier this month, Yuyin Society was packed with children as a Peking Opera youth class began its second student recruitment, targeting learners aged between 5 and 10. Wang took part in



Li Xintong performs in front of judges during the recruitment. — Ti Gong

the interview, selecting students for the youth class herself.

“We recruit children at 5-10 years old because younger kids might not be able to react correctly to teachers’ instructions,” said Wang. “And when a kid reaches grade 3 or 4 by age 10, he or she might be burdened with studies. Therefore, 5-10 is a proper age to cultivate interest and practice fundamental skills.”

The first semester of Yuyin Society’s youth class started in January. Before the new round of recruitment, 40 students in the first semester presented a report performance and showcased basic skills they learned during the past year.

“The first year of study was interrupted for nearly five months under the influence of the pandemic,” said Wang. “The parents have been supportive. I want to give myself and the teachers credit as we didn’t give up on Peking Opera education

amid this difficult time.”

Wang said the youth class plans to recruit no fewer than 500 students in five years. Currently, the society has four full-time teachers and some executive staff. Wang designed the course with the teachers and takes charge of the society’s daily management.

“We teach basic knowledge and skills, including fundamental postures and movements in the first year, and then singing and acting in the second year,” teacher Song Zihao told Shanghai Daily.

Song has worked as a youth opera trainer for years since graduating from opera school. “We get along with the kids well. Only when they see you as a friend, will they trust you and learn with you.”

Talking about the criteria for selecting new students, Wang said appearance and temperament are important factors that mold first impressions.

“If a child is outgoing and lively with sparks in his or her eyes, chances are that this is a smart kid,” said Wang. “Imitation ability is also important, as well as voice and body condition, including flexibility. We also appraise if a kid is quick to receive and understand instructions.”

Wang said the purpose of the youth class is to promote Peking Opera while spotting promising successors for the traditional art genre.

“If parents want their children to become a professional Peking Opera



Wang Peiyu

performer in the future, our teachers will be stricter in training to get him or her prepared for a possible future career,” she said.

In 1992, Wang arrived in Shanghai from Suzhou in neighboring Jiangsu Province to study at the Shanghai Opera School. Only 14 at the time, she was accompanied by her mother, who rented a small storefront in Hongkou District to sell Suzhou candies.

Famous for her deep, resonant voice, Wang specialized in portraying old men (*laosheng*) on stage. She has won the coveted Plum Blossom and Magnolia Stage awards.

Wang’s fame was one of the reasons some parents brought their children to Yuyin Society, though most of them are not in a hurry to decide how far the young learners shall go.

Li Xintong, 6, prepared a dance and performed in front of Wang and a few other judges during the recruitment.

“I want her to learn Peking Opera, and I have bought picture books featuring Peking Opera stories to spark her interest,” Li’s mother told Shanghai Daily.

“There is voice and figure training as well as martial arts in Peking Opera. This is a comprehensive art that I want my daughter to experience,” she added.

Eight-year-old Wu Aifei has already studied at Yuyin Society for a year and has been rated as one of the best students after the first semester.

“I’m hesitant about letting her become a professional Peking Opera performer in the future,” said Wu’s mother. “It will be a tough and laborious path. But if she is really talented and shows great passion, I think I will give her support.”



First-year students at Yuyin Society give a performance on the recruitment day of new students. — Ti Gong