

# Pei Yanling

## Childhood Texts

Interview by Luigia Calcaterra

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the play has no meaning.  
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most important thing  
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is good.*

*Could you tell us about your apprenticeship in the techniques of the traditional Chinese Opera?*

I have studied both Peking Opera and Kunchu, two different styles. I started acting at four and half years old for fun; it was a game for me. It was amusing, gratifying and exciting to have people look at me. Both my parents were actors and since I was a baby I had seen them perform. They were my first teachers, then I had a second teacher and then a third, who is now my second husband. I studied the Linchong role with him at twelve. I have been married to him since 1994.

Even though learning to act needed a lot of energy I enjoyed it, but my parents tried to make me understand that it was serious work. My father did not really want me to study acting because he considered the actor's work too arduous and hard for a woman.

It so happened that one day an actor was taken to hospital and I asked if I could be the substitute. My father accepted my theatre career from then on. In the beginning I did not have a specific training or a teacher, I just watched and learned by looking at others. I had many actors to refer to. I imitated everyone and tried out everyone's roles, because I had nothing else to do.

I continued in this way until I was seven years old, when theatre became something serious and was no longer fun. I realised the training was very hard work and I began to cry. At that point I had a teacher of my own, that is to say apart from my mother and father. My father often slapped me between the ages of seven and twelve. At twelve Guo, my third teacher, appeared. I learnt many plays with him. He did not beat me, but I was very afraid of him. Although my father had beaten me violently, I had not been frightened of him because I thought I was superior. I thought his acting and singing were all right, but nothing special. I used to tease and make fun of him. When my father, who respected him a lot, asked Guo to become my master, I was twelve years old and Guo was thirty-two. The first time I saw him do a sequence of actions I was immediately aware of how



Pei Yanling as the Monkey King Photo: Torben Huss

good he was. He was also very skilful at interpreting characters. He taught me in a very thorough way: he would keep on for hours even with a small movement or action, until I got it right. He did not beat me, but he left me in very difficult positions for hours. I would start trembling and he would not even look at me. I could not bring my leg down or move at all until he told me I could. I was very shy of him and I had to face a great deal of difficulty everyday. It had not been like that with my father, who, if I

complained that I was tired, would allow me to stop.

*Could you describe a typical day from the time when you studied seriously?*

At four or five o'clock in the morning we started the day with voice exercises, followed by exercises for the legs, one hour for each leg. They were very painful exercises and I cried, but my master told me it was no use lamenting. The exercises for impulses in the

legs were followed by exercises for the arms. During all this time the master was always present, he would never leave the pupil alone.

My master would tell me what to do and I had to do it without speaking. After having eaten quickly, we started at eight with basic exercises of jumps, pirouettes and acrobatics until midday. The timetable was very rigid and had to be respected. At times, when I was tired, my legs would shake, I felt exhausted and I was covered in sweat. After the morning there was a lunch pause when sometimes I could sleep a little with my mother close to cuddle me. When I was between seven and eight, my mother did not have the courage to look at me during the training because it made her cry.

At two o'clock in the afternoon we would start again and continue until six in the evening. After supper we had walking exercises and after having washed, before going to bed, we had to learn texts by heart. My father, before I shut my eyes, would come to examine me, asking me to recite passages by heart and only if I had learnt them would he allow me to sleep.

We worked every day, there was no Sunday or holidays and this went on until I was ten. By then I had studied and learned many roles and I went on stage as a member of my father's and teacher's company.

Although the exercises were very hard, I never wanted to stop. If I did an exercise wrong with the hands I was beaten on the hands, if I did an exercise wrong with the shoulders I was beaten on the shoulders, or on the legs, the head... If I did something wrong it was my teacher's duty to beat me. That was our rule, it was valid for everyone, it did not happen only to me.

*Do you use the same methods with your pupils now?*

These methods are no longer applied in the schools today. I don't have young pupils, but if I did have them I would not have the courage to beat them. I don't know why. At times I also get cross, but I would not dare to beat them, although the method used on me allowed me to learn faster. Knowing you will be beaten makes you more careful.

*How did you learn to use your voice?*

It was a simple method: the teacher would do something and I would repeat it. The teacher would declaim a sentence of a text or a part of a song and I would repeat it.

*So the interpretation of texts is passed on always in the same way, or can the actor develop or change what the master has taught?*

The interpretation changes from master to master and the pupil learns the way her own teacher delivers the text. The pupils must follow precisely what the teacher does and they are not allowed to change, modify or make variations.

*So the way you play your Linchong role, the General, for which you have become so famous, is exactly as your master taught you?*

No, it has changed, the interpretation can vary but not the content. Obviously when an actor reaches a certain calibre the interpretation cannot be identical to that which was taught in the beginning, because at that point the actor possesses her own art and must transmit it.

*When you interpret a character what is more important for you, the text or the action?*

For a good interpretation both the action and the text are important, you cannot make a distinction. Some actors, especially young

ones, are more gifted in action and less in text delivery, or the other way round, but for a good performance both things are important. I have to think of the meaning of what I am saying while I play, as the meaning and physical actions are related.

*How do you learn a character?*

At the beginning the content and the character's story are not explained. First of all we learn the actions, then we apply the physical actions to the text and lastly we concentrate on the recitation and singing. Even for what concerns the song we first learn the various sounds and then the text; in the same way as for the actions we first learn the movements, for example how to move the eyes or the arms, independently from the content of the text. First we have to practise the various sounds with the voice and the independent gestures and movements for the actions, while the text and its content are applied afterwards. Only when the master is satisfied with the independent movements and sounds will we then proceed with the text.

*In China it is said that for actors' interpretation to be good there must be KunFu. What is KunFu?*

If there is no KunFu in a play, the play has no meaning. The KunFu is the first and most important thing for an actor. KunFu means knowing how to sing, deliver a text and complete actions. I am able to tell if I have KunFu, for example, if my song performance is good. If my voice is not good that day because I have a sore throat or I am not well, I already know that that day it is not possible for me to have KunFu.

If I feel the KunFu, my master also feels it. There is a parallel between what my master and I perceive.

*In China you are the most renowned woman actor for your interpretation of male roles. Why did you specialise in these roles?*

My father wanted me to learn female roles when I was small, but I was very vivacious and when I saw female roles they bored me horribly and I would fall asleep, while I liked looking at male roles. When I was young I learnt quickly and easily, I was gifted and I had a predisposition for the male voice. When I had to sing female roles I felt bad, the male roles instead came easily to me.

*What difference is there between a Chinese and a Western audience?*

We share the concept of art and what is beautiful, independently of whether what we see is familiar to us or not. If I listen to an Italian song I can understand if it is good or if the singer is howling. But in the West the public applauds only at the end, while in the East the public reacts to the action continuously with applause and comments, even while I am singing. It is a noisy reaction, and if the acting is not good, the public will comment with a tut-tut, or by throwing objects at the actors on stage.

In the beginning I was not used to this difference and when I went to France it seemed strange to me that the public did not react. I wondered if I had done something wrong. Why were they looking at me and not clapping? I understood that it was a different habit when they clapped at the end.

*Does your artistic life influence your private life? Do you have a family?*

If there had not been the Cultural Revolution I surely would not have got married nor had children because I absolutely did not have the time. During the ten year break caused by the Cultural Revolution

I got married and had children.

Before the Cultural Revolution I studied and trained every day, I never rested and I was very thin, but afterwards I could no longer train. It was forbidden for me to interpret male roles as a woman, and men could not interpret female roles. Although I was appreciated also in female characters, I did not feel fulfilled in those roles and so during that period I played very little. Having nothing to do, I got married. One of my daughters is an actor now and I taught her to start with.

*Was your artistic career completely interrupted during the Cultural Revolution?*

By the time of the Revolution, I had already gained more than the average amount of fame and consequently my salary was also quite high; I earned a lot more than other actors. In order to survive financially, after the Cultural Revolution the State gave the same small subsidy to all actors. When the salary was levelled other actors were pleased, but I wasn't. It was a very difficult and painful period for me. All the plays in my repertory belonged to tradition and their production was forbidden; I could only play pieces that had a political content. I could not train, I could not go shopping and I could not speak freely.

Many costumes were burnt. My master's Linchong costume was cut to pieces. Famous artists were forced to refute their profession, me included. Women had to cut their hair. If I had to go to the toilet, two people always accompanied me.

*Why?*

I don't even know why.

*How did you experience this enforced renunciation of the stage?*

At times I was happy because I did not have the pressure; I did not have to be as careful as when I am playing: taking care of my voice, not speaking a lot, not going out... I did not have to study as I have to when I learn a role, I did not have to train all the time, and when I did work there was not so much tension. I felt relieved. At other times I felt depressed and terribly sad.

During the years of the Cultural Revolution I thought a lot about when I was small and started to work in theatre; I remembered the past. At times I felt I did not have a reason to live, but I had two children. I got terribly fat: I weighed seventy kilos. I was enormous and I thought it would be impossible for me to act again. But then I found an empty school building that had been closed down. I would take the key, look around to see that nobody was there and shut myself in a very small room for four hours every day to start training again.

During the very long obligatory collective meetings I could not exercise because people would see me, but then I did small exercises with the feet, or while I pretended to be reading Mao Tse Tung's texts, I went over the texts of my repertory in my mind. Every day I would recollect all the texts that I had learned as a child.

Translated from Chinese by Annesa Vielmi and  
from Italian by Julia Varley



Pei Yanling as Linchong Photo: Torben Huss

PEI YANLING (China) was born in Hebei in 1947. At the age of four she started her apprenticeship in the techniques of traditional Peking Opera under the guidance of her parents. Today she is the most renowned actress in China for her interpretation of male roles and she directs a company of about fifty actors.

LUGIA CALCATERRA (Italy) has been an actor and pedagogue in Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo since 1973, the year the group was founded, and has taken part in most of its performances. For twenty years she has developed research on Indian dance and theatre specialising in the style of Odissi.