

Performance

Edited by Nancy Pellegrini
performance@timeoutshanghai.com



Wang Yuanyuan
Founder and artistic director of Beijing Dance Theatre

I was 13 or 14, and just learning to dance; we thought the dancers on stage were very pretty. I remember that [her father] gave her a red ribbon to make her hair look pretty. It really touched me, the relationship between father and daughter. Even though she was very poor, he wanted something bright in her life – it was important for her, girls always want to be pretty. That generation, everyone knew that story, you knew who was the good guy and the bad guy, it was easy to follow. And I felt we should follow something, follow the revolutionary spirit. But when you grow up, you have the sense to know what is real and what isn't. You can choose your own ideas; you can change what you think.



Ma Bo Beijing Dance/LDTX choreographer

As a child I grew up in the heart of a dancer's family, and watched my parents practice and perform the *White-Haired Girl* and *The Red Detachment of Women*, so back then I could imitate and choreograph parts of the dance myself. In those days everyone worked extremely hard, especially my mother. As a dancer without formal ballet training she had to change bandages every day to stop her toes from bleeding. Back then I thought I would never pursue ballet. But to me, *White-Haired Girl* is a contemporary dance because it is brave and adventurous. Chinese ballet transforms tradition by putting pointe ballet shoes on modern dance classics.



Xin Lili Shanghai Ballet artistic director

I was ten years old when I saw *White-Haired Girl* for the first time, and my initial reaction was, "So this is ballet!" Later on I danced the lead role of the *White-Haired Girl*, which was extremely challenging for me, but I was proud to be a part of this aesthetic piece. *White-Haired Girl* and *The Red Detachment of Women* were produced in the same period of time but they both influenced generations. To compare the two, *White* presented a more humane and romantic side of love compared to *Red*, which projected revolutionary ideas. But *White* was the first original ballet production to take place in China, infusing Chinese elements into ballet performances. This new form was invented by a group of respected dancers in this country, and their success proved to be an indelible contribution to the development of Chinese ballet.

The Shanghai Ballet's White-Haired Girl is at the Shanghai Grand Theatre on **Tuesday 29** and **Wednesday 30**.

The original returns

As China's first surviving original ballet turns 50, some of the country's biggest names in dance tell **Nancy Pellegrini** what the Shanghai Ballet's *White-Haired Girl* means to them

Created in 1964 and premiered the following year, the Shanghai Ballet's *White-Haired Girl* is one of China's seminal dance works. *White* and *The Red Detachment of Women* were the only ballets allowed during the Cultural Revolution, but while *Red* was Beijing based, *White* belonged to Shanghai.

The story tells of Xi'er, sold to her landlord by her destitute, indebted father. She flees to the mountains but the stress of fending off wild beasts and foraging for food turns her lovely locks ivory. Then she meets her Red Army-member fiancé; together they exact revenge on her tormentor and live a happy, post-Liberation existence. As Shanghai Ballet prepares their anniversary production, China's leading dancers share what this classic means to them.



Jin Xing Founder and artistic director of Jin Xing Dance Theatre

When I first saw *White-Haired Girl* I was four or five and was impressed with the dancers' beauty. I thought they must come from a fairyland. I put a pillowcase on my head and twirled, pretending to be the heroine. I never danced it onstage, just at home. Neither *White-Haired Girl* or *The Red Detachment of Women* are my favourite for dramaturgy, but *Red* is appealing in terms of music and composition, while *White* has romantic elements. Both have influenced generations of Chinese dancers. They laid the foundation of dance in China.

“ I put a pillowcase on my head and twirled around, pretending to be the white-haired heroine ”



Nunu Kong Leading figure in China's independent dance scene

I can't actually remember when I first saw *White-Haired Girl*, it was more a classic for my mother's generation. I never even got to see the complete version on television. But now I ask myself why that was. Maybe because when I saw it I felt an immediate disconnection, so I may have turned away and never looked back. But it was so powerfully produced and publicised in China for many years, you knew the *White-Haired Girl* too well, people always had a 'connection' with this piece already. But there are four possible reasons why I should watch the *White-Haired Girl* in performance soon. Because I am a dance choreographer? Because it will be a shame if I never watch it once, as I am Chinese? Because I need to know the history? Because of inescapable reasons or pressure? But none of these reasons above are mine.