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Celebrate the Year of the Monkey with this Special Performance

For many people, when they see the word "opera" they think of the fat lady standing on stage singing in a foreign language. Now imagine a small army of performers somersaulting across the stage, twirling spears and tossing swords, executing superb martial arts moves—all the while singing melodiously, costumed in magnificent silk brocades and multi-colored makeup. That is the wonder that audiences will find when they go to see *The Adventures of the Monkey King: A Beijing Opera*, which is coming to The Music Hall in Portsmouth on November 16 at 7:30 for one performance only. Hosted by Northeast Cultural Coop, this visit by the Beijing Opera to New Hampshire helps fulfill their mission to celebrate cultures near and far with the citizens of New Hampshire.

This action-packed performance by the International Monkey King Troupe shows off Beijing Opera as one of the most dynamic forms of theater in the world, blending singing and dialogue with acrobatic tumbling and kung-fu fighting, with costumes that sparkle with silk brocades and faces painted with bright stylized masks. Beijing Opera has been called "an artistic ocean"—the only art form that encapsulates Chinese culture and history, literature, music, dance, acrobatics, stage fighting, and acting as well as the fine arts of face painting, and the magnificent imperial costumes of the past; in Beijing Opera all these elements are brought together into one integrated form.

The International Monkey King Troupe is a 17-person company based in Beijing that draws on the talented students, graduates and senior masters

of the National Academy of Beijing Opera. The leader of the Troupe is Ghaffar Pourazar, a British performer who was the first foreigner to complete the arduous training at the National Academy. Their mission is to make Beijing Opera accessible to a worldwide audience. Their shows incorporate an introduction to the Beijing Opera form, and the dialogue of selected scenes is spoken in English. Among his many innovative efforts, Ghaffar directed Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Beijing Opera style for the National Troupe of China. While Ghaffar Pourazar brings such artistic innovations to this classical art form, renowned Opera Master Shaohua Zhang, co-director of the troupe, sustains the authentic traditions of the Beijing Opera.

The Show

Since 2004 is the Year of the Monkey, **The Adventures of the Monkey King: A Beijing Opera** includes three action-packed plays that draw on the fables of the Monkey King, the greatest of all Chinese myth cycles. These three tales follow the Monkey King Sunwukong, a magically powerful but extremely mischeivous "superhero" or "warrior clown", as he accompanies the Buddhist monk Xuanzang on his journey to India to seek the Buddhist scriptures. The stories were collected in the 16th century novel, **Journey to the West** by Wu Cheng'en. The Adventures in this performance are **The Dragon King's Palace**, **The Iron Fan Princess**, and **Havoc in Heaven**. These episodes were chosen for their excitement, action and stories that are easy to follow for an audience that is unfamiliar with these legends--legends that are as familiar to most Chinese as the *Wizard of Oz* is to most Americans.

The Monkey King, Sunwukong, was born from stone. He was extremely capable, and aspired to join the immortals who lived in Heaven. He gained many magical powers from a Taoist master, and was able to transform himself into seventy-two different forms, from a tree to a bird, from a large beast of prey to a tiny mosquito. Using clouds as his vehicle he could travel 180,000 miles in a single somersault. However, his hubris and lack of discretion brought him into conflict with the Jade Emperor, the lord of heaven and earth. After many battles the heavenly army was unable to kill him, but he was finally subdued when the Buddha dropped a great mountain on top of him, pinning him down for 500 years.

He was released when he was needed to accompany the Buddhist monk Xuanzang, nicknamed Tripitaka, who was preparing to make the arduous "Journey to the West," to walk to India to gather Buddhist scriptures. Joined by the pig-monster Pigsy and the river creature Sandy, they encounter innumerable obstacles, but finally achieve their goal after

traveling for 14 years and 108,000 miles. For their herculean efforts they are rewarded with immortal life and happiness.

The three acts in the *The Adventures of the Monkey King: A Beijing Opera* dramatize three of the more entertaining adventures in the Monkey King's career: *The Dragon King's Palace*, *The Iron Fan Princess*, and *Havoc in Heaven*. In *The Dragon King's Palace* the Monkey King is seeking armaments for his monkey followers and is offered an assortment of fine weapons by the Dragon King of the Eastern Ocean. In a series of contests he tries out each one but none pleases him until he is offered the massive 20 foot iron staff used by the Great Yu to pound down the river beds and subdue great floods. Though the Dragon King thinks he will never be able to lift it, the Monkey transforms it into a needle and carries it behind his ear.

In *The Iron Fan Princess* the Monkey King and his companions find their path blocked by an impassable mountain range called Flaming Mountain. The Monkey King realizes that the only way through is to borrow the magical, indestructible fan of the Iron Fan Princess. The Princess, however, is angry with the Monkey King because he had sent her son to become a disciple of the Buddhist Goddess of Compassion, Guan Yin. She refuses to lend him the fan, and a fight ensues. Failing to snatch the magic fan, Monkey turns himself into a bird, flies into the Princess's drinking cup, and is swallowed. Tumbling inside her and causing terrible stomach pains, the Monkey forces the Princess to relent and she lends him the fan.

Havoc in Heaven takes place in Monkey's early years, before he sets out on his journey. The Jade Emperor has been hearing complaints about the Monkey's behavior, but rather than attack him, he offers him work in the heavenly stables. Monkey thinks he has a very high rank, but when he discovers that this is the lowest of menial jobs he storms off in a huff. The Jade Emperor sends his general to bring Monkey back, but neither insults nor combat help in capturing Monkey. Finally he agrees to return to Heaven if they will acknowledge the title he has given himself: "Great Sage, Equal of Heaven." The Jade Emperor agrees and assigns Monkey to guard the Garden of Immortal Peaches, where the peaches take 9,000 years to ripen and anyone who eats them lives forever. Assigned to guard the peaches for a special banquet, Monkey is overcome by their yummy smell, and he eats all the best ones. He then discovers that he has not been invited to the banquet. Insulted, he eats all the delicious food, destroys the banquet table, and runs away. The Jade Emperor sends his army to catch Monkey, but he is too powerful and escapes once again.

The Tour

The tour was organized by the Cornell University East Asia Program and funded in part by the Freeman Foundation of Stowe, VT. The tour Executive Producer is David Patt, Director of Outreach at the East Asia Program. He found in Ghaffar Pourazar and the Monkey King Troupe a unique opportunity to introduce American audiences to this dazzling theatrical art form. In addition to 17 main-stage performances, the troupe will present 11 one-hour shows for schoolchildren, and many workshops and master classes in the history of Beijing Opera and its theatrical techniques of dance, music, tumbling, stage fighting and mask painting.

The Cornell East Asia Program has prepared "The Monkey King's Guide to China," a web-based curriculum that introduces students to the culture and history of China using the Monkey King story and Beijing Opera as a hub. Teacher training workshops are planned to introduce elementary and middle school teachers to the curriculum and enable them to use it in conjunction with the children's performances.

The 2004 tour of *The Adventures of the Monkey King: A Beijing Opera* will visit 14 universities and performing arts centers in the northeast, including The Music Hall in Portsmouth, N.H., sponsored by Northeast Cultural Coop, a local non-profit cultural organization based in Amherst, NH

Bio of Ghaffar Pourazar

Ghaffar Pourazar is a British performer who was the first foreigner to complete the arduous training at the National Academy of Beijing Opera. He is the leader of the International Monkey King Troupe, whose mission is to make Beijing Opera accessible to a worldwide audience.

As the most successful foreign performer of this Chinese art-form he has become quite famous in China and his story has been told in news features on the BBC, CNN, CCTV, as well as in the Asian Wall Street Journal and many other publications. Pourazar arrived in Beijing in 1993 and started his four years' training in the Beijing Peking Opera School. In 1996 he won the Golden Dragon Award in the International Opera Festival, a competition for amateur performers. He then moved on to postgraduate program at the National Academy of Traditional Chinese Drama. He was a British Council Senior Scholar in Beijing from 1995 to 1997, and was awarded a grant from The Asian Cultural Council to research and record Beijing Opera traditions and stories from the old masters.

As Artistic Director of the Zheng Yi Ci Theatre in Beijing, the oldest traditional opera theater in Beijing, he introduced Beijing Opera to many

foreign tourists and attracted a large Chinese audience. The theater hosted U.S. Secretary of Commerce William Daley, and has staged special performances for the U.S., British, and German Embassies in Beijing.

As the first non-Chinese to have directed the National Opera Troupe of China, in October 1997, Pourazar adapted and directed the Peking Opera production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Chinese CCTV commented that it was like a "dream come true." CNN also covered this inter-cultural event and called it "a way to promote Peking Opera in China and in the West." In 2001 Pourazar took the traditional opera *Legend of the White Snake* and dubbed it into English, the first time that a performance was simultaneously interpreted into English.

His International Monkey King Troupe has traveled to many different countries. In February 2004 he led the troupe to Malaysia to perform for the Chinese Lantern Festival. In March 2004 he toured with the company of the Peking Opera Institute around Singapore performing Monkey King plays. In previous visits to the U.S. Pourazar has presented workshops at MIT, University of Buffalo, University of Oregon (Eugene), University of Southern Oregon (Ashland), China Institute (NY), Majestic Theater (Boston), Behind the Mask Theatre (Boston), Reed College (Portland), and for Chinese cultural organizations around the USA.

Some historical background on Beijing Opera

Beijing Opera (a.k.a. Peking Opera) has existed for over 200 years. It is widely regarded as the highest expression of Chinese culture and it has deeply influenced the hearts of the Chinese people. It is said that there are as many kinds of Chinese Opera as there are dialects, and Beijing Opera absorbed music and arias from many other opera forms and musical arts in China. It finally emerged as the national standard. At its peak of popularity it was favored by people from all levels of society, from high-ranking government officials to common laborers. The repertoire contains thousands of pieces, covering virtually the entire history and literature of China.

In ancient times Beijing Opera was performed mostly on open-air stages in markets, streets, temple courtyards and teahouses. The orchestra had to play loudly and the performers developed a piercing style of singing in order to be heard over the crowds. The costumes were a garish collection of sharply contrasting colors because the stages were dim and lit only by oil lamps.

Relying on only minimal sets, the Beijing Opera stage has no limits in time or space—using costume, makeup, and pantomime it becomes the setting for action that ranges from the highest heavens to realms under the ocean. Using the conventions of pantomime, footwork and physical gestures portray actions such as opening a door, climbing a hill or rowing a boat.

The elaborate face painting in Beijing Opera is an art unto itself. Each painted mask is a representation of particular qualities of character. For example, a red face depicts the character's bravery, uprightness and loyalty. The pattern of the face also reveals information about the role, so each unique face allows the character to reveal their personality before they utter even a word.

The costumes in Beijing Opera impress the audience with their bright colors and magnificent embroidery. Their style is generally derived from the fashion of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Particular colors are indicative of different social status. Elaborate headdresses, jeweled girdles and hair ornaments enhance the visual display.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) Beijing Opera suffered along with the other traditional arts of China. All traditional pieces reflecting the old society were banned from performance and modern plays with revolutionary themes were performed in Beijing Opera style. Traditional Beijing Opera was revived in 1978, but with modern competition from other forms of entertainment, and a younger generation that grew up without any exposure to it, Beijing Opera has struggled to maintain its audience in China.

Nevertheless, young people are still entering the National Academy of Beijing Opera and dedicating their lives to the rigorous training that every performer must undergo to master the many skills that make up this art. Ghaffar Pourazar and the International Monkey King Troupe have devoted themselves to making modern audiences aware of just how entertaining and exciting a night at the Beijing Opera can be.

For additional information, visit www.NortheastCulturalCoop.org or call 603-673-8470.