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Oct. 1, 2008

Famed Beijing opera troupe kicks off So Cal tour at UCLA Oct. 8

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UCLA welcomes the world-renowned Mei Lanfang Beijing Opera Company for a free on-campus performance and demonstration at Schoenberg Hall on Wednesday, Oct. 8, at 4 p.m.

The company is named for the late Mei Lanfang, China's greatest opera star, who gained worldwide fame portraying female characters on stage and introduced the form known as Beijing (or Peking) opera to the West through a series of groundbreaking international tours in the 1930s. Mei Lanfang, who counted Bertolt Brecht, Charlie Chaplin, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Constantin Stanislavski and Mary Pickford among his admirers and acquaintances, died in 1961.

The UCLA event, sponsored by UCLA's Herb Alpert School of Music, Confucius Institute and Center for Chinese Studies, in partnership with the California Institute for Chinese Performing Arts, will be the troupe's first appearance in the United States.

The troupe's director is Mei Lanfang's son Mei Baojiu, who carries on his father's tradition of specializing in female roles. In recognition of the artistic legacy of his father, the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music will present Mei Baojiu with a Distinguished Artist Award.

Beijing opera combines dance and fluid movements with dialogue, heightened speech, poetry and song and features colorful stage makeup, ornate hair treatments and long, flowing robes.

"The term opera is somewhat of a misnomer," said UCLA assistant history professor Andrea Goldman, an expert on the art form. "Yes, there's singing, but it's closest to a musical."

Combat is also a defining characteristic.

"Beijing opera focuses on combat," Goldman said. "Many of the early actors involved with these performances in the mid- to late 19th century were trained in the martial arts, and they incorporated these forms into their movements."
The UCLA demonstration will consist of three scenes, along with additional examples of the movement and vocalization traditions that define the various role-types typically seen in Beijing opera. The final scene will be a signature Mei Lanfang piece.

"Listening to Beijing opera takes a re-tuning of the ear," Goldman said. "It's not as mellifluous as Western opera, and there are a lot of percussive sounds. Women's roles are being played by men, they are singing in a falsetto — it takes getting used to. Be ready for a new sonic environment and to being brought into this new environment."

Following their UCLA debut, the troupe will present two performances at Hollywood's Kodak Theater, on Oct. 10 and 11. Tickets to the Kodak performances can be purchased by students at the UCLA event.

UCLA campus parking is available for $9 in Lot 2, at the corner of Hilgard and Westholme avenues (www.map.ucla.edu/campus).

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