

## Ancient Chinese Epic “The Orphan of Zhao” (English) is Now Playing in San Diego.

“The Orphan of Zhao”, a Yuan opera (or *Yuan Zaju*, 元杂剧) translated into an English musical play, is on stage at the La Jolla Playhouse Mandell Weiss Theatre from July 8 to August 3.



Figure 1: stage photo

“The Orphan of Zhao” is a historical tragedy based on events that took place during the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC to 476 BC). According to historical records, Tu’an Gu, an advisor for the emperor in the State of Jin (晋朝), considered Zhao Dun as his rival and put the whole clan of Zhao to death. Zhao Wu, the orphan of Zhao, survived the massacre and took revenge for his family. However, the play is not an exact replica of the historical events. Instead, it revises the relationship between different historical characters. The storyline of the play goes like this:

The emperor’s evil advisor Tu’an Gu frames Courtier Zhao Dun, claiming that Zhao Dun is disloyal to the Emperor. As a result, most of the Zhao clan is executed. Zhao Shuo, son of Zhao Dun and son-in-law to the Emperor (Jin Ling Gong, 晋灵公), commits suicide after receiving a fake Imperial order fabricated by Tu’an Gu. Before Zhao Shuo takes his own life, he tells his pregnant wife, the Princess, that if the unborn child is a boy, he should be named the Orphan of Zhao, and he should avenge the family when he grows up.

The Princess entrusts her new-born child to the country doctor Cheng Ying before committing suicide herself. Tu’an Gu sends General Han Jue to guard the Princess’s house, in case the Princess attempts to remove the baby. Cheng Ying removes the orphan, hiding the baby in a medicine chest. Han Jue discovers the plan, but is merciful and allows Cheng Ying to escape. Han Jue chooses to commit suicide rather than pursue the baby.

Tu’an Gu soon discovers the Orphan of Zhao lives. He commands his followers to kill all male babies born that month if Cheng Ying does not give up the Orphan of Zhao. After a discussion with a departed court official Gongsun Chujiu, Cheng Ying decides that

he will pass the Orphan of Zhao off as his own, and substitute his own son to sacrifice as the orphan. Then he asks Gongsun Chujiu to hide his son, who is now identified as the Orphan of Zhao.



Figure 2: the end of the performance

Cheng Ying reports to Tu'an Gu that Gongsun Chujiu has the orphan. Tu'an Gu interrogates Gongsun Chujiu with torture, then orders Cheng Ying to do the torture. The soldiers of Tu'an Gu finally search out the fake Orphan of Zhao and kill him. Gongsun Chujiu can't stand the humiliation, he commits suicide. The Orphan of Zhao is raised under different identities, switched with Cheng Ying's son Cheng Bo, and is subsequently adopted by Tu'an Gu who gives him a second name, Tu Cheng.

When the Orphan of Zhao grows up, Cheng Ying tells him the truth. With anger and sorrow, the Orphan of Zhao decides to seek revenge for his family.

The Orphan of Zhao makes an appeal with the Emperor, and reveals the injustice that his family suffered. The Emperor executes Tu'an Gu, and grants the Orphan of Zhao the name -- Zhao Wu.

"The Orphan of Zhao" is the first Chinese play that translated into European languages. Nine hundred years ago, "The Orphan of Zhao" was translated into French and played on theaters in France. In 1753, Voltaire adapted the story and revised it to his work "The Orphan of China" (*L'Orphelin de la Chine: la morale de Confucius en cinq actes*). His main idea was to promote morality, believing that the power of morality will defeat ignorance and violence. In 2010, Chinese Movie Director Kaige Chen gained a huge success in putting the story on screen.

The adaption played in San Diego is written by James Fenton, directed by Carey Perloff. BD Wong, playing the village doctor Cheng Ying, is a famous Chinese American actor at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. He is also well-known for his Tony Award winning performance in "M. Butterfly". In "The Orphan of Zhao", Wong has the ability to give a thoroughly absorbing performance, portrays a tragic role with great loyalty and sacrifice. The play includes two acts, with more than eleven actors and actresses. The bamboo scene design is exquisite, surrounded by the live accompaniment of cello, Japanese drums, and traditional Chinese musical instruments—Xun (埙) and Dizi (笛子), along with the sound of streaming water.

The La Jolla Playhouse is located on UCSD (University of California, San Diego) campus. For more information, please contact the ticket office at 858-550-1010, or LaJollaPlayhouse.org.

***Translated from "Chinese Weekends" (2014.07.18).***



**Figure 3: opening speech by Michael S. Rosenberg, director of the La Jolla Playhouse**



**Figure 4: BD Wong and APAPA leaders. Dr. Lilly Cheng (2nd from Right) is the Managing Director of Confucius Institute at SDSU**