

Making up the magic of opera

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BY DEE GIBNEY

By day, she's a sales clerk in a piano store, a wife and a mother. By night, she's a fierce warrior, a general, a kung fu fighter – and sometimes a princess.

How does a 51-year-old woman come by this well-rounded existence? Very simply: Chinese opera.

Marianne Lui has been performing for just 10 years, studying under master percussionist and choreographer Soong Kam Wing who immigrated to Toronto from Hong Kong, as she did, in 1985.

Lui loved the theatricality of Chinese opera since she was a child and would sing along with the characters, never dreaming that she would one day perform. With a full time job and a young child, her life in Hong Kong was too hectic to ever get seriously involved.

But after moving to Toronto, and once her daughter (now an investment banker) entered her teens, Lui sought out Master Soong.

She now has her own troupe, the Starlight Cantonese Opera Troupe who perform frequently throughout the GTA.

"It's more than simple acting," Lui explains. "There's a lot of action, a lot of singing and technical things like choreographed kung fu fighting and (symbolic) movements like horse riding and sword fighting."

To keep in shape for the physical demands of her performances, Lui practises in a ballet studio three to four times a week.

She recently performed a short segment from one of the traditional operas at the Royal Ontario Museum as part of their "Sounds of Chinese Celebration" to mark Chinese New Year.

The role was that of Chor Wan, a runaway bride, escaping an unwanted arranged marriage. She disguises herself and becomes a Kung Fu fighter who comes to the aid of the weak and downtrodden.

She encounters King Chu, a young waitress (played by Fong Siu Mei) who falls in love with the rebel bride, now disguised as a man, and, of course, the plot thickens as the three-hour opera takes its requisite twists and turns.

The ROM audience only got to see the part where Chor Wan (Lui) meets King Chu (Fong).

By day, Fong also works with Lui in the piano store. A former teacher, Fong has been performing for 18 years. When she's not furiously sword-twirling, she is busy behind the scenes helping with costumes and makeup.

It takes more than an hour to apply the four layers of makeup that make the facial features stand out so dramatically from afar, a necessity for the outdoor stages of China's villages.

Once the colourful flowing satin-embroidered robes, elaborate wigs and hairpieces are in place, the characters, with their solemn expressions, become larger than life.

Children watching performances often ask if Lui and Fong are princesses.

On this evening at the ROM, Jeffrey Roy, 4, brings a touch of reality to the phantasmagoria. "I knew she was real," he tells his father, "because I saw her feet."