

NEWSLETTER

Department of Foreign Languages & Applied Linguistics
National Taipei University

FLAL ANNUAL PLAYS

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INTERVIEW

**Comedies may be easier to do,
but still challenging to come off
well**



*Prof. Peter Chen (陳彥豪) talked about the tradition of
the annual play, what benefits it engenders on students,
and how to make the best of it in an interview conducted
by Alice Tsai (蔡蕙仔) and Annie Chen (陳宥安).*

**Q: Why is the annual theatrical play important for our
department?**

A: Pedagogically, annual play puts the concept of learning English through performance into practice. We learn English through the annual play.

We also learn to be a better team-player. We can only achieve through team works-- everything from staging props and music to acting itself. We work as a team, and it means translation, costume, lighting, photography, and even fund-raising.

The annual play has been a proud tradition of FLAL, keeping everyone together to achieve a shared goal. It has become a unique memory for those who have graduated, and the tradition is still there.



Q: We had *Next to Normal* last year, which is a musical. It was a challenging task for them. What are the differences between preparing for a musical and a non-musical?

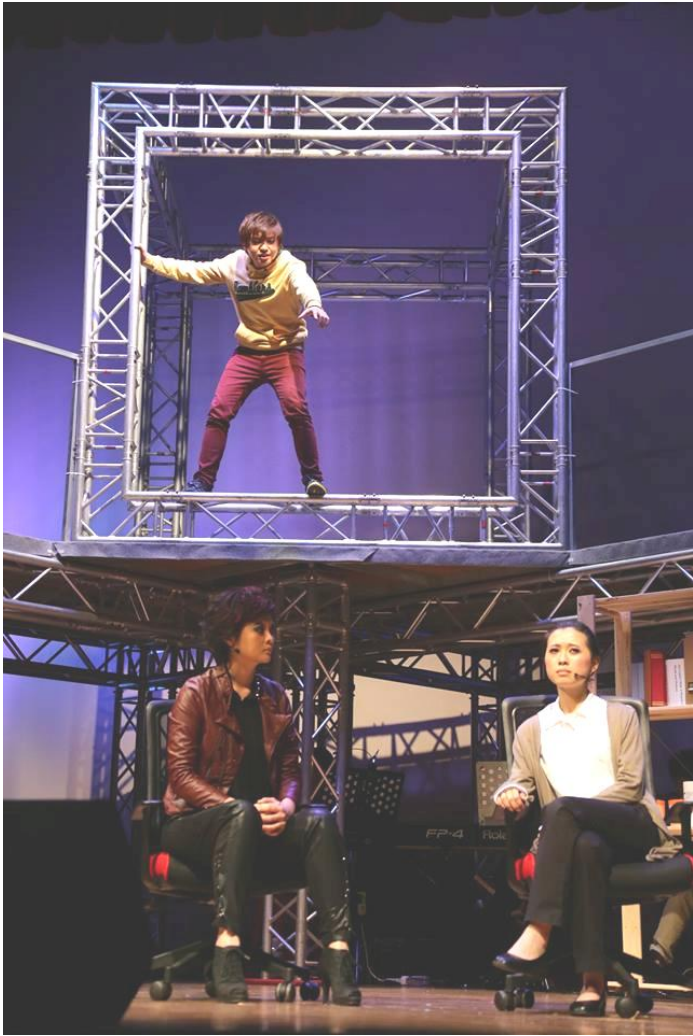
A: Musical is difficult for two reasons. One is the language itself—English is still a problem for stage performers; then, the music part.



It was the second time for FLAL to do musicals, which are definitely more difficult than spoken dramas. The difference is, when you sing, you have to control the melody, while expressing your feelings. The lyrics you sing have to convey meanings to the ears of the audience, and at the same time, you have to interact with other characters on stage. That is difficult.

When you sing, the body language is even more challenging, as you have to sing and perform with the gestures and postures at the same time. You have to worry about the melodies, the lines, the interactions and the body movements.

For stage drama, it's slightly easier. But if you accept something more difficult in your life, your success can be bigger. More difficult challenges can mean more in the sense of achievement.



Q: What is your expectation for next year? What do you think we could do to get better?

A: Stage drama and the musical are different kinds of artistic forms, so what we can do is doing our best to make this performance better.

Stage drama, though technically easier to do than the musical, is still difficult to perform well. So you have to make your best efforts, like your seniors did. And you have to work as a team. The whole class of juniors will have to dedicate as one.

Practice, practice, and practice. Rehearsal, rehearsal, and rehearsal. Everyone has to take this business as a serious one.



Q: Do you have any advices, based on your own acting experience, for our actors and actresses?

A: In 1975, when you were still angels in the heaven, I played the role of Earl of Kent in Shakespeare's King Lear. I love that role, keeping on saying something King Lear does not want to listen to. The way I prepared for the role was to listen to the whole cast in performance. We listened to Shakespeare's royal troupe, for as many times as possible.



We wanted to imitate the intonation, the accent, and the pronunciation of each character, and then we memorized it. So, how do we prepare as an actor of actress in a play? Get a DVD, a ready-made film, of the play performed by other theatrical

company or troupe, and then watch it. Your seniors did that too, watching Next to Normal in order to imitate and memorize.

The second suggestion is what I would call “empathy”. I tried to put myself into the role of Earl of Kent completely. That means I was no longer Peter Chen. I was Earl of Kent. I wanted to understand every element in the role I played—the characterization, including my physical presence, my psychical conflicts with King Lear, my education background, my gender, and my objectives. We are no longer ourselves; we put ourselves through empathy into the roles we are going to play.

The interpretation of fidelity is the key to perform well. Make no excuses for yourselves. Do your best through empathy and characterization.

Q: Which kind of play do you prefer, comedies or tragedies?

A: I like both of them, but sometimes lives can be painful, so I like comedies for personal reasons.



Comedies and tragedies are two different genres. We laugh when we watch comedies because of some funny coincidence or pure stupidity in the play. But I like to watch tragedies, too. For example, I like King Lear. When watching tragedies, we feel sad momentarily, but afterwards, we have a sense of going upward. Why? It is because tragedies can educate us more than comedies. After we watch tragedies, we tend to become a better person by avoiding making the same mistakes, like Hamlet did, like King Lear did.

So, for me, comedies are for fun, although they also teach us to learn from lives' adversities. Therefore, when I feel tired, I like to

watch comedies; when I have a serious mind, I like to watch tragedies. So try to enjoy watching both of them. Laughter can be entertaining, but tragedies give us more serious education we need.

Q: As the chairman of FLAL, do you have some words for the junior students?

A: You are the best, so do your best for this upcoming event. No role is too big and no role is too small when we are playing. Sometimes we will think that the casts get the spotlight, right? They seem to be the focus on the stage. But, actually, every position is important, not just the performers. We can all learn something from this experience.

You are making another history for this department. Every role you are playing has a great significance to you, to the class of junior, and to the whole department. I am always proud of every one of you because you keep that wonderful tradition of ours running.



Being funny in a natural way takes talents and hard work



Prof. Sue-Han Ueng (翁素涵) elaborated over the nature of comedies and revealed the secrets for performing them well in an interview conducted by Sandra Lin (林育萱) and Jamie Lin (林宛瑩).

Q: We are going to perform a comedy for our annual play in 2014. Can you tell us what makes a good comedy?

A: The play for next year is written by Neil Simon, who wrote a lot of comedies. FLAL staged a comedy—Rumors—a few years ago, which was written by the same playwright. His comedies are mostly about relations in a family. The one you selected for next year—Barefoot in the Park—for example, is about marriage. It is about the marriage between a young couple and the relationship in a family.



In Barefoot in the Park, there are conflicts and issues to deal with among families, but the story is about how the conflicts are solved and how people understand each other better in the process. There are a lot of very interesting and funny situations in it; there are misunderstandings about values and how people compromise in the end.

Comedies are not like farces. In a farce, there are lots of physical conflicts, with people joking around or fighting with each other. Neil Simon's plays, however, focus more on the romantic humanistic aspects. Protagonists tend to have more psychological elements in them, and that is the advantage of staging the play—you can have full characters on the stage, instead of knocking around and making fun with each other, like farces.



Q: What are the difficulties in performing a comedy?

A: Staging a farce is probably easier, as you may just have to play silly and joke around. Those are the stereotypes of a farce. But in a comedy, characters have to present themselves fully, so the interpretation of their roles is needed. Characters can't be made too flat, without dimensions. You have to create multi-dimensional characters on stage.

Neil Simon writes mostly about family situations among ordinary people—like father and son, husband and wife. So the challenge comes when you have to portray the characters fully, but you have to do it in a relaxed way. There can't be tense on the stage, because they are comedies. You elaborate on the humorous and comical sides, but you do it in a natural manner on the stage. That is a challenge for our actors.





Q: So do you have any suggestions for our acting crew in a comedy setting?

A: You have to act naturally, but at the same time, you have to add certain spice to the characters you play. You have to give the roles some persona, so your stage

presence can be more realistic, more like in our everyday life.

Also, you have to act out the messages between the lines. You have to find out what is interesting from the previous line into the next, instead of just presenting the plain words, so you can make it humorous, interesting for the audience to enjoy the performance.



Q: Any specific suggestions for staging *Barefoot in the Park*?

A: It is a light comedy. It is romantic. This play is quite interesting, but also quite challenging for performing well. Actors will struggle between making it funny, humorous and at the same time without stretching too much on your efforts in acting on the stage. You have to create the fun in a natural way.

Also, the original play was premiered in the 1960s, so you probably have to adjust, or even adapt or revise it a little bit to make it more contemporary, so the audience can appreciate the story better.

For instance, the telephone system is very different now than back then, and some popular TV shows in the 1960s are not even heard of nowadays. That is where you have to make some changes to make it contemporary.

Q: Comedies can be lack of profundity and meaning, compared to tragedies. What do you think?

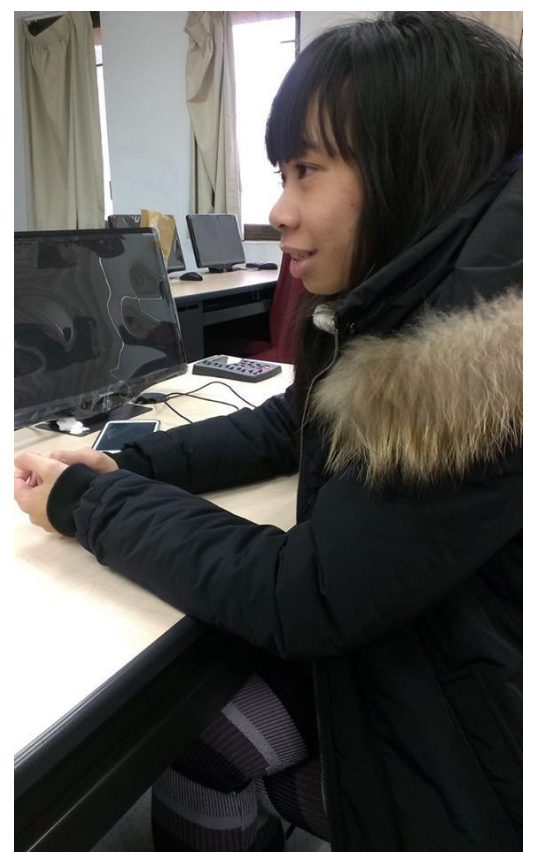
A: Well, comedies can be very sophisticated still. Since ancient Greek time, we have great playwrights writing comedies with the force of social criticism. Comedies normally involve a group of people in the play, so they can be a better tool for such purposes, while tragedies focus more on the ordeals of individuals.

In a comedy, you have interesting and funny characters dealing with problems or conflicts in the story, but in the end, their problems are solved with a happy ending. So the benefit of comedies is that they can be a very valid tool for making social criticism, many of which are made in the form of satires.

So comedies can still deal with very sophisticated questions with very in-depth discussions over social issues. It all depends on how you present them to the audience. In rehearsals, for example, the atmospheres are interesting for comedies. Tragedies are, on the other hand, mostly melodramatic, and the characters have a lot of burden on their back, with huge human sufferings. Both genres can deal with deep discussions over serious issues, but in different ways.

Q: We heard that you were the director of your own college graduation play. Can you share with us your own experience?

A: We performed West Side Story, which is a musical. So we had to sing, and we had to dance as well. We didn't sing live on stage though, we pre-recorded the singing part. Anyway, it was a challenge for us, but we also had a lot of fun, and we classmates got closer after we put up this play.



For me, the challenge also came from scheduling and rehearsals. I had to make sure everyone knew their parts and performed them as a complete production. We had to learn the dancing—jazz dancing—and also the singing.

We just tried our best and we engaged ourselves in it, instead of just watching or observing on the sideline. Then, we enjoyed the whole process. Back then, the whole class had to participate and we really enjoyed it. It is important to make sure that the whole process is a fun journey for everyone, so you will all have a wonderful memory which you could share for a very long time, even after you graduate.



2014 FLAL
ANNUAL
PLAY
BAREFOOT
IN THE
PARK



Make the annual play our biggest pride and your best memory



*Prof. Rae Lan (藍薔) reflected on what made **Next to Normal** a great success this year and expressed her expectations over **Barefoot in the Park** to be staged in 2014 in an interview conducted by Matt Fan Chiang (范姜士翔) and Bethany Chuang (莊慧瑜).*

Q: *Next to Normal* was very well received in May this year. How do you personally think about that annual play?

A: When they decided to pick a musical, some wondered if every character could sing that well. But given the fact that they're not professional singers, I think what they eventually did was okay. We can live with that, because they already did their very best. Even when Josh lost his voice, we didn't see that as a failure. We knew he was so involved in the character he played, so he sang with a lot of emotions in that hoarse voice.



I don't think it's the singing that grabbed the audience's attention. The success of this play is just like the play itself. It's a journey into an emotional growth of every character in this play. And very often, you could feel that, off the stage, the students themselves also had that emotional growth on the personal level.

So it's about how each character grows from a personal and professional perspective. You need to improve your acting skills, but at the same time you need to learn by working with others, by negotiating—sometimes by having to say yes when you really want to say no.

Q: Did you expect to see that kind of personal growth from them?

A: In the beginning, I was like, "Oh my god, Can they do this?" I still remember their first rehearsal, when many teachers showed up, and they started singing. They kept saying, "Oh we are still working on it. This is just a practice." At that time, I was worried, not just about the singing, but also their emotional development.

But, you see, this is how student grow and learn. Always, in the beginning, as a teacher you need to worry. But then you know they are going to make it; they are going to nail it. And then they did. I truly have to say that they are the greatest source of joy and pride. I am still proud of what they have done and all their efforts eventually paid off.





Q: Do you think the annual play of FLAL is getting better and better each year?

A: In terms of the scale of the play that students choose, you can see that each year it just gets bigger and bigger. Students get bolder and bolder. They are not afraid to experiment; they are not afraid to try new things. So you get *Crimes of the Heart*, a very deep melodrama, which depicts the emotional changes in each of the three sisters. And last year they basically went nuts. They went for the musical.

Few years ago, they did *Wicked*, a musical and a contemporary play. When it comes to contemporary works, we need to pay attention to the copyright issues. We started realizing, “Hey, there was something called royalties and the copyright.” For our students, it is really another journey of the growth.



In the past, they only needed to vote for the play the majorities were interested in. And with *Wicked* and also this year’s *Next to Normal*, they realized they need to negotiate with the companies. I still remember Janet was writing all these emails back and forth to negotiate with them. There are legal requirements forced upon us, and we had no excuses not to live up to very high, professional levels of performing. In the beginning, I thought these people are really tough, but, looking back, I think it was the right thing to do. You need to put yourself to the very extreme, so you know how much potential you have.



Q: FLAL has two tracks of learning—English teaching and translation—so why do we have the annual place in the first place?

A: It’s been like a tradition passing on each year, and we just accept it. I myself was graduated from Tunghai University. When we graduated, we did *Fiddler on the Roof*. And I really want to see that done again. At this very moment, I can still feel my emotion from my own acting experience in the play.

I think this is a tradition for almost every foreign language department in Taiwan. I don’t know who started this wonderful tradition, but when we talk about foreign language department, we were really talking about studying literature. You need to know how important literature is to our everyday life.

I’m not a great person doing literature, but I’m so grateful for all the works of literature, all the stories, all the British poetries, the renaissance, and the American plays I’ve read. I’m so grateful to all my teachers who taught me those literary works.

If people talk about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, do you know that is the only novel written by Oscar Wilde? He is a man of wisdom words. He didn’t just write one great novel but also many plays. He had so many witty, smart quotes that you can go Oscar Wilde. He had hundreds of quotes you actually get to use in your everyday life. It really doesn’t matter if you can read all the western literatures, but it matters if you know the key works from the plays—comedies or tragedies. When people say, “I know that’s your Achilles heel,” you know what they are talking about.

Q: The success of a play also hinges on directing and acting skills, but we don’t get to learn that in our department. What do you think?

A: More than once have I thought about the possibility of offering drama courses, like performing arts, at FLAL. We actually have professors who are experts in drama. We already have literature

courses. We have Shakespeare and novels. I'm sure they would be capable of offering such courses, even though from a theory-based perspective.

Since our students have so many talents, it doesn't make sense we don't offer the opportunities to develop your potentials in acting, and find out what your true love is. Next time if we have a meeting, I think I would bring that up.



Q: We are glad that you would bring it up to the meeting. Bethany, for example, is very interested in acting. So, we are wondering if we have the resource to help students like Bethany if she wants to develop her skills.

A: Well, resources need to be shared by the majority. I wouldn't say that developing or cultivating potential actors or directors would be one of the goals in our department. Because, at this point, we have a very clear goal and object in terms of training the kind of students we expect, and using the kind of resources that we have from the professors.

So, right now, there are the two main tracks, one on teaching in languages and the other in translation and interpretation. I think pretty much this is set. I don't think we should have a third track, either. If you are really interested in theater, you can consider joining or choosing a theater as your major. At this moment, I think we would be glad if we could offer some courses and help

students in the process of doing their role plays and mini plays, and then find out that acting is something you can enjoy in your life, although you don't have to become a professional actor in the future.

Q: Do you have any suggestions for our annual play in 2014?

A: When you were choosing in between *Barefoot in the Park* and *A Doll's House*, I hoped you would choose *A Doll's House*, because it's a classic and a big challenge. But I can understand why you ended up choosing this one. It is a lovely play and it takes melodramatic acting skills that we definitely can see from your performance.

So, in terms of acting, I don't see any problems for that. It's just that it's always a process of learning and growing. So, when you say graduation play would be the best record to showcase what students have learned over the years, I disagree with that. The fact is, just a few actors get to be doing the acting up there. For others, it is really not the chance to show their English or what they have learned.

But, the real learning comes from off the stage. The real learning comes from how you are willing to sacrifice yourself when there is an argument, how you learn to accept other's opinions when you disagree on something. This learning process is much more significant than the acting on the stage, and that is why it takes a team work. That is why when it comes to the final celebration, everybody cried. So, cherish this process. Don't worry if in the beginning you will be able to do well, because you will learn and grow. We will have full confidence in you when the final curtains roll up. I know you can do it.



MEMORY OF ANNUAL PLAYS

2003
blithespirits
Annual Play



**MATCH
MAKER**



2006 ANNUAL PLAY
Rumors



COMMUNICATING DOORS
國立台北大學應用外語學系 畢業公演
台北縣客家文化園區
FLAL ANNUAL PLAY 2009
2009/5/22 18:30
2009/5/23 14:30
Department of Foreign Languages and Applied Linguistics, National Taipei University



NOISES OFF





FLAL Annual Plays
To be continued...