

ARTS & CULTURE

REVIEW



Qiu Yunting as Giselle and Li Wentao as Albrecht in the centre of the stage during Act 1 of the National Ballet of China's *Giselle*, at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre. Photos: NBC

GISELLE A TRIUMPH OF STYLE, AUTHENTICITY AND TECHNIQUE

This version by the National Ballet of China is a treasure for purists, marred only by recorded music

Natasha Rogai
life@scmp.com

The National Ballet of China (NBC) made a welcome return to Hong Kong this month with performances of *Giselle* and *Chinese New Year*, the company's adaptation of *The Nutcracker*.

In *Giselle*, an excellent cast was headed by prima ballerina Qiu Yunting in a luminous interpretation of the title role. When the company last performed the ballet here in 2017, Qiu made a striking impression as a young

music and clear motifs for different characters, and its unforgettable choreography.

The NBC's production is a treasure for purists, adopting the iconic staging by the late Anton Dolin – the legendary choreographer and dancer whose knowledge and love of *Giselle* were second to none.

This is a blissfully authentic version, including many additional narrative details and a wealth of mime – nowadays these are often cut to simplify the story for non-specialist audiences, which reduces the ballet's rich-

Gong Xun's beautiful set evoke a timeless rural autumn – the action takes place during the grape harvest. The costumes for the Duke and his party of nobles are particularly gorgeous, and you can certainly see why Giselle cannot resist touching the train of Bathilde's dress.

It has been fascinating to see how the NBC has evolved in recent years. In the past, when performing the classics, the dancers shone technically but lacked the expressiveness they brought to the company's signature works like *Raise the Red Lantern* or *Red Detachment of Women*. This time

referred to as the "peasant pas de deux", but is here called the "wedding duo", which is indeed the original idea: a young couple are celebrating their wedding and dancing to entertain the aristocratic visitors – another mark of the production's authenticity. Fan's solos were a stand-out.

The benefits of casting experienced artists in character roles were shown by Guan Wenting's object lesson in mime as Giselle's mother, and principal Fang Mengying's sympathetic, detailed portrayal of Bathilde (Albrecht's betrayed fiancée).

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Motherhood and heritage in a world that keeps turning

Marian Ang's 'No Man's Land' reflects on family and identity – and the centrality of maternal love

Ashlyn Chak
ashlyn.chak@scmp.com

For Marian Ang, becoming a first-time parent and transforming fully into a "mother" were two entirely different experiences. It was the birth of her second son about a year ago that prompted the artist to truly think about what it means to be a mother, as well as the legacies passed down through the women in her family.

"Motherhood really tears you apart and reshapes you. With the first child, you're still clinging onto your old identity; with the second, you're completely breaking apart," says Ang, who was born in London to Singaporean-Chinese parents, and who now lives in Hong Kong.

The title of her solo exhibition, "No Man's Land", reflects how she feels about motherhood.

"You are in this limbo of what society expects of you as a woman and as a mother, this very world that only other women understand."

The artworks on display at Hart Haus – ranging from paintings and sculptures to fabric art – were completed during the past year, when Ang took part in a residency programme at the non-profit arts space in Kennedy Town.

Ang visited Asia for the first time when she was 18, and it was from her grandmother in Singapore – who turned 100 in 2025 – that she learned a lot about her family history.

All About My Grandmother (2025) is a series of four round-canvas paintings, each serving as a window peeking into the Singapore home of her grandmother, who left the Republic of China during the Warlord Era (1916-28) for what was then called Malaya, before settling in modern-day Singapore.

The four paintings convey a sense of joy. Even the smallest domestic details are faithfully captured, from the souvenirs and photographs her grandmother keeps in a cabinet to the patterned

art that places enormous importance on familial and maternal love.

The two paintings from the *Chicken Cup* series feature 15th-century ceramic vessels believed to have been commissioned by Emperor Chenghua to honour his mother. The cups depict a family of chickens, with the rooster and hen tending to their chicks in a serene garden setting.

In 2014, one of the original Ming dynasty cups fetched HK\$281.2 million at auction, setting a world record at the time for the most expensive Chinese porcelain ever auctioned.

Ang finds that a fascinating contrast against the Western tradition, where the most expensive artworks are often "grand, huge, allegorical, mythological pieces".



All About My Grandmother (2025) is a painting series inspired by the experiences of China's diaspora.



Queen of the Willis. Now, nine years later, she has matured into a world-class artist and it was a privilege to watch her.

Giselle is the ballet lovers' ballet. Created in Paris in 1841 by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot and revived in 1884 by the great Marius Petipa, this masterpiece of the Romantic school has survived the test of time due to the emotional power of its story, Adolphe Adam's score with its infinitely danceable

The only moment that jars is that during the "mad scene", the Duke and nobles turn their back on Giselle and do not watch what is happening. This may be another authentic detail from Dolin's production – he worked with people who had worked with Petipa – but dramatically it does not work.

The designs are fittingly classic and extremely attractive. In Act 1, the soft colours of Yue Songshan's costumes for the villagers and

there was lively acting from the whole company in Act 1, with every member of the corps de ballet fully engaged.

Another positive is that the overall standard of male dancing is now much higher than before, when the men tended to be eclipsed by the women.

Qiu's *Giselle* was exquisitely danced, with flawless technique and impeccable Romantic style. Her acting was full of nuance and

the show was not better attended – perhaps more marketing was needed, and the choice of programmes may have been a problem, given that Hong Kong Ballet performed *Giselle* last summer and its run of *The Nutcracker* finished less than a month ago.

Liu Xuechen was an icily implacable Myrthe with impressive control and elevation in her dancing, and She Zhaohuan was a touchingly heartfelt Hans (or Hilarion), *Giselle*'s rejected suitor.

Zhang Xuhao and Fan Yihan gave a sparkling account of the Act 1 pas de deux. This is often

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"National Ballet of China: *Giselle*", Chinese Performing Arts Hong Kong Season, Hong Kong Cultural Centre. Reviewed: January 20.



The Willis appearing in the second act of *Giselle*, performed by the National Ballet of China in Hong Kong on January 20.

REVIEW

Mahler's 7th given energetic, eerie resurrection

Christopher Halls
life@scmp.com

"Wouldn't you just die without Mahler?"

Even if that line made famous by Rita's flatmate Trish in the film version of *Educating Rita* is meant to satirise the pretentiousness of the intellectual class, the life-affirming nature of Gustav Mahler's music is undeniable.

Mahler's five-movement *Symphony No 7* was celebrated to the fullest on January 23 at the Cultural Centre Concert Hall, where Singaporean conductor Kahchun Wong led the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra in a performance that brimmed with heart, soul and spooky eccentricity.

The all-important double-dotted rhythms – the "ba-baaah" of a crisp, short note leading to a longer one – are the quasi-lifeblood of many of Mahler's main motifs.

Here, they were poignant and arresting in their execution, no



Singaporean conductor Kahchun Wong takes the applause.

more so than those delivered with laserlike precision by the trumpets, magnificently led by Nitiphum Bamrunghanthum.

Regardless of the guises in which motifs appeared in the stately, funeral-march-like *Langsam* (Adagio) opening, the acerbic bite prevailed as Wong kept a tight rein on the dark procession with gestures that were both efficient and effective.

Stepping in for Italian

conductor Daniele Gatti, the Singaporean then led the ensuing *Allegro risoluto* with emphatic determination (without score) and contrasted it with a strikingly sublime, tranquil section that vividly depicted alpine life and the dizzying mountain views that Mahler would have relished during his Austrian summers.

Though he had nothing to do with the symphony's commonly used title *Songs of the Night*, Mahler did, however, compare its second movement to the assemblage of characters in Rembrandt's painting *The Night Watch*.

Grotesqueness in the best possible sense was the main feature of the first "Nachtmusik" (Night Music – *Allegro moderato*), and Wong was adamant about coaxing the shady array of characters described in Mahler's "night wanderings" to reveal both their eerie and amicable intentions.

After the first and second hornists skilfully called to one another – one muted for a distant

effect – a bevy of spasmodic marches, dances and other nocturnal happenings ensued, and things turned sinister.

Woodwind scampered brilliantly, imitating strange bird calls with added bite and quirkiness where possible. The strings danced, and even a rural mood was thrown into the mix later with a gentle, rustic dance, clearly showing Mahler at his most carefree and playful with the evocative sound of cowbells clanking offstage – another Alpine reference – without restraint.

Grimmest of all, though, was the central Scherzo, marked aptly by Mahler as "Shadowy. Flowing but not too fast", which included strange, atmospheric shrieks and slides in the strings, and all the players lapping up the diabolical mockery of distorted Viennese waltzes, à la Ravel's "La valse".

In stark contrast to the earlier "music of the night", the more humane and tranquil scenes found in the second *Nachtmusik* came as welcome comfort, with serenade-like qualities.

Concertmaster Jing Wang excelled with assured violin solo contributions. The movement's Viennese folk music flavours, including quivering mandolins, took the audience on a relaxed stroll through Vienna's old town with the odd stop at a beer garden, before finally fading out contentedly – as if vendors had shut shop for the evening.

Finally, in the boisterous *Rondo-Finale*, Wong spurred acerbic brass chorales and celebratory dances with relentless energy to reinforce the symphony's brighter and more life-asserting sentiments.

This movement's show-stopping exuberance is often criticised for being at odds with the darker questions posed in the previous movements, but Wong pulled it off with impressive vigour, precision and uplifting energy.

"Kahchun Wong Conducts Mahler 7", Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, Cultural Centre Concert Hall. Reviewed: January 23

dresses on a clothes rail. "It's decades of accumulated sediment and memories," Ang says of her grandmother's home.

She has painted other still lifes of objects and corners of her grandmother's abode to capture the feeling of that old family home and, to some extent, better understand her ancestors' cultural heritage.

Since her teenage years, Ang has been trying to "piece together clues about what it means to be Chinese", which she does by "investigating objects [from the women in her family] and the [personal memories and] stories behind them".

In another corner of the exhibition, she pays tribute to other maternal figures in her life with an ever-evolving installation of items she has been given over the years.

At the time of publication, it consisted of a vase that once belonged to her mother and a baby romper sewn by Ang's husband's great-grandmother, as well as other items of the artist's family history.

She explains that these seemingly modest items are important reminders of the past for the family of immigrants. "I think women are the custodians of their families' histories, culture and values in ways that men are not."

"Men teach lessons, but women are the ones who hold information about where your wider family is, how they ended up where they were and the decisions they made on the way."

To Ang, she is, in a way, continuing a tradition in Chinese

Women are the custodians of their families' histories, culture and values in ways that men are not

MARIAN ANG, ARTIST

There is one very large work in the exhibition: the four-metre-tall *Paper Plane* (2026), which shows two boys playing. It is a fabric collage made with children's clothes adorned with auspicious symbols, previously worn by Ang's young sons to celebrate the Lunar New Year.

"Becoming a parent really supercharged my practice and made me much more focused on what I want to understand about my heritage and what I want to pass down," Ang says.

"This show is a sort of love letter to my sons: this is what I understand about our culture, through these objects that have such histories and values built into them."

"No Man's Land" by Marian Ang at Hart Haus, G/F, Cheung Hing Industrial Building, 12P Smithfield, Kennedy Town, Hong Kong Island. Tuesday to Saturday, 11am to 6pm, viewing by appointment only. Until February 21.



Marian Ang at *No Man's Land*. Photos: Jonathan Wong, Handouts