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## Sequel to *Thunderstorm* set to strike audiences

By Chen Nan | China Daily | Updated: 2020-10-10 09:56



On Sept 20, two weeks after the rehearsal of the new version of *Thunderstorm* commenced, actors, actresses and creative members of the two plays, *Thunderstorm* and *Thunderstorm II*, were unveiled in Beijing. [Photo provided to China Daily]

The play will tour China to mark the 110th anniversary of the birth of playwright Cao Yu.

In 1933, a student at Tsinghua University wrote a script, titled *Thunderstorm*. It was published in 1934 and premiered in 1935.

Revolving around two families whose complex relationships lead to inevitable tragic consequences unfolding against the backdrop of turmoil of the decade, the script was critically praised both at home and abroad. It enabled the young student, whose original name was Wan Jiabao, to become well known.

Wan was born in Tianjin and fell in love with acting during middle school. He died in Beijing in 1996 after being hospitalized for eight years.

*Thunderstorm* has been described as one of China's most enduring dramas of the 20th century and Wan, who wrote under a pen name Cao Yu, is called "the father of the country's modern

drama". He was appointed the director of the Beijing People's Art Theatre in the early 1950s and was elected the chairman of the Chinese Dramatists' Association in the early 1980s.

As this year marks Cao Yu's 110th birth anniversary, his classic works, including *Sunrise*, *Wilderness* and *Peking Man*, are being staged by Beijing-based drama company Magnificent Culture Co.

*Thunderstorm* is also on the program list. What makes it special is that Cao's daughter, Wan Fang, will premiere her latest work, *Thunderstorm II*, which is seen as a sequel to her father's classic piece.

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French director Eric Lacascade will turn those two plays into one long production, which will premiere on Dec 5 in Haikou, Hainan province, and will be staged in Beijing's Poly Theater from Dec 23 to 27. It will tour key cities, including Changsha in Hunan province, Nanjing of Jiangsu province and Tianjin until next January.

According to Wan, she first watched *Thunderstorm* when she was about 5 years old. It was performed at the Beijing People's Art Theater, where her father was one of the theater's founding members and its first president.



Actress Shi Ke plays the role of Fanyi in *Thunderstorm II*. [Photo provided to China Daily]

"I was so scared that I started to cry when I first heard the noise of the thunderstorm emanating from the stage. My father tucked me under his arm and dashed out the theater. I understood later that he didn't want my crying to annoy the actors and audiences," recalls Wan, 67. "For him, theater is a noble place."

Asked about her idea of writing a sequel to her father's *Thunderstorm*, Wan says that the classic work has been adapted by many theater companies in China and is a teaching material for art schools.

"The characters in *Thunderstorm* are vivid, memorable and I always wondered what future the characters would have after that fateful night," she says.

In *Thunderstorm*, the young master Zhou Ping from a wealthy family attempts to elope with the family's maid Sifeng, who is pregnant, before uncovering the truth that they are in fact brother and sister. Their attempts to elope have been hampered by Zhou's stepmother, Fanyi, who has had an incestuous relationship with Zhou. A thunderstorm breaks out when Lu Shiping, the mother of Sifeng, drops by to take her daughter away, which reveals the painful past hidden in the Zhou family.

What Wan explores in her *Thunderstorm II* is the three major survivors of that night, Zhou Puyuan, the father of Zhou Ping, Lu, and Fanyi, whose children and lover died during that night and their lives were changed. Her writing style is contemporary and in a stream-of-consciousness style.

"I am intrigued by the power of *Thunderstorm* by Cao. There are different layers of power and conflicts from those characters, such as Zhou Puyuan, who dares to love a woman of much lower social status, and the message of women should stand up to battle against the injustice and inequality that they were facing at that time," says the director. "Though the story took place in China, it reflects issues which are mutual."

Tong Ruimin, 63, plays the role of Zhou Puyuan, who had an affair with Lu as a young man and had two sons with her. Zhou, however, married a girl from a rich family and forced Lu to leave his house. Zhou kept their older son Zhou Ping while Lu took the younger son away.

"Some younger audiences have not watched the classic piece. Though the piece is from decades ago, it still deserves to be seen today," says Tong, who has directed *Thunderstorm* himself and as a teacher of Shanghai Theatre Academy, he let his students read and act in the play as a teaching material.

"I also look forward to see how Wan Fang's *Thunderstorm II* goes onstage. It's like a conversation between father and daughter, which is interesting."

"It will be a quite different version of *Thunderstorm* and I really enjoy the conversations among Zhou, Lu and Fanyi in *Thunderstorm II*, in which they talk about death, regret, and self reconciliation," says actress He Saifei, who plays the role of Lu.

The other cast members include Hawick Lau playing the role of Zhou Ping, actresses Shi Ke and Kong Wei playing the role of Fanyi and Lyu Xingchen playing the role of Sifeng.