



Wei Sina (left) stretches before her show at the 10th China Acrobatics Golden Chrysanthemum Awards, held from Sept 16 to 21 in Penglai, East China's Shandong province. Other performances include Playing With Bowls by a troupe from North China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region (center), and Chinese Kung Fu by performers from the Hebei Wujiao Acrobatic Art School (right).

PHOTOS BY WANG ZHUANGFEI / CHINA DAILY

Old acrobatic skills revived

Rising demand for traditional culture spurs renewed focus on visually beautiful art that requires intensive training

By CHEN NAN

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It is the moment the audience gives a collective gasp of astonishment, as Wei Sina, a 16-year-old acrobatic performer, does the splits, balanced upside down on one hand on a rotating, 3.5-meter-high installation.

Suddenly, she twists her body as if she is about to fall and the audience gasps again, this time in shock. But slowly she stretches her body and poses with her feet pointing to the high ceiling, and the audience responds with thunderous applause.

Titled Wings, the 15-minute performance features Wei playing the role of a bird trying to fly high in heavy rain.

"I am satisfied with my performance because I finished all the movements without a fault. It's a breakthrough for me," she said.

Wei, who was born and grew up in Nanning, the capital of South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, started practicing acrobatics at age 6, and she has already won a number of national awards. She is a performer with the Guangxi Acrobatic Troupe in Nanning.

Wings was one of the 30 performances that made it to the final round of the 10th China Acrobatics Golden Chrysanthemum Awards. Launched in 1987, the competition is held every three years and is the highest award for acrobatics in the country.

This year's competition was held in Penglai, in East China's Shandong province, from Sept 16 to 21. More than 28 Chinese acrobatic troupes — made up of over 500 acrobats — presented dazzling, fresh choreographic pieces.

"We've selected 30 from hundreds of programs. They represent the highest level of China's acrobatics," said Wang Rengang, secretary-general of the China Acrobats Association, a governmental organization



Acrobats from Shandong Acrobatic Troupe juggle straw hats and dance, accompanied by remixes of Michael Jackson hits, in a piece created by US choreographers Patti Colombo and Shanda Sawyer.

founded in 1981 that focuses on the promotion and development of Chinese acrobatics.

Since 2005, the China Acrobats Association has initiated a number of plans to revive the traditional art form, including giving financial support to acrobatic troupes, lowering ticket prices and offering the troupes more opportunities to perform at home and abroad.

"Acrobatics has a long history in China. It is a family entertainment that crosses borders. We've taken China's acrobatics troupes to perform and compete overseas, and they have received warm feedback and lots of awards," Wang said.

The history of acrobatics in China dates back to the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) and Song Dynasty (960-1279), but, like many traditional Chinese art forms, it experienced decline in the face of challenges from contemporary entertainment.

"It takes at least five years to train a new acrobat to the professional

level. So lots of young people give up the idea right at the beginning, which has led to a lack of talent," Wang said.

Wei recalled that she did not find it easy at first.

"I cried for a month in the beginning because it was painful and boring to practice the movements over and over again," said Wei, whose parents run their own business in Nanning. "My parents sent me to the troupe because they thought acrobatics is a visually beautiful art and the job is stable. Now, I am used to the intensive training and, despite the hardship, I feel content when I finish a difficult move."

Like Wei, Zhang Jianan of the Shandong Acrobatic Troupe started practicing acrobatics at a young age and did not enjoy it until she made her stage debut when she was 15.

During the 10th China Acrobatics Golden Chrysanthemum Awards, Zhang, along with 32 other acrobats from the troupe, performed a piece

by US choreographers Patti Colombo and Shanda Sawyer. With remixes of Michael Jackson's hits, the actors juggled straw hats with great speed.

"I thought about giving up because my main focus was high-altitude acrobatic skydiving, which was frightening and caused lots of physical pain," said Zhang, 31, who is from Rizhao, in Shandong province. In four years, she plans to retire from the stage and become a coach.

Despite those difficulties, Zhang said she enjoys the freedom and self-expression of the art form.

Wang Xiaoying, president of the Beijing Acrobatic Troupe, said that, unlike traditional acrobatics, which mainly involve performers demonstrating jaw-dropping physical skills, the art form has now been combined with other elements, such as dance and theatrical techniques. It also incorporates such things as lighting effects and 3D projections to satisfy the tastes of modern audiences.

Growing awareness of the physi-

cal demands on acrobats, especially younger ones, has also led to great changes in the way they train.

"Now our training employs a scientific approach, which is efficient and healthy," said Wang Xiaoying. "The performing life of the acrobat, like that of many other athletes, is very short. In the past, acrobats retired at 25 years old. Now we don't bother to set an age limit. As long as they want to perform onstage, we'll let them stay."

In 1957, a group of acrobats who had been performing in Tianqiao, a district in downtown Beijing that was once a haven for folk arts, founded the Beijing Acrobatic Troupe.

In 1995, the troupe presented a diabolo act, which won a gold medal in Paris at the Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain (The World Festival of the Circus of Tomorrow). The following year, the act was presented by Cirque du Soleil, which led to a long association with the Canadian circus.

The diabolo is a prop for tossing and juggling, familiar to audiences around the world. It consists of an axle and two cups or discs and is spun using a string attached to two batons.

During the 10th China Acrobatics Golden Chrysanthemum Awards, the troupe revived its diabolo act, with new choreography and music and displaying traditional techniques.

Celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, the Beijing Acrobatic Troupe invited four retired acrobats back to train the young performers.

"The four artists are in their 70s and 80s, and they spent their entire lives practicing their technique, such as playing diabolo and doing contortions. We invited them back because these techniques are not seen onstage nowadays," said Wang Xiaoying.

"Given that the demand for traditional culture is growing in the country, there is a good reason for reviving the old acrobatic skills."