

Ghaffar Pourazar tells
Matt Crook how he's trying to
save Beijing opera

The
Monkey
King of
Beijing
Opera



Pourazar performs
as the Monkey King

PHOTO COURTESY INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR BEIJING OPERA



Ghaffar Pourazar is an oddity

– an Iranian-born, British-raised computer animator who dropped everything in 1993 so he could endure years of torture-like exercises and become the first non-Asian to complete the gruelling training programme at The National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in Beijing, China.

Seventeen years later and troubled by waning interest in a dying art form, Pourazar, 50, isn't ready to give up on Beijing opera – a type of traditional theatre that encapsulates Chinese culture which rose to prominence in the late 18th century.

"The Beijing opera is an intangible art form. That means you can't touch it, you can't feel it, you can't see it," says Pourazar at his hotel room in Penang, Malaysia, painting his face between performances at the George Town Festival.

"It's in the body of those performers who inherited it. It's a link between the past and the present, one

master followed by a disciple, or one master followed by several disciples, and then they become masters and there are other disciples," he adds.

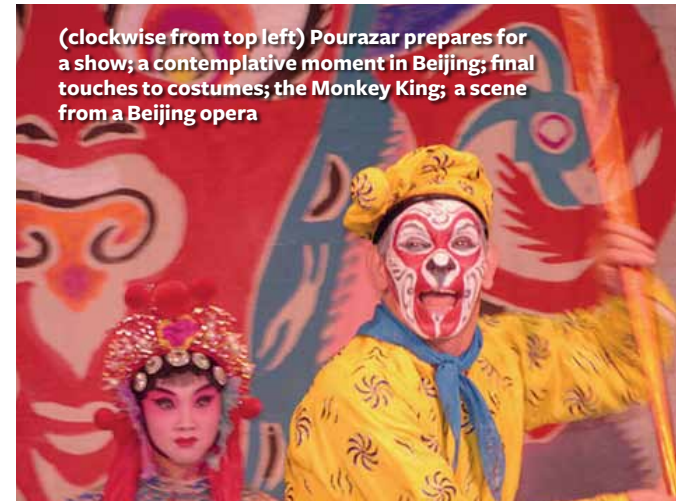
A Road Less Travelled

The journey to become a Beijing opera performer requires an intense, years-long apprenticeship with a teacher, learning singing, acting and dancing that are the backbone of the art form, along with skills such as acrobatics, stage fighting and face painting.

"Beijing opera is taught every day, a tiny little bit. A little movement, a little sound, a little singing – the next day, a little bit more," he says. "I graduated after five years, but things are no longer traditional."

Traditionally, students graduated after seven years, while it took at least ten years before they would call themselves actors. "It's not something you can learn from just studying books, otherwise you'd do a three-year degree course," he adds.

Students of Beijing opera usually begin their training as children, but



(clockwise from top left) Pourazar prepares for a show; a contemplative moment in Beijing; final touches to costumes; the Monkey King; a scene from a Beijing opera

PHOTOS (TOP LEFT & MIDDLE) GREGORY MACISAAC; (TOP RIGHT) REUTERS; BOTTOM ROW (COURTESY INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR BEIJING OPERA)

Pourazar began when he was 32, after being mesmerised by a performance at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall.

"I was a computer animator. I was interested in movement and dance and I had a strange philosophy that if you wanted to draw it well, make a good animation of movement, you should be able to do it," he says.

"There's nothing that can compare with Beijing opera. Nothing can come

close to the way the Chinese have broken down the human body and then put it together."

The years of aches, pains and torment were made bearable by the character of the Monkey King – a mischievous warrior clown for which Pourazar is now famed.

"When I paint my face like the Monkey King and I perform and put my heart into the character,



(from left) Pourazar practising his movements; in his element during a performance as the Monkey King

even the Chinese give up – they like me, they enjoy me, they enjoy my performance of the Monkey King and that is what’s made me survive the Beijing opera, otherwise I would have joined hundreds, if not thousands, of Westerners who have tried learning and failed.”

The Remnants of an Art Form

Despite its traditional roots, Beijing opera’s popularity has declined in China over the years and missed a generation that is more interested in MTV and Hollywood, says Pourazar, who travels the world with his International Monkey King Troupe, performing English-language versions of opera classics.

To catch the eye of a younger audience, Pourazar injects his performances with doses of rap, jazz, rock and roll, and even Broadway, but it’s not without some resignation.



PHOTO (TOP LEFT) GREGORY MACISAAC; CENTER COURTESY INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR BEIJING OPERA

“It’s a real dilemma. To be honest, if I was given support, I would prefer to spend most of my time learning the traditional plays and being with the old masters, because once they go, whatever is left of this art form goes with them.”

But it isn’t just the surviving masters of Beijing opera who are dwindling in number.

“In the mid-1900s there were nearly 2000 Beijing opera troupes in China. Every village had a Beijing opera troupe, maybe a small one, a club or something. Now there are a few dozen, and out of those, most of them are skeleton troupes,” he says.

Beijing opera is also being hampered by the effects of time, as the skills of the original masters become increasingly lost.

“Our present teachers, they tell us that they would be lucky to have more than 10 percent of what their masters had, and their masters told them the same thing. So then you go figure how much of the art form is left behind and whether it can be revived.”

With his aging back and battered knees becoming an increasing source of bother after years of pushing his body to the limit, Pourazar now plans to focus more on directing and producing plays in an attempt to bring together the tattered remains of Beijing opera while honouring the Chinese masters, past and present.

“The Chinese take nothing for granted and they give you nothing for granted until they see you rub your nose in the mud.”