

FRIDAY • NOVEMBER 4, 2005

ALSO INSIDE:

MOVIES

Reviews of 'Jarhead,' 'The Dying Gaul,' 'Chicken Little' and 'Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price'

— Beginning on Page 11

ART

'Ecstasy' exhibit at MOCA puts you in an altered state

— Page 24

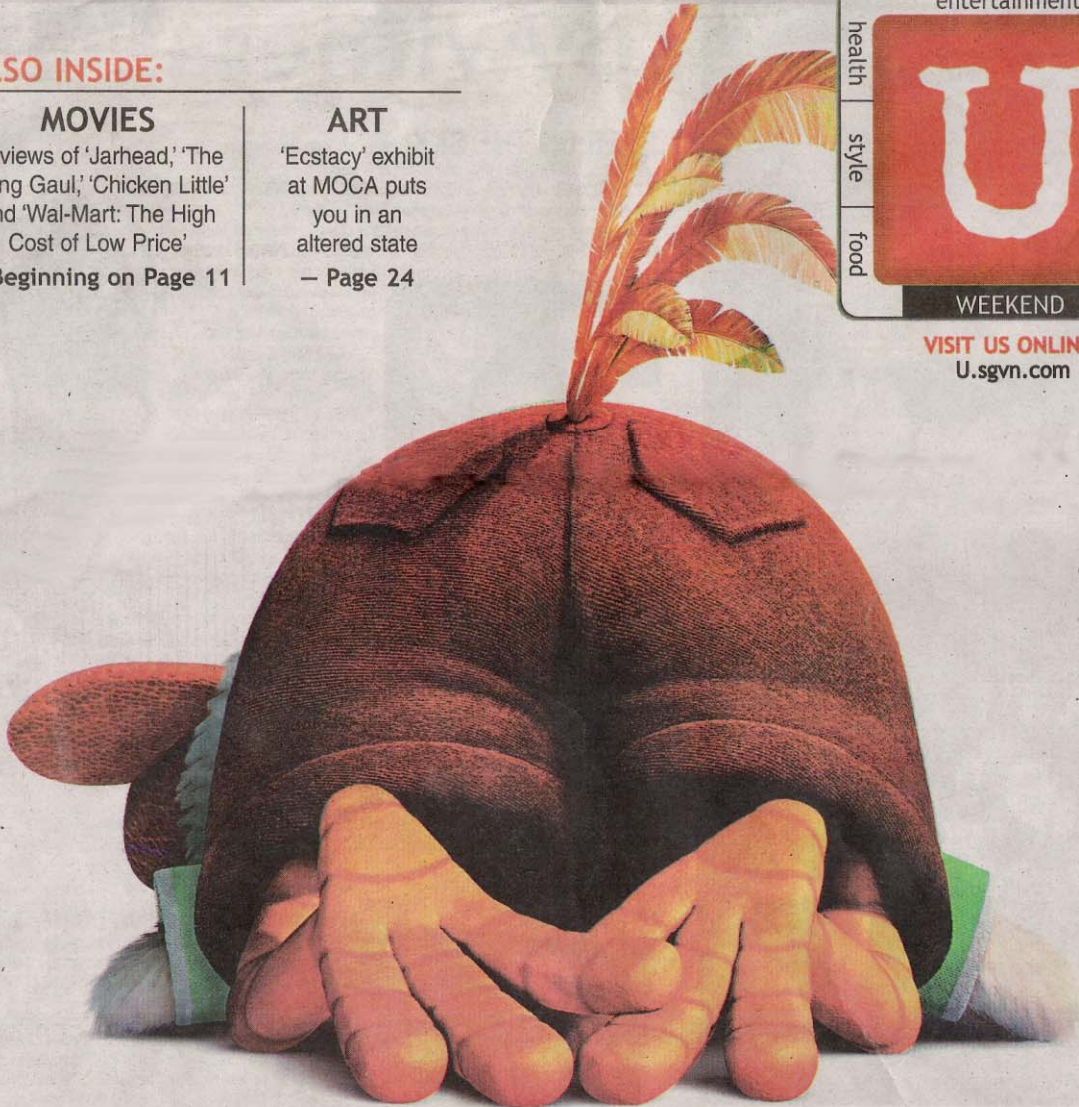
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TURNING TAIL

Disney leaves old-fashioned animation behind with 'Chicken Little'

Page 8

The ancient erhu is getting its due

By Steven D. Harris
Correspondent

Chances are one might not recognize the erhu by name or sight, but would be familiar with its sound. The "voice" it makes is something akin to the remon (albeit less eerie), and is remarkably close to the human voice.

This odd, archaic instrument is finally getting its due. It is now a fixture in many motion picture soundtracks, thanks in large part to the talent of Karen Han. She makes her Los Angeles debut Saturday with a concert at Cal State L.A.'s Luckman Theatre.

Karen Han and Friends will present a world music blend described as "New Waves from the Orient." Her friends are the Asian jazz-fusion group Hiroshima, pianist-composer Missa Johnouchi (leader of Asian Wind), flautist Hideyo Takakuwa and percussionist Hideo Funamoto.

As a composer and internationally renowned erhu virtuoso, Han has taken her music across the globe. She's performed locally with the Pasadena Pops and Hollywood Bowl Orchestra as well as the London Royal Philharmonic and Paris Opera Orchestra, among many other prestigious ensembles. She has played for such dignitaries as former President Carter and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Han can be heard on the soundtracks of "The Passion of the Christ," "Anna and the King," "The Joy Luck Club," "The Last Emperor" and the soon-to-be-released "Memoirs of a Geisha."

The erhu (pronounced R-who) is an ancient Chinese two-stringed violin. Because of its humble origin, no one knows for sure when it was conceived. But its heritage dates back at least 1,000 years and possibly twice that long.

The instrument is played in a vertical position on the left knee and has a longer neck than the traditional violin. The bow, which cannot be removed, is attached around the two strings. The upper tip is often decorative (Han's own erhu has a dragon head), while the lower end consists of a song box with snakeskin.

The erhu's temperament can either make you or break you. Its limitation of two strings certainly creates a challenge. The performer must make impressive leaps at times to

produce a desired melody. One requires amazing dexterity and an exceptional ear to play it in tune.

"Yes, it's very hard," Han admitted. "Harder than violin, because it doesn't have a finger board. I try to make up for the failing of the instrument. It was originally made with silk string, which broke too easily. Then they copied the Western violin and changed to metal string. It is not a very fancy instrument, but the song box is very sophisticated."

Han, a 30-something San Gabriel Valley resident, was born in the Anhui province, Bengbu, China. In 1988, she immigrated to the United States and now lives in Walnut

Han described the erhu as "music from the heart. It's very calming to the soul. People tell me they get goose bumps all the time. Sometimes, women come to me crying.

"After a concert last month, I was at a hotel and ordered room service," she said. "The waiter heard me practicing when he knocked on the door. He came in and said, 'Wow, you're a good singer.' He was so impressed and just loved the sound it made."

Han discovered this unusual instrument through her father, an amateur erhu player himself, who introduced it to his 6-year-old daughter. His hope was that it would offer her a career in the arts.

"He was thinking about my future very early," she remembered. "I first thought about being a dancer. But my father recognized that being an instrumentalist was more stable, since dancers have a very short career life.

"The price of an erhu was very cheap at that time and, every though it's hard to play, it was also a very popular instrument in China. When I started, the erhu was almost as big as I was.

"My father was my only mentor in the beginning. A little later, he found me a good professional teacher," she said.

Han, in fact, received private instruction from more than 10 erhu specialists in the first three years.

"I guess my father did this to see if each one could offer something different for me to learn. I realize now that it was wise; you shouldn't stay with just one teacher."

She eventually was one of two applicants selected from 1,000 to enroll at the Central

Conservatory of Music in China. Han is among a mere handful of artists to receive a master's degree on the erhu.

Han noted that Saturday's performance will cover New Age, classical and jazz.

"It's a new face in original, Asian fusion music with positivity and loving energy," she said. "I always think of a musician as the second composer or new developer. So the music was created in a way to make the world more universal and come together."

Her new CD, a follow-up to her last titled "Karen Han: Erhu II," will be available at the concert. It includes some classical pieces by Mozart and Schubert.

Still more of Hans's credits show a love labored: she acts as music director for the Hollywood Chinese Musicians

Ensemble and is board director of the Claremont School of Music. She's also the founder of the Chinese String Instrument Institute. If that's not enough, she's also the producer of Saturday's concert at Luckman.

Whenever time permits, Han performs master classes for young students.

"I love demonstration classes," she said. "I can tell that they are fascinated by my instrument. It really catches them; I feel so fortunate to have so many little fans."

Steven D. Harris is a freelance writer based in Pasadena. Write to him in care of the San Gabriel Valley Newspapers, Features Department, 1210 N. Azusa Canyon Road, West Covina, CA 91790.



KAREN HAN AND FRIENDS

Luckman Fine Arts Complex
at Cal State L.A., 5151 State
University Drive, Los Angeles
7:45 p.m. Saturday
\$25-\$60
(323) 343-6600