



# Theater Restaurant - Taiwan style

TEXT & IMAGES: SERINA HUANG



I'm a lucky lady. My husband recently organized a special dinner to celebrate my birthday, and his choice indicated how well he knows me. Rather than a ritzy but predictable upper-crust restaurant, he chose a hidden gem - a uniquely interactive cultural experience in a back alley just off Nanjing East Road. The place: the See-Join Puppet Theatre.

Founded by Bill Chen (陳建華) in 1992, See-Join Puppet Theatre is the first interactive *budaixi* (布袋戲, Taiwanese puppet) theater restaurant

of its kind in Taipei. Recently relocated to new premises, the bright orange-painted restaurant (with every imaginable corner crammed with colorful budaixi puppets) is intimate to the point of feeling poky. But don't be put off by the quaintness of the décor: the food and performance more than compensate for the surrounds. Chen's passion for his art form is infectious, and he clearly enjoys entertaining the young and old alike, transporting his audience to the fairytale world of Taiwan's vivid puppetry.



## See-Join Puppet Theater

2, Alley 16, Lane 41, Nanjing East Road, Section 2

Tel: (02) 2523-1118, 2522-1152

<http://www.see-join.com.tw/>



At 7.30 pm sharp, master puppeteer Chen introduced himself and the budaixi performance began. The large red velvet curtain peeled away to reveal a florescent canvas painted to depict a traditional temple scene. We had arrived a little late, and so our food arrived just as the performance was starting. I thought I would passively observe from our back table

puppetry. Chen gave us each a simple traditional-style wooden puppet and we practiced how to hold it upright, make it nod, take it for a walk, go for a run and even run in slow-motion. Then came the fun part: learning how to twirl the puppet up in the air and catch it. Chen was very encouraging, especially with klutzes like me. ‘They are made from wood so you can’t break it’, he reassured me as my puppet – yet again – thudded to the ground.

Chen then invited some of the audience behind the stage to maneuver some larger, more elaborate budaixi puppets. He explained that this style of puppet – unique to Taiwan – was developed to stand out in front of a large crowd. Most were over-the-top beautiful, with pretty porcelain faces, intricate lacquered hairdos and whimsical floating costumes. Working them was harder than it looks: an average-sized budaixi puppet weighs around two kilograms, with many custom-designed movements such as hand gestures or head movements.

While the highlight of a night out at See-Join is the performance, the home-style Taiwan cuisine cooked by Chen’s wife was better than I expected. Some menu items, like roasted fish jaw (which incidentally pairs well with Taiwan Beer), were probably less attractive to most foreign palates. But there are also more mainstream choices such as sweet-glazed roasted chicken legs, deep-fried tofu, sweet and sour fish

fillets, peasant-style egg and pickled turnip omelet, a spicy curry of ‘sweet’ pork spareribs with onion, and beef with black-pepper sauce.

The individual entrance fee for the performance is NT\$400 per head, with food priced between NT\$180 and NT\$250 per dish. The menu is in Chinese and English, with pictures. You can also hire out the entire restaurant, which can seat around twenty people. In addition to the restaurant, Chen regularly performs at other venues, including the National Center for Traditional Arts in Yilan. Chen has recently returned from a cultural tour to Australia, and speaks passable English but the language of puppetry is universal, and will appeal to all – especially children and the young at heart.



vantage point, but the acrobatics on stage drew me in from the start, and I kept turning away from my chopsticks to reach for the camera. It was a good thing that I kept an eye on the stage too, because the performance was highly interactive. I blinked for one second only to find water spurting from one of the Chinese lion puppets, which was greeted with squeals of delight by the children in the audience. And we all had fun trying to hit one of the evil characters with foam balls ... got him! Next was a hands-on lesson on



*Taiwanxifu (Taiwan daughter-in-law) is the blogging alter-ego of Serina Huang, who enjoys sampling Taiwan’s culinary creations, exploring new places and discovering cultural insights. Her blog is at <http://taiwanxifu.wordpress.com>.*