

# U Theatre

Friday and Saturday, September 26–27, 2003  
Zellerbach Hall

## The Sound of Ocean

This performance will last approximately 100 minutes  
and will be performed without intermission.

U Theatre's 2003 USA tour is produced by Lisa Booth Management, Inc.  
in association with the Asia Society, and with major support from the Council of Cultural Affairs, Taiwan.

Performances of the U Theatre, Drummers from Taiwan, are sponsored by United Commercial Bank.  
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and the Dimensions of Consciousness, supported by the James Irvine Foundation,  
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a federal agency that supports the visual, literary, and performing arts to benefit all Americans,  
and the California Arts Council, a state agency.

## The Sound of Ocean

Founder and Artistic Director	Liu, Ching-Ming
Drumming Master	Wong, Chee-Mun
Director	Liu, Ching-Ming
Composer	Wong, Chee-Mun
Artistic Consultant	Wu, Jing-Jye
Musicians	Sun, Chin-Feng Tang, Wen-Haw
Stage/Lighting Design	Lin, Keh-Hua
Set Design	Liu, Chung-Hsing
Costume Design	Yip, Kam-Tim
Performers	Liu, Ching-Ming Wong, Chee-Mun Tu, Chi-Chao Lin, Hsiu-Chin Cheung, Wai Yuen Huang, Chih-Lin Huang, Kun-Ming Cheng, Po-Jen Leong, Huey-Yi Tu, Yu-Fong Chen, Yung-Long Huang, I Ting Chiu, Chi-Hon
Stage Manager	Chang, Wen-Ho
Technical Director	Lin, Shih-Hsin
Lighting Supervisor	Fung, Kwok Kee Gabriel
Sound Supervisor	Lin, Meng-Yu

Dramaturge Lee, Li-Heng  
Executive Coordinator Yu, Fei-Ling

Premiere: October 1997

Special Thanks:

Pei Liu, director, and June Huang, production manager: Taipei Cultural Center, New York;  
Peggy Powers, La Frances Hui, Peter Tierney, Jr.

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Producer's Note

Artistic director Liu, Ching-Ming founded U Theatre as a creative community to investigate the natural, cultural, and spiritual links between artists and their environment. Additionally, Liu is acutely interested in exploring what it means to be Taiwanese today—to “rediscover” Taiwanese and Chinese modes of expression, and to give a contemporary voice to this culture’s deep and varied underpinnings and impulses.

U Theatre may best be described as philosophy in motion. For this company, performance is not an end in itself, but an aspect of a holistic way of life oriented in the Tao (the “Way”). In its work, the relationship of the individual to the whole community—and by extension, of the group to its audiences world-wide—is portrayed without explicit narrative or the creation of imagined characters. The result is a fascinating and unique mode of contemporary theater that is process-based, formal, finely tuned, and performer-dependent. It is grounded in a collective experience predicated on each member’s personal search for enlightenment and balance.

U Theatre’s rigorous aesthetic depends on disciplined training in various forms—acting, martial arts, drumming, song and dance,

meditation—some drawn from the East, and some from the West (Liu studied at New York University’s Performance Studies program and at the famed Grotowski school). This practice—as spiritual as it is physical and creative—takes place in an extraordinary setting. U Theatre’s home is high up on the lush and rugged landscape of Laochuan Mountain, an hour outside of Taipei, where platforms and shelters have been cut and built into the rock. Each new company production is premiered at the company’s 500-seat outdoor theater there. This environment is the cradle of U Theatre’s investigations and a potent source of energy and inspiration for the group.

Since 1991, the company has also undertaken a number of long pilgrimages on foot—throughout Taiwan and in the Himalayas—carrying only the most modest supplies on their backs while walking from village to city to farm. Confronting and overcoming intense physical and mental challenges, they cross urban and rural—as well as modern and traditional—borders in these shared

experiences, sometimes on their own, other times with thousands of other pilgrims. Though not directly related to performance, these journeys are fundamental to U Theatre's artistic philosophy and practice, fusing ritual, action, culture, and community.

In her own remarks about *The Sound of Ocean*, Liu asks: "As U Theatre is situated on a mountain, far away from the sea, what relevance does water really have to the group?" Her detailed reflections on the work can be read in the notes below. For an outsider and relative newcomer to the work, part of an answer may be found in the geography and contemporary status of Taiwan. In size just larger than the state of Rhode Island, Taiwan is literally bounded by water, and for over 50 years, water has secured this island's tenuous independence from mainland China.

By the time of the first American performance of *The Sound of Ocean*, U Theatre will have presented this production more than 75 times across the globe, from London's Barbican Centre to the Avignon, Bergen, and Singapore festivals, as well as in Germany, Spain, Macedonia, Hong Kong, and Brazil. About U Theatre and its work, *Le Matin* has written: "Is it dance? Theater? Music? More than any of these things, *The Sound of Ocean* is a remarkable universal performance, probing the human condition." And for 100 minutes in the theater we join these remarkable artists in a shared journey of discovery and renewal.

—Deirdre Valente

## NOTES FROM THE COMPANY

### Why "U"?

The pronunciation of the letter "U" is similar to the Chinese word for "excellence." This same word was used for "performers" in imperial China. More than 1,000 years ago, Zen masters in China wrote that a true artist should balance artistic skill with self-improvement (the "Tao"). Since U Theatre's founding in 1988, we have created performances that delve into the inner meaning of self. For U Theatre, combining Tao and artistic skill is the goal of life and of artistic creation.

### Music, Dance, and Drama, and Our Theater on the Mountain

Most modern performance groups concentrate on character development and story narration. U Theatre takes a different approach by gradually building up energy levels within the theater through the performers' precise movements and music, for which drums and gongs play a central role. "U Theatre has actors but no characters, rhythm but no plot, singing but no dialogue," commented a French theater critic in 1998. U Theatre's performances combine music (rhythmic drums), dance (movement and gesture), and drama.

U Theatre's home on Laochuan Mountain is an hour's drive from Taipei City. Every morning, the members of U Theatre make their way here to train and rehearse. At Laochuan Mountain, our company practices Tai-chi, takes martial arts lessons, practices drum techniques, and most important of all, meditates. Although holding various religious beliefs, company members value the benefits of meditation as much as monks. Through the introspection achieved through meditation, U Theatre's members work to find and maintain an inner peace despite the chaos and confusion present in the outside world. We believe that through performance we can communicate this inner peace with our audiences.

### History and Philosophy

Liu, Ching-Ming established U Theatre in 1988 as an expression of her personal desire to reacquaint herself with Taiwanese and Chinese cultures as well as to introduce such traditional cultural elements into modern theatrical performance. Before U Theatre, nearly all modern theatrical efforts in Taiwan took Western modern theatrical techniques and approaches as their foundation. Liu, framing U Theatre's approach to performance within the imperative of "reacquainting one with oneself," has made Taiwanese and Chinese cultures the base ingredients of U Theatre's performances.

In our first five years, U Theatre focused on learning from Taiwan folk artists the forms and skills of theatrical performance. Liu concurrently arranged a training curriculum to teach various methods

of Western modern theater. U Theatre's early works were adaptations of Chinese classic tales from a Taiwanese perspective, combining song and dance together with traditional religious elements.

In 1993, Liu invited drum master Wong, Chee-Mun to instruct U Theatre's members in music, especially in the performance of traditional Chinese percussion. Wong's deep-held conviction that "to learn to play the drum, one must first learn to meditate," inspired the adoption of meditation, and later Chinese martial arts, into the central core of the U Theatre's training. These two elements have become essential elements of U Theatre's performances.

"Performance is the representation of the best aspects of life," is the oft-repeated mantra of Liu, Ching-Ming that has come to define U Theatre. The attention our group places on raising the quality of life through theater makes this company unique in comparison to other modern theater ensembles.

The "outward" nature of U Theatre's performances during its first five years—expressing a search for cultural roots, was followed by an "inward" focus, through which U Theatre's members have worked to achieve inner peace and then project this peace into their work. Our aim is to actively join with audiences to share this experience.

In 1997, U Theatre celebrated its tenth anniversary with the premiere of *The Sound of Ocean*. This work is a milestone in our efforts to achieve strict body discipline and total freedom of the mind. *The Sound of Ocean* is a theatrical piece focused on performers. While the audience will recognize in it elements of music, dance, and drama, the energy level of the performances in *The Sound of Ocean* moves it beyond other theater works.

U Theatre's members have honed their artistic and spiritual skills on their mountain workshop over many years now. We lead simple lives, and this is reflected in our work. While it is unclear whether performers in old China followed similar creative processes and forms of simple living, the members of U Theatre are resolute in their commitment to continue facing their lives with honesty and to the pursuit of inner peace.

#### About *The Sound of Ocean*

*The Sound of Ocean* is an experience that soothes and shares. It is a work about water. As U Theatre is situated on a mountain, far away from the sea, what relevance does water really have to the group? The phrase serves as a metaphor for the actors' sensitivity. But what does that mean? "The Sound of Ocean consists of vibrations united in harmony," says master drummer Wong, Chee-Mun. *The Sound of Ocean* tells of the water of life, which nourishes our souls. Individual drops gather together to form a stream, and streams join forces to create a river—which eventually empties into the ocean.

It is said that the goddess of compassion, Kuan-Yin, when she began working on the perfection of her mind, practiced meditation by the sea. Every day, she listened to the ocean rolling in and ebbing away. Thus purified of all illusions by the steady roar of the ocean, she reached supreme enlightenment. Is this the reason why a definition of *The Sound of Ocean* is so elusive? Is it, perhaps not the creation of U Theatre? *The Sound of Ocean* encompasses five segments: "Collapse," "Flowing Water," "Breakers," "Listening to the Ocean Heart," and "The Sound of Ocean." "Flowing Water," "Listening to the Ocean Heart," and "The Sound of Ocean" are the backbone of this work. The other two sections produce a strong contrast to these three. The sense of calmness in "Flowing Water" is amplified by its placement after the powerful performance of "Collapse." To talk about *The Sound of Ocean*, one begins with "Flowing Water."

After six years of performing, U Theatre added drumming to its repertoire in 1993. Wong, Chee-Mun had just come back from a trip to India, where he had meditated for six months at the location where Buddha reached enlightenment. After many sessions of contemplation, some of which lasted an entire day, Wong's thoughts became serene. Then he told the troupe: "I will first teach you meditation, and then we will play the drums."

After two years of teaching, he created "Flowing Water," a steady stream of repetitive rhythmic sequences reflecting the continuous flow of water. The changes in volume remind us of the adaptability of water, which "flows downhill, willingly complying with the slope." The drumming remains unbroken despite the intermittent strokes. However, the intervals do not emanate silence, but rather are filled with a primordial sound, "om," which, in Buddhist cosmology, is the sound that

fills the universe. The Buddhist Master Vimalakirti responded to the persistent questions of his disciples by maintaining silence and, thus awakened from their ignorance, they exclaimed: "The master's silence is like muffled thunder."

A further two years were necessary to complete *The Sound of Ocean*. Wong, Chee-Mun explained that he was inspired by a mighty temple bell, which emitted real "sound waves, ocean waves, purifying waves." Wong continues, "When I started practicing meditation, I often woke up during the night, feeling that my conscience had reached the border of death and that life remained indeterminate. What is life? When death arrives, there is apparently no more life, but does not something remain that death cannot erase?" To hear "Listening to the Ocean Heart" is to experience a cautious and serene acceptance of death.

The performance ends with "The Sound of Ocean." Only three instruments are used. Their different tones clash with one another and in turn, hold themselves together. The big drum steadily bounces back; the furious gong keeps ringing; a large musical bowl resounds regularly. Three instruments, three sounds: the first one strongly contrasted and in relief; the second sudden and cyclical; the third horizontal and even.

*The Sound of Ocean* expresses both the reawakening life and the eternal peace of death. It is a sharing from the actors with the audience, a sharing of life, every moment of it, and a sharing of the present.

—Liu, Ching-Ming  
Founder and Artistic Director

Liu, Ching-Ming (founder and artistic director) was born in 1956, and rose to become one of Taiwan's top stage actresses by the early 1980s. After earning a masters of arts from New York University (1983), in 1984 she was invited to participate in a year-long workshop by Polish director Jerzy Grotowski at his renowned theater school. Absorbing Grotowski's teachings, Liu learned to "instill a quest for deeper relevance at the heart of all of my artistic endeavors." Liu founded U Theatre in 1988, soon after returning to Taiwan, and the company developed its own approach to the performing arts by studying and distilling the artistic forms embodied in Taiwanese religious and folk rituals. To this foundation were soon added elements of Tai-chi and dance techniques. In retrospect, Liu now sees the evolution of U Theatre as a personal journey through which she gained a fresh understanding of herself. The process of evolution for U Theatre has continued and, since 1993, the group has incorporated drum-metered meditation and martial art forms. For U Theatre, art manifests itself as "an articulation of the quality of existence."

The full focus of Liu's efforts is now on expanding the expressive potential of the drum. In support of this, she is helping U Theatre's artists to elevate their own artistic consciousnesses and to experiment with myriad combinations of music, theater, and dance.

Wong Chee-Mun (drum master) was born in Malaysia in 1965. He began taking percussion lessons at the age of six and started formal training under a master of Chinese martial arts at age 10. Wong has developed and practiced these skills in both specialties for more than 20 years. Following his university graduation, Wong toured Europe, the Americas, and Africa for several years as a member of a dance troupe. After spending time studying meditation in the 1990s in India and Tibet, he joined U Theatre in 1993 at the request of U Theatre's founder, Liu, Ching-Ming. Wong's approach to U Theatre's training regimen, which requires that students first learn meditation before taking up percussion, has radically changed the character of U Theatre and mapped out for the group a path by which to continue to grow and mature. *The Sound of Ocean* represents the culmination of seven years of work by Wong and is the current centerpiece of U Theatre's performances.

Lisa Booth Management, Inc. (producer) initiates, produces, and manages performing arts projects world-wide. Specializing in contemporary theater, dance, and performance, activities include touring American artists globally, producing North American tours by foreign artists, general managing performance seasons, and developing special projects and events. Since 1984, LBMI projects have taken place in more than 300 cities in 45 states and 20 countries. Recent international companies touring the United States: Les Colporteurs (France); Teatro Hugo & Ines (Peru/Bosnia); Ratan

Thiyam's Chorus Repertory Theatre (with the Asia Society); Children of Uganda; and Dance, The Spirit of Cambodia (with the Asia Society and the New England Foundation for the Arts). USA artists on tour: Doug Varone and Dancers, Shen Wei Dance Arts, Robert Post, Halau O Kekuhi, and Ping Chong. Upcoming: K Kvarnstrom & Co. (Sweden) and Movement (R)evolution: New African Dance. LBMI created and general managed the On Tour program of the Henson International Festival of Puppet Theater (1996–2000).

Asia Society (associate producer) is America's leading institution dedicated to fostering understanding of Asia and communication between Americans and the peoples of Asia and the Pacific. A national nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization, the Society provides a forum for building awareness of the more than 30 countries broadly defined as the Asia-Pacific region—the area from Japan to Iran, and from Central Asia to New Zealand, Australia, and the Pacific Islands. Through art exhibitions and performances, films, lectures, seminars and conferences, publications and assistance to the media, and materials and programs for students and teachers, the Asia Society presents the uniqueness and diversity of Asia to the American people.

#### 2003 USA Tour

Deirdre Valente and Lisa Booth

(Lisa Booth Management, Inc.), producers

Patricia Kirby, company manager

Clark Transfer, Air Power Chicago, freight

Peacock Travel, travel

Marsh USA Inc., insurance

This tour was produced in association with the Asia Society: Rachel Cooper, director of performing arts and public programs.