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THURSDAY, MARCH 10, 2016

On March 16th, on the stroke of half past midnight, a palanquin holding a centuries-old Matsu statue, newly washed and dressed, will leave the Gong Tian Temple (拱天宮) in Baishatun (白沙屯), Miaoli County.

Who chose that date? The goddess did. Why leave at such an ungodly hour? That, too, was Matsu's decision.

The 11-day pilgrimage will take in a 200km round trip to Chao Tian Temple (朝天宮) in Beigang (北港), Yunlin County, and back. The arrangements, says the temple's current director, Chen Chun-fa (陳春發), are 70 percent decided by the goddess, 30 percent by the temple committee.

Chen says the committee wanted an early morning start to let the pilgrims get some sleep, but no matter how many times they cast lots it was "no" for a morning start.

"We always go according to what Matsu wants."

The Baishatun pilgrimage, the earliest "pedestrian" Matsu pilgrimage in Taiwan, started over 200 years ago, with perhaps 20 pilgrims, Chen says. Today pilgrims come from all over Taiwan, and from Japan. When Chen first attended in 1971, there were some 300 pilgrims. There were no more than 3,000 when he joined the temple 15 years ago.

"It has increased yearly since then and ballooned in the last few years. Last year 19,000 people registered; 15,000 have already registered for this year's event."

Unlike the Dajia (大甲) pilgrimage, the route is unknown.

"Lots of police ask us, but we can only tell them that we simply don't know," Chen said.

MATSU'S WHIM

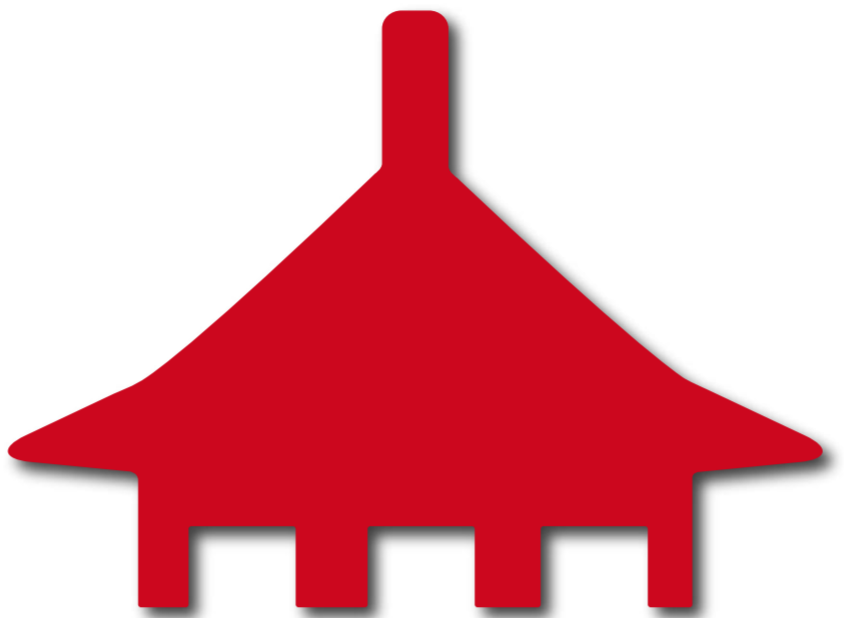
Matsu will tell the bearers her preferred direction whenever they come to junction. In 1978, Matsu decided not to cross the Xiluo Bridge (西螺大橋), and insisted on going underneath, where they chanced upon a family living in a ramshackle hut by the river. The palanquin swayed, lots were cast, and it was discovered Matsu was saying the family should move before the Dragon Boat Festival.

The family moved, heavy rains swelled the river, the shack was swept away.

Neither does the goddess necessarily allot to stay overnight at a temple. Thirty years ago the palanquin stayed at a house in Xiluo. It entered via the front door without problem, but the next morning the owner had to dismantle the doorway to get the palanquin out.

"That year he made a lot of money," Chen said, referring to the popular notion that if you do Matsu a favor, she will reward you.

For a registration fee of NT\$700, pilgrims receive clothes, a hat, a talisman, a mention to Matsu and their



Do as the Lady says

This year's Baishatun Matsu pilgrimage leaves the Gong Tian Temple just after midnight on Wednesday morning. If you fancy a uniquely Taiwanese experience, this 11-day pilgrimage may be the one for you

BY PAUL COOPER
STAFF REPORTER



Above: A Matsu statue is held aloft in her home, Gong Tian Temple, in Baishatun, Miaoli County, in this undated photo.

Bottom: An aerial photo captures the crowds waiting outside Chao Tian Temple in Yunlin County's Beigang during a recent Baishatun Matsu pilgrimage in this undated photo.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BAI SHATUN MATSU WEB SITE

name read out by Chao Tian Temple priests before the pilgrimage returns from Beigang. You cannot register online; send money and info including your name and size via registered post, and on the day of the pilgrimage you can pick up your goodies from the temple.

You don't need to register to participate. If you fancy attending some or all of the route, it leaves the temple, near Baishatun train station in Miaoli County, at 12:30am on Wednesday, arriving in Beigang on March 20 and arriving back in Baishatun on March 26.

Food and water are provided free along the route. Bring sunscreen, mosquito repellent, talcum powder and consider a tent. Be prepared for huge crowds.

— ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY LOUIS JIA-YU WEI

PILGRIMAGE NOTES

WHAT: Baishatun Matsu pilgrimage
WHEN: Wednesday at 12:30am to Saturday March 26
WHERE: Gong Tian Temple (拱天宮), 8, Dongxiao Township, Miaoli County (苗栗縣通霄鎮8號) on Wednesday at 12:30am; arrives at Beigang' Chao Tian Temple in Yunlin County Sunday March 20; returning to Baishatun Saturday March 26. Actual route unplanned.
ON THE NET: www.baishatun.com.tw and www.facebook.com/baishatunluo
GETTING THERE: Take the Taiwan Railways Administration (TRA) train from Taipei Main Station (台北車站) to Jhunan (竹南) and then transfer to local train to Baishatun (白沙屯). One-way tickets cost NT\$300.



Lab Space kicks off its season with comedy

Their first play of the season contains six short plays

BY JEROME KEATING
STAFF REPORTER

The LAB Space kicks off the year with David Ives' delightful comedy *Shorts*.

Ives, a prolific American playwright, is best known for his clever one-act plays that highlight the interplay of language, existential imagination, word play conundrums and more.

The six "shorts" were chosen by directors Ting Kao (高詩婷) and Andrew Chau (周厚安).

Who would not wish for a reset button for conversations that go awry? In *The Sure Thing*, a man and a woman meeting for the first time have that luck. Each time their conversation turns negative, a bell rings and they must start again.

With *Degas, C'est moi*, a man wakes up one morning and decides he should be the great French Impressionist painter Edgar Degas. But is the world ready for him?

In *The Philadelphia*, a different man finds himself in a twilight zone where he discovers that he can only get what he wants by asking for the opposite.

The Russian revolutionary Trotsky finds himself being killed over and over again in *Variations on the Death of Trotsky*. However it is in his conversations with his assassin that he is able to come up with memorable profound statements.



Victor Stevenson, left, and Sharon Landon in a scene from the short play *The Philadelphia*, one of six shorts from David Ives' *Shorts* that will be performed this weekend at the Lab Space.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHENG YI-LEE

A scam artist invents a new imaginary language, Unamunda, and charges people to learn it in *The Universal Language*. All goes well until he falls in love with one of his students.

Words, Words, Words. Three chimpanzees named Milton, Swift and Kafka are locked in a room with typewriters to hopefully create Shakespeare's Hamlet through their random typing. What they discuss while doing this is the key.

This production sees the returning faces of Victor Stevenson (*Tuesdays with Morrie*) and Sharon Landon (*A Perfect Ganesh*) from last year.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

WHAT: *Shorts*
WHEN: Tomorrow and Saturday at 7:30pm and Sunday at 2:30pm; March 18 and March 19 at 7:30pm and March 20 at 2:30pm; March 25 and March 26 at 7:30pm and March 27 at 2:30pm
WHERE: The LAB Space (實踐場), 3F, 9, Beitou Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市北投路一段9號3樓)
TICKETS: Available through www.accupass.com/go/ives or at the door
ON THE NET: o?