



Xu's images on the stage. She has impressed TV audiences with her on-screen roles but she feels more at home in the theater.

Star of TV drama finds herself on the stage

Wang Anqi and Yang Yang

Xu Xing, a leading actress for nearly 30 years, has impressed viewers with her roles as kind, selfless and persevering mothers in various TV dramas. But Xu treasures more her identity as a stage actress.

"Unlike a TV actress, a stage actress has to directly face the audience and unfold every detail correctly during the performance," she said.

"If every movement is performed well and every line uttered just right, the role is played vividly and the performance touches the audience."

Xu was named best supporting actress at the 1997 Zuolin Dramatic Arts Awards for her role in "The Unwanted" and received a lifetime achievement award in 2010 at the awards named after Huang Zuolin, a pioneer of the theater in the 1930s.

At the age of 8, Xu moved to Jiading's Nanxiang Town from her home in urban Shanghai with her parents who were intellectuals sent to the countryside to work.

Early rural life

Rural life in Nanxiang was difficult for a teenager like Xu. She got up at four or five o'clock every day and worked in the fields, pulling up seedlings and planting and harvesting rice. But Xu still managed to find time to read books and listen to the radio. She also joined a performing arts propaganda team and discovered her talent as a singer.

In 1974, when Xu turned 18, both Shanghai Theater Academy and Shanghai Conservatory of Music came to Jiading to enrol students. Xu applied for both and was given a place at the academy.

The delivery of lines in standard and fluent Mandarin is a prerequisite for an actress and Xu had to try even harder than her classmates to master this basic skill.

The complex language environment of a mixture of Nanxiang dialect and Shanghai urban dialect which Xu had been exposed to for many years made her Mandarin problematic.

Xu took every opportunity to practice speaking and studying Mandarin textbooks. In addition to learning phonetics from her teachers, she would consult



Xu Xing gives a talk at the drama studio she has established in Nanxiang to provide free coaching for elderly people interested in acting.

classmates hailing from the northern China who usually spoke better Mandarin. Diligent work and good comprehension saw Xu's Mandarin improve by leaps and bounds.

As her Mandarin improved, her performing skills also progressed. Xu's portrait of an ill-fated young woman in her graduating play "Withered Trees Revive" in 1977 was so good and thorough that she became one of the two successful candidates enrolled by Shanghai Youth Repertory Theater that year.

Since then Xu has remained attached to the stage.

The first drama Xu acted in as a professional actress was Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing." Though she had only a supporting role, she would stand in the wings to study the more experienced players.

After two years of supporting roles,

Xu was finally given the opportunity of a leading role in the drama "Redemption." The role she portrayed in the play was of a female student who committed a crime during the "cultural revolution" (1966-1976) and was later educated and persuaded to return to the right track.

To play the role, Xu even studied how to smoke. Once she mishandled the cigarette lighter and a tongue of flame rose up and burnt her eyelashes.

Playing 13 roles

Xu's reputation as an outstanding actress was established after her performance in the 1992 monodrama "Phone Calls on Atlantic Coast."

The play lasted for over 100 minutes and told the story of a Shanghai-born female doctor's tough experiences abroad in 50 phone calls between her and other characters.

The drama's 13 characters were all played by Xu.

To prepare for the role, Xu spent several months studying the backgrounds of each character, pondering their psychology and discussing with the director about the day-to-day dialogue to portray the characters.

The success of the drama caused a sensation nationwide. Chen Zhili, then deputy Party secretary of Shanghai, thanked all the creative staff backstage after watching the performance.

"An actress's duty is more than speaking a few lines. To portray a role well, she has to figure out the logic of the storyline and the reason behind a character's action. In this way the audience start to understand her," said Xu.

A fan of detective stories, Xu has read all of Agatha Christie's novels and acted in the stage versions of novels such as "And Then There Were None" and "The Mirror Cracked from Side to Side."

Xu keeps fit with regular exercise and has practiced yoga for half an hour every day for the past 10 years.

Last year, to carry out a proposal from Xincheng Road Community, Xu founded a drama studio to provide free coaching for elderly people interested in acting.

"Age is merely a number. As long as you have a hobby or have something to do, you won't feel panic about aging," said Xu.



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