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*Backstage with Chen Shi-Zheng*

## **Bringing an Epic 'Monkey' Tale to the West**

By CRAIG WINNEKER *September 28, 2007*

A young boy cowers under a bed as soldiers patrol the streets outside. He discovers a lacquered box and opens it. Inside he finds a book telling an ancient story of a brave hero who travels far and wide in a search for enlightenment, defeating many foes. The epic adventure sparks the boy's desire for knowledge about the world -- and transports him far from the horrific violence just outside the door.

The setup for a new Hollywood adventure fantasy? It probably should be. But it's also the real story of how Chen Shi-Zheng, born in China in 1963 and raised during the height of the Cultural Revolution (his mother was killed when he was four; his father sent away), first encountered a story that would inspire his career. It would stay with him from his early days as a performer in opera troupes traveling through the Chinese provinces until his current position in the top echelons of the opera world.

Mr. Chen emigrated from China to New York in 1987 and soon established himself as a talented opera performer, choreographer and director, with a flair for mythology and fairy tales. He made his mark with a monumental, 19-hour production of the Chinese Ming Dynasty opera, "The Peony Pavilion," performed at the 1999 Lincoln Center Festival. In the years since Mr. Chen has become an in-demand opera director, and has directed the film "Dark Matter," starring Meryl Streep and now in postproduction.

In his current show, Mr. Chen is finally fulfilling a dream he's had since his turbulent childhood: presenting the epic Chinese story he

found under that bed to a wider Western audience. "Monkey: Journey to the West" is a spectacular staging of the seventh-century Chinese tale of a Monkey King on a search for wisdom and enlightenment. The production wowed audiences this summer at the Manchester International Festival, is now playing at Paris's Théâtre du Châtelet, and will move to Berlin next year.

Mr. Chen's collaborators on "Monkey" are animator Jamie Hewlett, co-creator of the "Tank Girl" comic book series, and musician Damon Albarn, from the Britpop band Blur. The duo are the creative team behind Gorillaz, a multiplatinum-selling "virtual" band whose members are cartoon characters. Mr. Hewlett's vivid set design and outlandish costumes are the show's visual trademark, and his animations are woven seamlessly into the story line, projected onto a scrim and used both during set changes and in actual scenes. Mr. Albarn's haunting and dynamic score blends genuine Chinese sounds with electronica and even hurdy-gurdy. It sounds like neither Blur nor Gorillaz.

But the show's defining vision is clearly Mr. Chen's, and it is left to him to merge the Eastern and Western influences into a cohesive whole. He succeeds. Imagine Busby Berkeley directing a Cirque du Soleil production of "Enter the Dragon." Leading the large cast of singers, acrobats and martial artists is the track-suit clad Fei Yang, who portrays the Monkey King with simian gusto. One minute he sings an aria, the next skitters up a rope, the next cocks his head, scratches himself and makes cheep-cheep noises. The singing (all in Mandarin) is gorgeous -- and often performed by someone hanging upside down or spinning a plate.

Mr. Chen spoke to Craig Winneker in a café outside the Théâtre du Châtelet.

**Q:** *You've wanted to stage this story for a long time. What was the original motivation for making "Monkey"?*

As a Chinese artist, I often feel that, all over the world, everybody does Russian literature, everybody does Chekhov, everybody does Molière, everybody does Shakespeare and Greek drama. But nobody does Chinese works. Chinese literature and Chinese drama somehow have been lost in translation. I talk to writers and actors, and they just find the translation very difficult to get into. They don't understand it, and they feel like there's too much of a cultural barrier. So I started staging Chinese classics -- some in Chinese, some in English adaptation. It was part of an ongoing mission to really try to force Chinese theater onto the world stage.

*Q: Those works also reflect a bit of your personal history, don't they?*

Most of these plays are incredibly bloody and tragic, and often about revenge. I think that reflects my growing up during the Cultural Revolution. It's also about history and the darkness of human nature. Now I'm getting a little bit more mature. I look around and see that our circumstances aren't getting better. Since I was a little boy I have been reading "Journey to the West." I found it under a bed of my father's friend, who was a librarian, when all the classic literature was banned. That book was a starting point of my imagination, of my sense of possibility. It gave me some place to go besides reality. I quite identified with the monkey character. I was a small boy trying to become more powerful, trying to turn magical powers onto everything and fight against evil. When I go visit China now, all the children know is "Harry Potter" and "Lord of the Rings." Same thing [in Europe and America]. Those things are owning mystery and mythology for modern children. I just thought it would be so nice to introduce this, if this story can have the same kind of effect as it had on me.

*Q: The themes of these stories are universal. There was no reason why they shouldn't be more widely known.*

Exactly. We live in the human condition. There are so many things I can appreciate in Russian or French literature, reading Balzac or Molière in Chinese translation. In China, when I was young, I found it immensely powerful. I had a very clear picture about what France looked like and what the French looked like. I find it amazing that for some reason Chinese literature has not landed anywhere. Much of it is about business; it's really not about the cultural heritage part.

I just thought that this is really a wonderful story, a magic story and -- sorry to say -- far better than "The Lion King" or any of these Disney stories. The protagonist is ferocious! You feel for this character, who fights every hypocrisy and who fights his way to claim his own rights. He reminds me of America -- how it has its own youthful history. The monkey invented himself. He has no parents, he has no tradition. He has come from a stone, and he finds his teacher, and he basically taught himself how to get out of trouble. It's so easy to understand.

*Q: How was it working with such unusual collaborators -- a rock star and a comic book artist. Were you at all worried that this project would become known as the "Gorillaz opera"?*

Well, the Gorillaz are well-known and it's easy for people to just think about them. But both Damon and Jamie want to be known as individual artists. They wanted to be able to reinvent themselves doing something new. I took them three times to China to visit some remote villages and also to look at the change in modern China, in Beijing. It's incredible, the energy, the massive construction, compared to some of the remote, minority villages. They got a sense of how China is at a junction in the road. I wanted this production to reflect that.

The reason for collaborating is to find a modern translation or filter. Through Jamie's animation and his design and through Damon's sound, and through my writing the libretto, I think this story found a translation in a way. If the story can land in them,

then they can translate it to the rest of the Western population.

*Q: How did you familiarize them with the story? To understand it from a Western perspective?*

They didn't read the story. They saw a Japanese TV show in the '80s, a very campy show. Apparently 30 years ago Brits all saw it. It's very famous. I never saw it; they showed it to me. I had seen every possible version in China, from opera to animation to film. I basically gave them a synopsis. There are 100 chapters. Each scene depicts some kind of natural disaster or human temptation one has to conquer.

When we first had this conversation a couple of years ago, they didn't really know where to start. In the beginning they were afraid of falling into the pitfall of a fake-Chinese look that you often have in the West. I told Jamie, "It has to be your own drawing, it can't be your version of Chinese." Unless you understand and put your sense of humor in it, then it doesn't work. Monkey's a bad boy, in a sense. You need that. He needs to be not so clean, not so pretty. You need some modern reference or touch to the story, so people understand that this Monkey is not a 1,500-year-old invention. He's today.

Damon was really fixated by the noise in China, the horns and the aggression. He loved that [and worked it into the score, even inventing an instrument, the Klaxophone, that makes music from car horns]. That is so far from Puccini. It's pretty brutal and crude, and there's a lot of harshness.

*Q: How do you approach a new project? Does it have to come from someplace personal?*

I never just take a job. I always push my own projects. It's important that you feel you have something to say. That you really feel the story resonate inside you. That you feel you can do something about it. That you can make something spectacular for

everyone else to appreciate. I'm doing Monteverdi operas with the English National Opera. Last year I did "Orfeo" and this year "The Coronation of Poppea." Monteverdi's music speaks to me. I find it incredible. I find the story very compelling. I said I want to do this instead of doing another Puccini or Verdi. It has to be something that haunts you for quite a while. "Monkey" has been with me for 30 years. So has "Orfeo." I've been listening to that music for years. I have dreams about it. It's in your existence for a while and you feel like it's pretty much cooked inside of you before you actually put it on stage.

**Q:** *Do you think your interpretation of the "Monkey" story would play in China?*

We have an invitation to take the show to China. I'm curious about what a Chinese audience will say about it.

***"Monkey: Journey to the West" plays at Théâtre du Châtelet until Oct. 13. For more information, [www.chatelet-theatre.com](http://www.chatelet-theatre.com)***