

Wall Street Journal

# Getting Down to 'Monkey'

## Business *A Chinese Classic Comes to Lincoln*

*Center*

By MARSHALL HEYMAN

The audience at Tuesday night's Lincoln Center Festival opening of "Monkey: Journey to the West" was rather eclectic. There were lots of well-dressed Asian men and women, not surprising considering the production is in Mandarin, was conceived and directed by the Chinese director Chen Shi-Zheng and is based on the classic Chinese novel "Xi You Ji."

But there were also lots of hipsters dressed in cool T-shirts, perhaps more hipsters dressed in cool T-shirts than the David H. Koch Theater has ever seen. This was because this amalgamation of opera, dance, theater and acrobatics was composed by Damon Albarn (of the British band Blur) with a visual concept, animation and costumes by Jamie Hewlett. Together, the two founded Gorillaz, a virtual music group, in 1998.

As a story, "Monkey: Journey to the West" has elements of the quest of "The Wizard of Oz," the demon-fighting in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," and the kung fu of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" mixed in with a bit of "Curious George." As a sumptuous piece of staging, it recalls Julie Taymor, Robert Wilson and the current revival of "Pippin." There is an enormous Buddha hand that crushes the eponymous character, lots of flying ladies and an undersea sequence

featuring a floating starfish and a dancing octopus that must be seen to be believed.

After the opening night performance, the large, mostly non-English-speaking cast—including the acrobats who play both the floating starfish and the dancing octopus—made their way, by double-decker bus, to the Hudson Hotel, where the afterparty was under way. (The bus, like most double-decker buses in the city at the moment, had a huge advertisement for "Monkey" on the side of it.) There, because doing this kind of acrobatics definitely burns a lot of calories, they voraciously ate sliders, miniature brisket sandwiches, watermelon and feta salad and spare ribs.

Among the guests were the actor Richard Kind, the filmmaker Bennett Miller and Yue-Sai Kan, the Chinese media icon and television host. The "Monkey" tale might be new to American audiences, "but every Chinese person knows this story about the Monkey who goes to get the scripture and the problems he encounters on the way," Ms. Kan said.

But, for us, the moral wasn't necessarily obvious. What did she think it's really about? "In life, if you want to attain something, you go through a lot of problems, and sometimes you need some help. But you have to be ingenious, smart and brave. You have to persist."

But how about that octopus? Ms. Kan agreed that the octopus was one of her favorite parts. "It's adorable," she said. "Really memorable. That whole scene under the water!"

Mr. Hewlett said several of his more complicated designs ended up being tossed out, especially because many of the actors could not do their martial arts moves wearing heavy costumes. But not the octopus.

"We needed an octopus," he said. "And it seemed to be the simplest costume. It's comical and quite silly. I was being

playful. A lot of people have impressions of opera, but we wanted to make it accessible for the whole family. Why shouldn't kids go to operas?"

The director, Chen Shi-Zheng, said when he first came up with the idea, he was looking for something that "young people would like. It's cool, it's humorous. It seemed just right to tell this story." Connecting with that audience would be easier with Messrs. Albarn and Hewlett and the legacy of the Gorillaz.

But what's the story about?

"On the surface, it's a spiritual quest," Mr. Chen replied. "But with animals who are also flawed characters. It's about testing wills and overcoming obstacles."

Of course, now that the 41-member cast is in New York, mostly staying at the Parker Meridien in Midtown, Mr. Chen is now the cruise director. They do eight shows a week through the end of July, but on Monday they'll have a day off. One of his next obstacles will be what do with all of them for 24 hours.

"There are 50 of us, and for a lot of them it's their first time out of China," Mr. Chen said. "We'll probably take the ferry or walk around or go to a museum and a big Chinese meal."

He didn't say if that Chinese meal would include any calamari or octopus, but he did say they would probably all travel to there by double-decker bus.

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