

Times

May 25, 2007

The serious side of monkey business

Damon Albarn happily admits that he is not the master of his new opera, finds John Lewis

We're in a converted factory in a south-west suburb of Paris, where the rehearsals for *Monkey: Journey to the West* resemble a medieval carnival. The building is swarming with acrobats and martial artists, casually spending their down time uni-cycling, juggling, sword-fighting, plate-spinning and walking around on their hands.

Wandering amid this Bacchanalian scene is the opera's composer, Damon Albarn, occasionally shouting out suggestions as to how the young cast should be singing. In another room, the impish figure of Jamie Hewlett – the cartoonist behind Gorillaz and the opera's designer – is watching a beefy Chinese acrobat having his head taped over and his face covered in plaster as he is fitted with a huge, cartoonish latex Pigsy mask.

But the calm at the centre of this storm is the opera's director, Chen Shi-Zheng, a long-haired, soft-voiced figure dressed in black, who presides over the 17 performers as they rehearse the opening scene. As Albarn's strident oriental funk score blasts out from the PA, the cast come out from the wings. They are playing a tribe of monkeys, leaping around on all fours, shinning up huge poles, banging their chests and picking imaginary bugs off their heads as they whoop and grunt ecstatically. "Don't be afraid to look foolish," says Chen in Mandarin. "Use every part of your bodies and keep screaming."

Although *Monkey: Journey to the West* is touted as Albarn's work – and his quirky music and Hewlett's manga-style designs certainly brand it as a Gorillaz event – it is Chen who is, in Albarn's words, "the master". Since leaving China for America in 1987, Chen has earned rave reviews around the world as the director of startlingly minimal productions of Western operas by the likes of Monteverdi and Wagner. "What I've always tried to

do is to take the unified physicality of Chinese opera,” he says, “which tends to tell stories in pictures, and apply that to Western work, stuff that’s always been very text heavy. I’ve always felt that one can learn from the other.”

Chen was the starting point when *Monkey: Journey to the West* was commissioned by the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris to open next month’s Manchester International Festival. “The first ingredient was Shi-Zheng,” says the Châtelet’s director, Jean-Luc Choplin. “I had seen his production of a Chinese opera called *The Peony Pavilion* and was amazed how he was able to break down barriers between cultures and art forms. He was the perfect person to stage a big spectacle.”

The *Monkey* story has been adapted from a 16th-century Chinese classic *Journey to the West*. Albarn and Hewlett, like most thirtysomething Brits, were familiar with the characters Pigsy, Tripitaka and the Monkey King from the cult 1970s Japanese TV series *Monkey*. “Jamie showed me the DVDs and they’re good fun,” Chen laughs.

But his own introduction to the story was much more dramatic. At the age of 8, Chen was given the “four great classical novels” of Chinese literature by a librarian friend of his father. This was at the height of Chairman Mao’s cultural revolution, when these classics of the Ming and Qing Dynasties were banned.

“He kept them buried in a shoebox in the garden,” he says, matter-of-factly. “*Journey to the West* was one of them, alongside *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Water Margin*. I still read them now.

“Like most boys, I was cynical, but this tale wasn’t cynical at all. This was about having the power to transform yourself. The Monkey King’s journey from animal being to human being to spiritual being was obviously a Buddhist metaphor for the way in which you have to endure calamities to reach enlightenment. But, with my misfortunes, that had a special resonance for me.”

“Misfortunes” is a mild way of putting it. By the time he’d read *Journey to the West*, aged 8, Chen’s mother (a teacher at a Catholic school) had been shot dead in an antigovernment demonstration, while his father (like thousands of other intellectuals) was taken away for “retraining” on a farm, returning after more than a decade of torture and brainwashing as a

nervous wreck. Chen found solace in music, later training with a Chinese opera company.

“This experience of bereavement is actually very useful to an opera director,” he says, calmly and philosophically. “Opera is invariably about how people deal with death, vengeance and tragedy, and most of my work explores that dark side.”

As the creative trio came together and the story came to life, Chen spent more than two years casting in workshops near Beijing and Shanghai. Most of the cast are in their late teens or early twenties: the men built like welterweight boxers, the women like Olympic gymnasts.

“These people are playing animals and gods and celestial beings,” says Chen, “so we needed a broad range of people who could perform different superhuman feats. The central role of the Monkey King [is] so physically demanding that we need two people to play him – hopefully you won’t notice because they’ll both be wearing exactly the same latex mask.”

Albarn and Hewlett grew close to Chen throughout the writing process (“We really have become like brothers,” says Albarn), touring the southern provinces of China, during which Albarn soaked up the chaotic sounds of urban China and tried to integrate them into his score. He even designed his own instrument – the klaxophone – which replicates the deafening sound of car horns in Chinese cities.

“It was fascinating having Shi-Zheng as a guide,” says Albarn. “Someone who could explain things like the cultural revolution from a very personal standpoint.”

Now Chen has faith in China’s future. “You can’t hate an entire nation because of some political incidents,” he says. “I am amazed at how much things have changed. The problem now is that China has moved, very suddenly, from being driven by ideology to being driven by commerce. In both those environments, art didn’t stand a chance. I just hope that projects like this can find a place in Chinese society.”

Monkey: Journey to the West opens at the Palace Theatre, Manchester, on June 28 (0870 6077471; www.manchestertheatres.com/palacetheatre)

