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Chen Shi-Zheng

The opera director, 43, grew up during China's cultural revolution and endured famine, fighting and personal loss. He reflects on how his experience of death influenced him — and drew him to opera

I was born in Changsha, Hunan province, in 1963 — just before the cultural revolution. My older sister, Chen Tie-Hua, and I and our friends were very proud to be young pioneers. There was no regular school: every day we were instilled with propaganda for Chairman Mao and drilled to take part in parades in a huge stadium. We kids were taught to scream as loud as we could. I didn't understand the concept then, but the great mass of people, the huge banners and lighting were like some massive opera spectacle.

My earliest memories are of gunshots and famine. There were so many factions fighting each other. My brothers, sisters and friends all had different ideas of what a proletarian society should be. It was very intense. Growing up among the most violent human emotions, I took it for granted that this was how society functioned, by people killing one another.

And, strangely, death was one of the things that got me into opera. Funerals were the only occasions when people gathered for traditional rituals. Whenever somebody died, musicians would come to the house of the dead person and play classical Chinese music around the coffin. There would be singers — usually old men — performing operatic songs. Going to funerals like this affected me enormously. I realised that another world existed, one with music and singing. And there was always food at a funeral. The rest of the time we were starving, living on sweet potatoes and pumpkins. Years later, in 1986, when I was studying at New York University, I had my first experience of Hallowe'en. When I saw the pumpkins and people told me they made them into pies, I almost vomited. It brought back too many bad memories.

My father, like all intellectuals then, had been sent away to a re-education camp, and my sister and I were left with my mother. She had been a teacher of Chinese literature before the revolution. I was four when we went with her one day to watch a parade. Everyone wore a white shirt with a red scarf, and we sat on a bench to listen to all the shouting going on about Chairman Mao. Suddenly there was a sound of a gunshot. I was so small that it went straight past my head, but it hit my mother's arm and went in through her shirt to her heart. Some neighbours put her into a car. Blood was seeping through her white shirt. My sister and I sat looking at it, unable to do anything. It was very shocking. At the hospital, she was pronounced dead.

My grandmother kept my mother's ashes in a blue Ming vase on an altar in her house. Next to it was a picture of my mother in front of a very high bridge near Ho Chi Minh City. She looked very happy and young. After her death we were kind of orphans, living with relatives for a few days at a time. Sometimes our grandparents would take us in, but we had to keep moving. My sister instinctively knew who was kind to us, where to stay and when it was time to move on. Hunan province was one of the worst places. Often we had to walk miles to find wild vegetables to feed ourselves. But I was lucky — neither of us was killed.

In 1976, Mao died and the schools reopened. I had learnt from memory to sing the songs I had heard at funerals. Somebody thought I was smart and that I should go to opera school. I was only 14, but I felt like an old soul. As I started school, my father came home. He'd been beaten and totally destroyed in his years in the countryside, being brainwashed and learning to be a farmer. Torture had left him in very bad health, and he weighed almost nothing. We were strangers. I never spent time with him and he never said anything about what had happened to him.

A few years ago his sister, my aunt, passed away. She left a photograph of my mother and father — their marriage picture. I had never seen them together. And there was a photograph of my mother holding me as a baby. Until that moment I'd had little sense of my mother's existence — just her death.

As an opera director I am always looking for inspiration. But however much I try to get away from it, I am terribly attracted to death. I even find comedy in tragedy. My early experience of death changed my perspective of life. But it isn't all negative, because I have been able to use it creatively. I try not to be preoccupied by the things in my head. My start in life was so dramatic, I find it almost impossible to be mellow or to find the kind of creative energy you need for more frivolous projects. If something doesn't move me, I don't understand it.

Some people say that to be truly creative you need to have suffered. I believe my childhood experiences taught me far more about being human than going to school. I've tried to write my story and the stories of my mother, my grandmother and my teachers, but I haven't found a way. For now, it's easier to transform other people's stories.

Chen directs Monteverdi's Orfeo for the English National Opera, in repertory at the London Coliseum this month

Interview by Sue Fox. Main portrait: Mark Seager

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