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His next extravagant step

By Karen Wada

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When Chen Shi-Zheng was a 4-year-old in China during the Cultural Revolution, he saw his mother shot to death on the street. "This was my first memory," he says. "Since then, beauty and cruelty have lived together, and I've always found duality compelling."

Life's double edges continued to fascinate Chen when he became a prominent performer of Chinese opera and then after he immigrated to the U.S. in 1987, when he switched to directing for the stage. He says his latest work, "Peach Blossom Fan," which begins a 16-performance run tonight at REDCAT, brims with "wonderful counterpoints" – like love and betrayal, and false honor and hidden virtue. A modern version of a Ming Dynasty morality play, it has allowed him, he says, to take his "most extravagant step" toward the mix of cultures and genres that has gained him a global reputation for a spectacular blending of East and West.

Chen first won acclaim five years ago at New York's **Lincoln** Center with an opulent production of the 17th century Chinese literary treasure "The Peony Pavilion." The 19-hour romantic fantasy established him as a creator of onstage magic and a champion of internationalizing Asian art. But he hopes his current suite of three English-language reconceptions of Chinese classics – "Peach Blossom" is the finale – will prove he is more than just a skillful ambassador. "I want to go beyond imitating Chinese opera," he says. "I want to create a new kind of actor and vocabulary."

Chen began that mission last year by staging the revenge drama "The Orphan of Zhao" at Lincoln Center and the haunting parable "Snow in June" at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Mass.

"Peach Blossom," based on a play about the end of the corrupt Ming Dynasty, was commissioned by CalArts' Center for New Theater. Like the rest of the trilogy, it combines the highly stylized gestures and vocalizations of Chinese opera acting with bold yet elegant staging that in this case attempts to evoke both an evanescent imperial garden and a pop-culture music video (including screen projections, karaoke and a fashion catwalk). Chen likes to use traditional tales to explore contemporary questions. Here, a courtesan who stays true to her exiled lover and her principles "makes you wonder whether you can or should find personal happiness amid public misery and decay," he says.

To Chen, in fact, the storytelling often is more important than the story, and he works in the reverse of the usual stage practice of starting with a script and visualizing it theatrically. “I conceive things like a modern dance. I choreograph the movement, then I lay in the characters, the music, then the text,” he says. “Peach Blossom” has a score by indie rocker Stephin Merritt and a libretto by playwright Edward Mast. The designers and actors include CalArts students, faculty and alumni and others – Chinese and American – who have worked on Chen’s previous shows.

“As a kid, I had incredible dreams,” says Chen, 41. “I’d read a ghost story and have these fantasies that were very vivid, as if a film were playing inside my eyes. Later, I would think about how I could stage them. The theater has the power to go deep and capture the human subconscious that way. Somehow I want to penetrate the spectator and make that connection.”

Chen is among a wave of Chinese expatriates who are rising to the top of the arts world. Not one who enjoys being labeled, he disputes the idea of a cohesive movement but notes that “we all know each other and have common backgrounds.” A number of these artists, including composer Tan Dun and choreographer Shen Wei, come from his home province, Hunan. And many grew up during the brutal era of the Cultural Revolution. Those turbulent times cost Chen not only his mother but also his father, a government official who was sent to a reeducation camp. Shuttled among relatives, the boy befriended the local opera performers who staged public funeral rites – one of the few forms of creative expression the Communists allowed.

“I saw how artists allowed people to live in two worlds,” he says. “They provided relief from reality yet helped people confront the daily pain and danger.” A gifted singer, Chen also was drafted to appear in Maoist propaganda pageants. “The funerals made me see the private, human power of art, and the revolutionary shows made me see how art could be used as a tool to influence the masses.”

In the mid-1970s, with the Cultural Revolution over, Chen began formal training in Hunan opera, one of hundreds of regional styles in China. “I was too Westernized even then,” he says, recalling how he was chastised for reading Greek tragedies and French novels. Nonetheless, he values his rigorous classical instruction because it taught him to take control of each second onstage, including where to look and how to manipulate the hands and voice. He says his directing also was shaped by Asian theater’s emphasis on collaborative performance-based art, as opposed to “the playwright-centered West.”

A teacher who had lived in Russia urged the young tenor to learn to sing like Caruso or Pavarotti, which meant developing command of emotion as well as nuance. At 19, he went to study with an American-trained soprano in Beijing, where he met and married a teacher from New England. They moved to the East Coast in 1987. Chen earned a master’s degree from New York University and began singing and acting in the United States and Europe. He decided to become a director while working with musical iconoclast Meredith Monk in the early 1990s.

“Meredith was directing, composing, performing,” he says. “I thought, ‘That’s what I want to do.’ ”

By 1996, he was back in China staging Euripides’ “The Bacchae” with the China National Beijing Opera, and it was there, he says, that he discovered important connections between the ancient theater of his native and adopted worlds: “I realized I wasn’t putting Greek tragedy in a Chinese shoebox. I was creating my own kind of production.”

Then, in the late ’90s, the Lincoln Center Festival invited him to present a complete version of the epic “Peony

Pavilion,” a crown jewel of kunju, which is considered by many Westerners to be the most lyrical of Chinese opera forms. He hired a young Shanghai troupe he thought could handle the demands of the monumental project: several dozen actors who could play nearly 200 roles – from beggars to nobles – and designers who could “insert an old Chinese garden in Manhattan,” including an authentic period pavilion and a giant duck-and-fish pond.

Just before the New York opening, however, Shanghai officials refused to allow the company to leave for America, calling “Peony” “pornographic” and “feudal.” The standoff ended only after Lincoln Center, France’s Festival d’Automne and other benefactors enabled Chen to recast the show.

“Peony Pavilion” represented a triumph of Easterners in the West, but Chen still wanted to collaborate with Westerners to retell Eastern stories. For the trilogy, he has teamed with composers like Merritt, whose songs he finds “suitably witty, dark yet comic.” He says he is lucky that his text writers, including Mast and Charles Mee (“Snow”), have understood his desire to give equal weight to movement, music, imagery and words.

Meanwhile, the actors in these productions have had to rethink their craft.

“We Westerners pride ourselves on getting to the emotional truth in our roles,” says David Patrick Kelly, for whom “Peach Blossom” is his third Chen play. “It’s stunning to see you can get there through highly stylized form as well.”

While Chen’s shows are routinely hailed as visual feasts, they sometimes are faulted for lapses in content or clarity – “texture outstripping text,” as Variety put it. Chen blames a perception gap. The American thirst for plot and realism diminishes theater’s magic, he insists. He also concedes that while he sees contradiction (“those wonderful counterpoints”) as natural and even enjoyable, others may find it maddening. “People don’t think black and white is the perfect combination. But evil is 50% of all of us. I like that parity. That’s what makes us fascinating.”

More than any other medium, he believes, the stage can paint the world not just in black and white but in all the tantalizing shades of gray. “Theater gives us more room to breathe,” he says. “And I want to use every bit. I don’t want art to just replicate what we already know, but to go somewhere we’ve never been.”

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‘Peach Blossom Fan’

Where: REDCAT at Walt Disney Concert Hall, 631 W. 2nd St., L.A.

When: Today-Sunday, April 13-18 and April 20-24, 8:30 p.m.

Price: \$8-\$50

Contact: (213) 237-2800

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