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A Western Detour for a Chinese Tale

By EDWARD WONG

JIANHU, China — WHEN Chen Shi-Zheng began rehearsals with the two actors he had chosen to play the lead in “[Monkey: Journey to the West](#),” a pop-inflected international opera with a Chinese cast that opens the [Lincoln Center Festival](#), he knew he had to break them of their past training.

The Monkey King, the mythical animal warrior in Chinese classical literature, is often portrayed as a prankster. But Mr. Chen, a veteran Chinese-born stage and film director living in New York, saw Monkey as a fighter who could be vicious and ill-tempered. That meant helping the actors understand the character’s motivations and mind-set — something they had never done before when they played Monkey in more traditional Peking opera productions.

“The Chinese Monkey is very cute, even when he’s angry,” one of the actors, 32-year-old Wang Lu, said during a banquet after one of the final rehearsals in this city in eastern China. “This one has Western characteristics. He’s naughty. He’s a bad child. It took me a while to adjust.”

Bridging Chinese and Western artistic approaches is a continuing challenge for Mr. Chen, whose first appearance at the Lincoln Center Festival, in 1999, was after a major [run-in with Shanghai officials](#) who objected to his experimental approach to “[The Peony Pavilion](#),” a kunqu opera, a traditional form of Chinese theater. Most recently his adventurous 2012 production of another well-known opera, “Farewell My Concubine,” had several previews in Beijing but never officially opened. (It included video, choreographed fight scenes and a live horse onstage.)

Many in the Peking opera establishment condemned his take on “Farewell,” and China Daily, an official English-language newspaper, ran a [long article](#) on the controversy with the headline “Innovation or Violation?”

“I still haven’t had anything produced for the public in China,” Mr. Chen said with a smile. “I hope one day that will change.”

Instead, his productions play the international festival circuit. After its 2007 debut at the Manchester International Festival and runs in Paris, London and [at the Spoleto Festival U.S.A.](#), “Monkey” begins performances at Lincoln Center on Saturday.

Mr. Chen collaborated on the music and design with [Damon Albarn](#), the frontman for the bands Blur and Gorillaz, and Jamie Hewlett, the animator of Gorillaz. Mr. Chen wrote the lyrics, which are in Mandarin. With 27 performances at Lincoln Center, “Monkey” will get the longest festival run ever, a sign of faith and also a risk on the part of festival organizers.

The show takes as its starting point a Chinese fable based on the story of Xuanzang, the monk who made an epic overland journey to India to bring back venerated Buddhist texts. “Of all the Chinese classics, this is the funniest,” Mr. Chen said. “There’s a certain kind of freedom and exuberance.”

The 41-member cast is a mix of Chinese acrobats, martial artists and Peking opera actors and singers. Only nine are returning from the show’s original run, and most of the acrobats are new. Twenty of them come from the Jiangsu Yancheng Acrobatic Company, based in the nearby city of Yancheng.

For centuries, this region was known for producing some of China’s most talented acrobats. But there is little money to be made these days doing acrobatics in China, so the tradition is dying, and circus companies have shrunk. Mr. Chen “was looking for an acrobatic troupe with influence and power for this performance,” said Wu Qikai, head of the Yancheng troupe, which was founded in 1954. “We have that reputation in China.”

In recasting principal roles, Mr. Chen was faced with finding performers flexible enough to shed aspects of their Chinese opera training, including the emphasis on emulating the styles of past great performances. After one run-through at an enormous new cultural center in this rural swath of Jiangsu Province, he gathered the main actors and delivered a short lecture in which he urged them to make their performances more natural.

Li Li, 25, who plays the monk, said in an interview that her Peking opera training had not taught her how to embrace the kind of acting that Mr. Chen sought.

In Peking opera, “I’m copying what the previous generation has left for us,” she said. “The way I’m judged is by the standard set by previous performers. This time, the previous generation didn’t help me.” The work “took me out of my comfort zone,” she added. “The director created a new language.”

This new production of “Monkey” is the first work Mr. Chen has put together in China since the short-lived “Farewell My Concubine.” He was hired in late 2011 to direct a version of that story as, in essence, dinner theater at an upscale Beijing hotel owned by the Reignwood Group. [Yan Bin](#), the Thai-Chinese founder of Reignwood, is a fan of both Chinese and Western opera.

Looking past “Monkey,” Mr. Chen already has another opera in the works that he is aiming for next year’s Lincoln Center Festival — and it once again draws on a well-known Chinese tale, in this case “Legend of the White Snake.” Mr. Chen plans to include video and other experimental elements. The main investors are Chinese this time, but there are still no plans for it to be produced in China.



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