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The New York-based director and choreographer tells Tim Bryan about making his first film, lending his talents to the English National Opera and how the Cultural Revolution sparked his obsession with death.

'I have to have coffee in the morning. I rise about 6am and grab some French roast, grind it myself and put an espresso maker on the stove. Usually a few double or triple shots. I don't eat anything. I don't find it hard to wake up - it just helps me focus.

I settle down to the paper - The New York Times if I'm in Manhattan or a local paper if I'm away. I like to know what's going on around the world and I check out the sports - I'm a Knicks [basketball] and a Yankees [baseball] fan. I usually check e-mails and make some phone calls about the day ahead. I leave for rehearsals before 10am. They last all day, until about 5pm. It's a funny life - I live in the dark, getting up early, riding the subway and then sitting in theatres under artificial lights.

I live in Greenwich Village, right on Washington Square, and have been here 15 years. I feel like a true New Yorker - I know all the bars, delis, concert halls, shops. I don't feel like a part of any country, just a New Yorker.

At the moment, I'm doing a film with Meryl Streep and Val Kilmer. It's called Dark Matter, my first feature-length [film], as I've only done documentaries in France before. We're in pre-production, which means a lot of script work, riding around checking out locations and landscapes. I feel car sick most of the time. The film is a true story, based on a top physics student from China who went to the United States. It's a tragic tale but an interesting journey. He ended up killing himself. [Mainland actor] Liu Ye plays the lead. He was hard to get but he loved the script; he really identifies with the story.

I'm sorry to say I have an affinity with death. It features heavily in all my work - plays, opera, film, music. I don't think anything can be more profound than death. I want work that moves me, and death does. I feel sympathy ... human frailty really touches me. I think that comes from my upbringing during the Cultural Revolution. My mother was shot in front of me and I lived with funeral singers when my father was sent to work on the land, so I have been brought up with death. I never used to talk about this. But I guess my work became more relevant, more personal and journalists started asking questions. I talk about it now ... well, sometimes.

When you have been brought up in a place where there are 1.2 billion people, it is hard to be an individual - it's difficult to rise above that. When people try and fail that challenge, it can be hard. Death is the only way out for some. I go back to China about three times a year and always think about people's challenges in China today, where they will end up.

I like New York. Some people think I fled to the west, that I defected, but that's too strong a word. I was always trying to get a visa. I tried for years. But then I met my wife, Heather, a poet, and while we were in the US, [the] Tiananmen [Square crackdown] happened and I couldn't go back. We haven't got any kids, I'm not sure I want them - the world is too populated as it is; too many people needing too many rice bowls. I worry about that.

I'm pretty much on the go all day, six days a week.

I only have time at lunch for a quick sandwich, then it's back to work. Doing a film is not too different from the stage - you can use the same techniques with lighting, with how performers move. It's difficult though. Stage is a slow process, constantly refining things in rehearsals. Film is different. It takes longer, but there is less time. It takes many years, because you have so many other aspects to focus on: long hours of intensive editing, sitting in darkened rooms watching a tiny monitor for months on end.

I have to adapt mediums. I'm interested in how you can marry image with music and sound. I'm not really a words person. I'm more preoccupied with colour, shape and human emotion. I trust music more than words - I guess I have been lied to too often. We say what we don't do, and do what we don't say.

I'm also a choreographer. I'm not directing a sitcom so I try to let movement help build emotion. Western acting is a lot more static, less stylised, less choreographed than Chinese. The body is a constant vehicle of emotion, which I think western acting forgets. The voice and body are often too detached. The body illuminates sound. Dark Matter will have a lot of music. Plenty of dialogue, sure, but a lot of eclectic music such as American folk. I call it my 'spaghetti eastern'. I try to use Chinese styles, marry them with the west. I don't like calling this 'fusion' though. You can take the good things from both - you don't have to completely fuse them together. I don't like mixing things for mixing's sake. That's partly why I'm here in London. Monteverdi's Orfeo, by the English National Opera, which I directed, has just finished - it is my debut work in Britain.

I guess I'm better known in the US - and in Paris and Berlin - than in London. In China, my reputation is, let's say, too ambiguous. I was banned in 1998. I was too radical with one production.

I'm in London also to work with the famous rock group Gorillaz. We are going to stage a version of Journey to the West - I think westerners know it as Monkey. They will write the music, I'll direct it, using Chinese circus performers. It will play in Manchester, for a festival, then move to the [Theatre du] Chatelet in Paris next year.

I like working with people such as [Gorillaz founder] Damon Albarn. He is a wizard with music. We went to China last year together, checking out ethnic minority music. He loved it.

Usually I work really long days and have to drink Chinese tea all day. But even that is not enough to keep me going, so while the cast have sugar bursts with chocolate, I have a few more shots of espresso. We finish at about 6pm but I usually head off to a bar with people to talk about ideas. I don't drink beer; usually it's red wine or Bloody Marys. In summer, I have sake martinis. I also like Chinese wine. It's like a strong vodka, but with more flavour.

To relax, I usually watch films or DVDs or try to read short articles. I always eat out. We are too busy to cook. New York is good for that, although I wish the Chinese food was better. It is adapted too much for western tastes. After all that coffee, I suppose I don't sleep much, say three to four hours a night. I think that is more down to my training myself to wake up when I think of ideas. I scribble them down constantly and carry around notebooks all the time. Funnily enough, I rarely look back over them. I guess noting them down in a book is like noting them in my subconscious.'

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