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Chinese director Chen Shizheng has a hectic schedule, directing a movie starring Meryl Streep and teaming up with Gorillaz for a musical, writes **Kavita Daswani**

EXCITING STAGE

MAINLAND OPERA AND stage director Chen Shizheng should be getting used to the spotlight.

Having made a name for himself in western classical opera, as well as traditional *kunqu* productions, the 43-year-old is now involved in a series of even more high-profile projects.

He's preparing to stage an interpretation of the Chinese mythical tale *The Monkey King* – a collaboration with virtual Britpop band Gorillaz that's due to open next year.

But his latest project is likely to draw even more attention: feature film *Dark Matter* boasts a stellar cast, including Meryl Streep, Aidan Quinn and mainland actor Liu Ye (*The Promise*).

The first-time filmmaker has been in Utah, having spent last month filming parts of what he describes as a "very inspiring" tale.

Based on a true story, the film centres on the life of a brilliant Chinese physics student (Liu) who gets a visa to study in the US in the 1990s. His dream is to win the Nobel Prize for research into the origins of the universe. On his rise to the top of US academic circles, he's befriended by Joanna Silver (Streep), a wealthy university patron who takes him on as her protégé. But university professor Jacob Reiser (Quinn) sets out to use Liu's genius for his own benefit, with tragic results.

For Chen, a native of Changsha in Hunan province, the story is about the relationship between two of the world's most powerful nations and cross-cultural misunderstandings. "This is a film about self-expectations and the miscommunication between two cultures," Chen says by phone, after a long day on the set. "It's a story about a young Chinese person searching for the American dream. What it's really about is the balance between the rise in the power of China and the power of the US."

Chen says the Chinese student's ambitions to surpass his professor's achievements is emblematic of a deeper problem between the US and Chinese cultures. "It's kind of an alarm for what's to come," he says. "It's not just this story, but overall it's important to see how these two cultures have miscommunicated over the years. They don't see eye to eye."

"Friends of mine who come to the US are either pro-American or anti-American, but they can't find the right balance. The film, I hope, has lots of interesting takes on what America is to the Chinese and what China is to America, but on a

much more personal level." Chen says he has wanted to make the movie for a long time, but it took a while for all the pieces to fall into place. Getting approval from US film executives was a "huge struggle". "They didn't know how to look at it," he says. "They see the world as one-sided. And the Chinese didn't know how to look at it, either. It was very black and white for them. It was hard for them to understand the delicacy of the balance. I wanted to break that stereotype."

Once Streep was attached to the project, however, the film became easier to sell. "She's a personal friend," Chen says. "I've been trying to get her to do my theatre pieces for years. But she loved this story."

An independent production, the film is backed by distributor Myriad Pictures, which was behind low-budget movies such as *The Good Girl*, starring Jennifer Aniston. *Dark Matter* is being made on a similar scale, with a budget of US\$3 million – barely enough to cover wardrobe costs for the average Hollywood blockbuster.

Chen has lived in the US for 15 years and travels extensively in Europe, dividing his time between Paris, London and Berlin. Because he shuttles back and forth between the US, Europe and Asia (he visits China several times a year), he says he can bring unique insights into Asia's relations with the west.

"I understand both worlds. I understand what's missing in America and in Europe, and the dimensions I can bring in. I also understand, and am critical of, the exotic romanticised version of my culture. I'm interested in being able to give people a new vision of our world."

Chen suffered the adversities of many who grew up during the Cultural Revolution. His father was

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sent away to a re-education camp, and his mother, a literature professor, was killed by a stray bullet while watching a parade. As a result, Chen and his sister spent much of their childhood shunted between reluctant relatives. Food was always scarce. He recalls having some of his better meals at funerals.

His aptitude for operatic singing – picked up from listening to performances at wakes – caught the ears of officials, who sent him to opera school when he was 14. Although his early training was in *huaguxi*, or flower-drum plays, Chen went to study at New York University in 1986 and has since become known for his mesmerising

stage productions. These have included *The Peony Pavilion* – a 20-hour staging of the *kunqu* classic that in 1999 came under fire from the Shanghai Bureau of Culture for being "feudal, superstitious and pornographic" – and, more recently, Monteverdi's *Orfeo* for the English National Opera.

Some who have worked with Chen say his theatrical flair seems to cross all boundaries.

"In all his work there's a visual sensibility that transcends simple storytelling," says Nigel Redden, director of New York's Lincoln Centre Festival. "His visual images are striking, memorable and distinctive."

Recalling his work with Chen staging *Peony Pavilion* at the Lincoln Centre, Redden says: "The production was a real revelation for western audiences and, perhaps, also for Chinese audiences who had never seen this extraordinary opera in its entirety. Shizheng made this 16th-century story come alive. His sense of detail, his use of tradition and his use of innovation were delicately balanced so that 18 to 20 hours of music and theatre seemed fresh throughout."

Chen says he wants to challenge "exotic assumptions of our culture, which are dated", something that was at the forefront of his mind when producing his adaptation of *Orfeo*. "I wondered what it could be if it happened in an Asian setting," he says. He wanted to take a western opera into "a new territory, to think about different associations".

"It's the same thing I do with Chinese opera and theatre," he says. "In America, a Chinese artist has the possibility of expanding his own repertoire and language to other cultures, which is so much better than trying to say, 'this is mine, this is yours'."

If the result is a greater understanding between the two cultures, Chen says he'll feel as if his work is done. "There's so much China-bashing and US-bashing right now. It's very sad that we always go to some kind of general judgment, instead of going for a human-to-human level of contact."

"Government levels are always screwed up, we know that. It's only at the human level that any ex-

change can happen. My interest lies in creating a film that speaks to people in a way that they have a personal feeling. You have to create an atmosphere that's fundamental to most of the world."

In the years that he has lived in the US, Chen says American audiences have been increasingly willing to expose themselves to different entertainment – and that includes a blossoming interest in Chinese culture. "America is paying more attention to China. It's something new and interesting to them. It's changed their perception of China, which is very good, because once a perception changes, everything can change."

He hopes to prove that point with another venture: an operatic version of Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, which he's producing in conjunction with the San Francisco Opera next year.

But once he wraps up production on *Dark Matter*, Chen must first complete his mammoth Monkey project, which will run for 81 minutes without intermission. Called *Monkey: Journey to the West*, it's a metaphorical exploration of enlightenment that combines Chinese circus performers, Shaolin monks, Peking opera singers and animation and fusion music from Gorillaz.

Gorillaz are a key component of the production. Chen says he was looking for "a translation, a filter" for his adaptation of the mythical tale, which will open at the Manchester International Festival next June.

"I wanted somebody who understands the subject and who could use their own media and their own sound to tell western audiences what it's about," he says. "I get the Gorillaz. We hit it off well. We understand what it's about and we understand its fundamental dimensions."

"It's very necessary that this is not the orthodox, authentic or official version. The problem with Chinese art is that it's always the official version. But I've found that the less official it is, the better it gets. What I wanted was a young, rock, 21st-century vision of a boy becoming enlightened. I think it's really relevant to our times."



Photo: Mark Seeger



Chen Shizheng's (top) recent production of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (above) for the English National Opera was a taste of things to come

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