

# Chen Shi-Zheng

**MALCOLM ROCK watches the convention-defying director at work in London**

**F**ew directors would hear a harpsichord-heavy 17th century baroque opera and think of a bikini-clad bathing beauty adrift on a giant sea-green pumpkin, but few directors see the world in quite the same way as Chen Shi-Zheng. Surely only Shi-Zheng, who escaped the cultural revolution of Maoist China in 1987 and is today radically reinventing Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea* for the English National Opera, would then have the daring to bring sacred Javanese dance into the mix. Shi-Zheng sees nothing audacious about his unusual vision, commenting that the staging of western opera is criminally static and can only benefit from elegant Asian movement.

"Javanese dance is the most refined and delicate form of expression I have ever encountered and is the first thing that came to mind when I heard Monteverdi's music," says Shi-Zheng, who initially experimented with the Javanese-baroque crossover during last year's ENO production of *Orfeo*, also by Monteverdi. "It is similar to the music in elegance and nuance and can indicate powerful emotion with the smallest gesture."

It was while touring Indonesia that the 44-year-old director fell in love with Javanese dance and founded the Orange Blossom Dance Company in order to facilitate future projects that would unite east with west. Despite being more accustomed to performing at funerals and Buddhist ceremonies, Orange Blossom dancer and choreographer Rianto, 26, says he is looking forward to appearing in the West End when *Poppea* premieres at the Coliseum later this month.

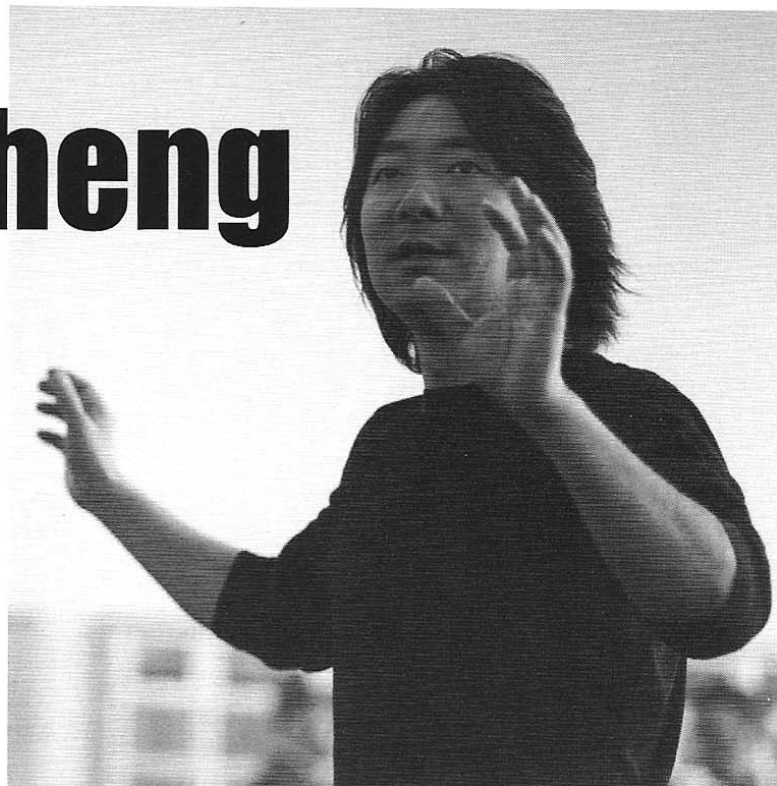
"I am excited to bring my dancing to the audiences of London," says Rianto, who spent four years studying Lengger Banyumasan folk dancing at the University of Performing Arts in Solo. "My dance style is simple, for me and the audience."

Of course the surface simplicity of Rianto's dance - rooted feet, gentle sways and slow twists of the wrist - betrays a complex form entrenched in disciplined spirituality that Shi-Zheng is keen to harness: "The dancers basically choreograph themselves with my guidance and the process becomes like sketching then erasing what doesn't work," Shi-Zheng explains. "I discuss with the dancers what the scene is about and play them the music so they can improvise using the vocabulary of their bodies."

Similarly to *Orfeo*, the dancers remain visible throughout *Poppea*, maintaining a constant ripple behind their vocal counterparts while shifting large set items such as plastic seaweed and oversize jellyfish from wing to wing. But they are more than just graceful stagehands, acting as a Greek chorus that observes the action while reflecting the score.

"There is an appalling lack of physicality in opera, so I rarely watch it," Shi-Zheng scoffs. "In the theatre you are sitting, your body is inactive, so you want to enjoy the movement of those on stage. We are all mobile beings who run and fly and leap and travel on wheels. We live in an eccentric world and I think the stage should reflect our actual environment. Text makes you think, music fills your heart, physicality is re-energising and in my work the three become one."

Even during this early rehearsal, taking place at an East London film studio, Shi-Zheng maintains an unassuming control over proceedings by allowing his dancers freedom to try new things before providing whisper-



Chen Shi-Zheng. Photo: Neil Libbert.

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soft feedback inaudible to anyone but the performers immediately concerned. Whatever he is saying, his dancers seem to agree and it is not long before they are once again shuffling across the stage, shifting weight from leg to leg led by angled, unambiguous ankles.

Evidently pleased, Shi-Zheng returns to his seat to leaf through a bundle of costume illustrations comprising silver, hot-pink and partially transparent bathing suits and scuba gear to be fashioned from latex and poly-organza. It is not difficult to guess why aghast Shanghai cultural officials might have labelled his marathon staging of 15th century Chinese opera *The Peony Pavilion* as "stupidity and pornography" - it is Shi-Zheng's contempt for regulation and common expectation that fuels his bold vision and sets him apart from his peers.

"I like reinventing myself because I find everything dated. I am not attracted by any particular form of expression and live in a no-man's land as a result. Maybe it is because when I left China I was escaping to become an artist and I continue to maintain a certain isolation and distance from general circulation in order to choose my own world."

Raised by a troupe of Hunan funeral singers after his father was taken away for re-education and his mother shot at an anti-government demonstration, Shi-Zheng grew up immersed in Chinese song, dance and martial arts (the latter inspiring his acrobatic-operatic odyssey, *Monkey: Journey to the West*, a collaboration with former Blur front-man Damon Albarn earlier this year).

"I suppose I can relate to the Javanese who dance at funerals and ceremonies for the gods and don't distinguish work from life - they live for dance. They aim to depict another world by transporting the soul and imagination and I want to see whether there is a place for them in modern western theatre."

Critical success worldwide and calls to work in London, Paris and New York stand testament to the very real place Shi-Zheng holds in international theatre. Nevertheless, he remains committed to bringing further east Asian dance disciplines, including south Indian Hindu folk, to the western stage.

"I hope that by reinventing the art-form we can become more aware of our physical capacities and continuously challenged by new media and cultures."

Rianto, on the other hand, seems content gently clasping his hands together as if in prayer, pointing his toes heavenward as the harpsichord plays. "To dance is to live," he utters, "I hope to keep living by dance."

*The Coronation of Poppea plays at the London Coliseum from 18 October to 6 November.*