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Chen Shi-Zheng Brings Chinese Poet, Ax Murderer to Berlin Stage

(The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of Bloomberg.)

By Shirley Apthorp

March 16 (Bloomberg) -- It all went horribly wrong. In China, Gu Cheng was one of the most celebrated poets of the 1980s, a rebel reading for cheering stadium crowds.

As an emigrant in New Zealand, he lived an increasingly isolated and unstable life. In 1993, at the age of 37, he murdered his wife with an ax and then hanged himself.

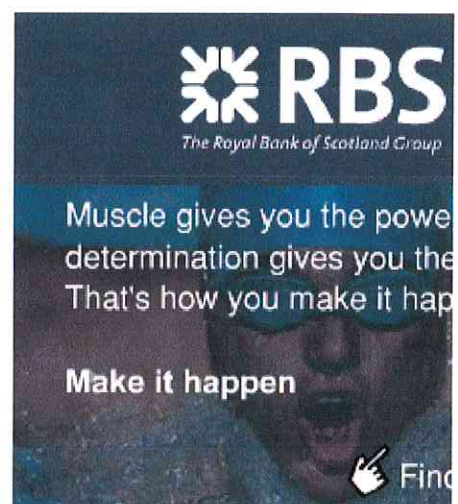
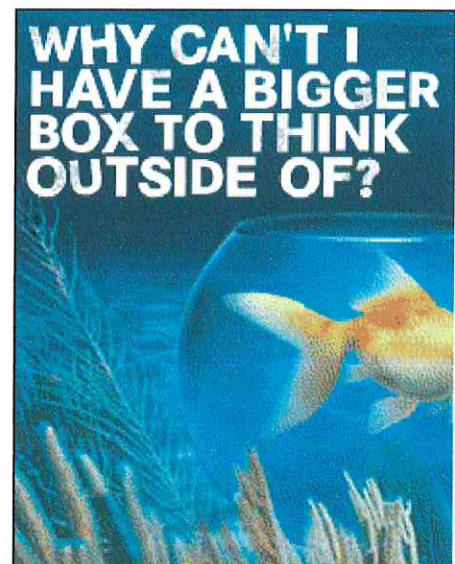
Gu's strange life and brutal end are the inspiration for "Mercury Light World," a new opera by Chinese composer Cong Su opening in Berlin today. Cong Su has created a pre-recorded electronic score to accompany a cast of four singers and vocal ensemble "Die Maulwerker." Michael Schindhelm's libretto combines Gu's poems with new German texts.

Stage director Chen Shi-Zheng, 42, is attracted to violent subjects. This summer he will direct his first film, "Dark Matter," about the Chinese physics student Lu Gang, who shot six people and then himself on an Iowa campus in 1991. The cast includes Meryl Streep, Val Kilmer and Liu Ye.

"I'm fascinated by these stories," Chen says. "I look at these characters and think, 'that could have been me.' Yet another failed dreamer, another person who could not live with the frustration and disappointment. I have been lucky."

Cultural Revolution

Chen sees many parallels between Gu Cheng's life and his own. Both were children during the Revolution. Chen's mother was shot in front of him when he was four and he was raised by a funeral singers, learning the finer points of Kunju opera in an age where most of the classical was repressed or forbidden.



Gu's privileged family was exiled to the barren Shandong province for re-education when he the following years observing nature, writing poems in the sand and on scraps of paper that

Both artists enjoyed a measure of celebrity in the more liberal early 1980s; Chen as a teenager singing in stadiums, Gu reading his poems to adoring crowds. Both were living abroad by the Tiananmen Square massacre; Gu in New Zealand, Chen in New York.

Then their lives diverged. While Gu drifted from a teaching post at the University of Auckland Waikiki island, Chen graduated from painting and waiting jobs to theater direction. Soon he internationally to mounting acclaim.

"I met Gu Cheng in New York in the early 1990s," Chen recalls. "He was obviously disturbed to communicate with. It seemed as if he didn't know how to live in this world. I was deeply shocked that he had killed his wife and himself."

Standards of Chineseness

Though he returns to China several times a year, Chen is critical of the country's cultural and He had his own problems with the system in 1998, when Shanghai cultural officials condemn the 15th-century Chinese opera classic "The Peony Pavilion" as "feudal superstition, stupid pornography," blocking the export of sets and refusing the performers passports.

"My work is my own personal vision," says Chen. "It does not meet proven official standards. An artist's job is to have a personal style, but in China, that is not at all encouraged."

"Each time I go to China, I feel that people are just catching up. Nobody has time to think about what happened to them. People don't know what they're looking for any more. They have to catch up with or surpass the West. That's worrying."

Giant Ax, Mao Bust

Chen directs "Mercury Light World" as a non-narrative reflection on Gu Cheng's life and death.

"The poems depict a world reversed, a universe in strange configurations," he says. "The staging is that he is already dead, and people go to his apartment to clean up his belongings in a system like a Tibetan burial service. There are suspended icons from his life, like a giant ax that ascend during the opera. It is a dark fairytale, a Greek tragedy."

He sees parallels with Monteverdi's "Orfeo," which he directs at the English National Opera. The staging is the continuation of a Monteverdi cycle begun with Boston's Handel and Haydn Society.

"It's not enough to believe that poetry will change the world, that people will throw away their happiness," Chen says. "Your ability as an artist has no power to resurrect the person you love. That art and poetry cannot save us from hell. It is also dark, also a Greek tragedy."

"Mercury Light World" is showing at the Hebbel am Ufer theater in Berlin on March 16, 17 and 18. It travels from there to Basel, Switzerland and then Brisbane, Australia. "Orfeo" is showing April 15.

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