

Finding themselves

Three interpretations merge contemporary dance with a Chinese score in this year's trailblazing opening act, *Quest*. **CHEAH UI-HOON** and **JURENA CHAN** report

QUEST, as this year's arts festival opening performance, happens to be the overarching theme linking the triple bill choreographed by three choreographers. Their vastly different works, in some way or other, all have a common thread running through them: the quest for identity, destiny and human ideals.

But for the two arts companies — the Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) — in this rare collaboration among Asian arts companies, *Quest* is also evidence of how both have come far in "finding" themselves. If each had not established their craft and carved out their unique identities, there wouldn't be a platform for *Quest*.

"We'd been interested in collaborating with the SCO for a while now," says Goh Soo Khim, SDT's artistic director. "But it was a question of timing."

Part of the timeliness for this collaboration — practical logistics aside — is that SDT has shaped into a company of dancers who are known for their versatility in adapting to different dance styles, having built up a wide repertoire of pieces from notable Asian and Western choreographers. The SCO, meanwhile, has constantly pushed the envelope where the Chinese orchestra is concerned, as seen in its collaboration with visual artist and Singapore cultural medallion winner Tan Swie Hian and British composer Michael Nyman.

Promising to be a visual as well as aural treat, *Quest* is a rare production stringing together various luminary music and dance artistes. First, the SCO will be playing some of the best contemporary Chinese orchestral music ever written, says SCO's music director Tsung Yeh.

Namely, Tan Dun's *Fire Ritual*, a *huqin* concerto; Tang Jian Ping's *Hou Tu*, which uses strong bass and unconventional acoustics to symbolise earth and nature; and Chan Ying Han's *Illusions*, for prepared piano and a Chinese instrument ensemble. "The pieces not only showcase the whole orchestra, but the variations it's capable of, thanks to sections like solo *huqin* playing and prepared piano," says Terence Ho Wee San, SCO's senior manager for marketing and sponsorship and spokesman.

Though the three pieces require much hard work from the SCO, the orchestra enjoys the practice. Maestro Yeh lets on that the orchestra had to practise a lot of chanting and humming for *Fire Ritual*, saying that at times he felt more like a chief of a tribal ceremony calling out for spirits and souls than a musical conductor.

The three choreographers — Korea's Kim Eun Hee, China's Gao Yan Jin Zi, and

Singapore's Jeffrey Tan — picked the music of their choice, when they were presented with a list.

Goh Ching Lee, director of the Singapore Arts Festival 2006, comments that it was definitely interesting to look at how the choreographers responded to the chosen pieces of music and interpret them to develop their dances.

Hard work

It was not all a bed of roses when it came to the actual choreographing work though. Maestro Yeh lauds his fellow partners for their hard work and effort. He says: "The pieces are not written for dance. Usually dance music has a strong rhythmic background, however, there is a lot of silence in these pieces and it requires sophistication to dance with silence."

Though Tan Dun's composition was described as "theatrical" by maestro Yeh and "fascinating" by Korea's Kim, the Korean choreographer noted that creating a dance to it was quite a task.

"Usually when it comes to creating a new work once the theme is set, I can start work on the methodology — thinking of the music then the content. But for this production, the music was given to me first, so choosing a theme for this work was indeed quite difficult," admitted Kim. "The music was something new to me then and I took a long time to come up with a theme. But since, I have been faithful to the music focusing on the theme: *One Path, Illusion*."

Kim, who has her own dance company which is known for its distinctive movement, much of which is rooted in traditional Korean dance, will be reflecting on human will and through breath and movement with Tan Dun's *Fire Ritual*.

Tan, SDT's resident choreographer, will portray the intimacy between man and nature through Tang Jian Ping's reworked folk songs.

Meanwhile, Gao, founding member and resident artist of the Beijing Modern Dance Company, will depict the cycle of life based on the five elements of gold, wood, water, fire and earth; accompanied by Chan Hing Yan's composition.

She describes the essence of this production — a rare one marrying contemporary dance seamlessly with Chinese music — aptly: "The dancers' bodies are in itself music, and when you close your eyes, music too is itself a dance."

Elaborating on SDT's collaboration with the SCO, Goh says that dancing to a live orchestra takes the performance beyond just dance vocabulary, but into music appreciation as well. "No, the dancers aren't very used to it, but it enhances their



sensitivities towards understanding contemporary Chinese music," she points out.

"It's a win-win situation," declares Mr Ho. Especially as the co-production, a festival commission, will introduce SCO's regular audience to contemporary dance, and SDT's fans to contemporary Chinese orchestral music.

Goh adds that this showcase is very rare in the Asian cultural context. She says she is pleased to see such a production materialise and hopes that this will pave the way

for other bold collaborations in future.

In the end, when Singapore is still on the quest to grow its arts audience, it is collaborations like this which take Singapore arts, and arts appreciation, to the next level.

Quest, a production sponsored by Singapore Press Holdings, will be presented at the Esplanade Theatre from June 1 to 3. Tickets are priced from \$15 to \$80 and are available from Sistic.

Highly evolved:

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