

Au Yong Follows His Own Path

Judith van Praag

On June 18 and 19 the Theatre Off Jackson will present "Stuck Elevator: The Super-Heroic Stationary Journey of Ming Kuang Chen". This one-person opera is inspired by the real-life experience of the Happy Dragon Chinese restaurant bicycle deliveryman who was trapped in the elevator of a Bronx high rise for 81 hours.

The composer of this work in process, multimedia artist Byron Au Yong has a degree in music composition and ethnomusicology from the University of Washington. Back in 1996 he was on the road to what might have been a more mainstream career as a classic composer, when the Wing Luke Asian Museum invited him to curate a show around instruments and costumes in their collection. "A Bridge Home: Music in the Lives of Asian Pacific Americans" introduced him to the value and joys of amateur music making, and of working with people in the community.

At the moment Au Yong is composer-in-residence with "Portland Taiko". During the Spring Concert, they performed his "Ji Mo: Stillness of Solitude", in commemoration of the brutal killings on Capitol Hill last year.

"In Japan there's an epidemic of youth (90% of them are boys) who suffer a total I.D. crisis, they quit school and hide out in their bedrooms. Here they go out to shoot others and themselves," Au Yong says. He's concerned about the lack of initiation rituals in today's world. "Present acute situations demand for a response."

After a stint as a professional taiko player in Canada, a fellow musician suggested Au Yong should study with opera, theatre and film director Peter Sellars, and reluctantly he enrolled in the graduate program at the University of California at Los Angeles.

"I got to re-divine my priorities, my path was complicated by my family history; it's difficult for a child of Chinese immigrants to live the artist's life."

The second trip Au Yong made to China (the first was with his grandmother who fled the country in the late 1930s) was as a participant of "Dragon 100", a cultural study tour to Hong-Kong and Xi'an. He learned that overseas Chinese kept creating art in a community oriented way; of all the delegates, he was the only professional working artist.

His parents never got in his way when he chose his path. "My parents are so noble, I will be in debt with them for life. My father has a Ph.D. in chemical engineering, and his greatest wish was to teach, but he never got to do that in America."

Peter Sellars, who would chair Au Yong's Master's Committee,

instills social and moral responsibility in his students.

"Peter is like a guru, when 600 students came to an auditorium fit for 400, he lectured outside, under the trees. He told us how privileged we were, and that as artists we have a social obligation."

Au Yong received his master's degree in dance with a World Arts and Cultures Graduate Fellowship from UCLA. Next, he earned a master's of fine arts degree in musical theatre writing with a Tisch School of the Arts Scholarship from New York University.

This was around the time that Ming Kuang Chen had been trapped in the elevator and was in the news a lot. The ordeal of the bicycle deliveryman spoke to Au Yong.

"This man came from the same province as my grandparents, so it hit close to home. If things had gone differently, that could have been me... I had to tell his story."

Together, librettist Aaron Jafferis (who is of the same school of thought as Au Yong; he also studied under Peter Sellars) and Byron Au Yong rode 11 of the elevators in the Tracey Towers (one was out of order!), the location of Ming Kuang Chen's ordeal. Jafferis has locked himself in his bathroom to capture the mood for the opera libretto.

"The audience should hang out with us after the show," Au Yong said, "There will be fried rice, fortune cookies and drinks. This is the first run of a show in development, so Aaron and I are interested in their reaction to the character and arc of the opera."

If you wish to hear and see Au Yong perform, "Breathplay", the Single Tone Performance with Shakuhachi master Christopher Blasdel takes place later in June. Au Yong will use Chinese percussion instruments and the sound of water.

July and October will find the energetic artist in Aldeburgh, UK, where he will attend the Jerwood Opera Writing Programme workshops.

In the fall Portland Taiko will perform a new piece about immigration: "The Way Home".

Last but not least: Au Yong will be teaching Music for Dance at Cornish College of the Arts.

While following his own path, Byron Au Yong is fulfilling his father's dream.

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