

Xuan Cheng

Chases Classical Ballet



BY MARTHA ULLMAN WEST

A dancer's journey to Oregon Ballet Theatre

Xuan Cheng, wearing a rehearsal tutu and worn pointe shoes, lies cradling a guitar, seemingly unconscious, across the lap of another dancer. Cued by the sound of a horn, she wakes up, looks around, rises to her beautifully articulated feet and starts to run soundlessly on pointe, her whole body, including her face, projecting terror and bewilderment.

On an unseasonably warm day in mid-September, in Oregon Ballet Theatre's sunlit main studio, Cheng is learning to *be Teresina*, the determined heroine of Danish choreographer August Bournonville's 1842 ballet, *Napoli*, which opened the company's 29th season in early October.

Opening night in Portland's far-from-intimate Keller Auditorium, Cheng danced the story of the Neapolitan girl in love with a poor fisherman — in which she overcomes maternal opposition in Act I, an arrogant sea devil in Act II and accusations of witchcraft in Act III — with the same musicality, technical skill, attention to detail, intelligence and heart that characterize her performances in a wide swath of classical and contemporary ballets.

Over the seven years she has danced with Oregon Ballet Theatre, Cheng has inhabited, with every ounce of her five-foot-four body, such disparate parts as the title role in *Giselle*, the fleet, sparkling Dewdrop Fairy in Balanchine's *Nutcracker*, and the mysterious, wandering woman in William Forsythe's *The Second Detail*. She has danced a tragic Odette/Odile in former OBT artistic director Christopher Stowell's *Swan Lake*, and one who lives happily ever after in current artistic director Kevin Irving's idiosyncratic account of the same ballet.

In Nacho Duato's *Rassemblement*, Cheng cast classical placement aside, becoming a passionately protesting Haitian slave with every grieving muscle in her fine-tuned body, approaching the role with the same commitment to the technique, choreography and dramatic development that characterizes her preparation for traditional evening-length story ballets. And in Forsythe's *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*, her joint-separating solo tells the audience exactly what that part of the ballet is all about.

"She is a workaholic, never resting on her laurels, and

Oregon Ballet Theatre's Peter Franc and Xuan Cheng in August Bournonville's *Napoli*
Photo: Jingzi Zhao

really and truly invested, mind, body and soul, in learning and growing with every opportunity,” says Irving, who took over the company’s leadership in 2013. “Every day. She sets a perfect example for the entire company — and is a total sweetheart at the same time. Her embrace of dance from sources as different as Bournonville, Forsythe and Duato makes her a tremendous asset to the company. In that as well, she sets a high bar for the company.”

She was born in Chenzhou, China, and began her ballet training at age five. At 10, she started the Vaganova training program at the School of Guangzhou Ballet, compressing the eight-year curriculum into five years.

In addition to classical ballet, Cheng studied several Chinese dance forms as well as acting and character dance. “I was a baby ballerina in the school company,” she says, laughing, somewhat ruefully, in an interview following rehearsal, keeping her feet warm in comfortable booties.

After graduating, she danced with Guangzhou Ballet, quite quickly becoming a principal dancer. It’s also where she met Ye Li, who is now her husband.

In 2006, Édouard Lock offered her a contract with La La La Human Steps, and she headed to Montreal. “I wanted to get out of China and this was my bridge to the West,” she says.

The company’s contemporary aesthetic was also a bridge to new ways of moving, at first a difficult one for Cheng to cross; she still self-identified as a baby ballerina, Russian style at that.

“There was lots of athletic training, boxing, swimming,” she says. “I developed very muscular arms and one day I looked in the studio mirror and burst into tears and said, ‘I look like Popeye!’” Nevertheless, she soon embraced Lock’s high-energy aesthetic and, in 2007, was cast in *Amjad*, in which Lock, Moroccan by birth, fused 19th-century European story ballet with what he called an “Orientalist” sensibility.

Critic Philip Szporer, writing in *The Dance Current*, said of Cheng’s performance: “[She] embraces a theatrical sensuality and attack, with a crisp, technical precision. A strong core gives her freedom to execute Lock’s quick turns, and the line, form and colour of her interpretation reveals her specific training ... Refined and dynamic, her movement does not say ‘watch me’ but draws our eye nonetheless.”

Cheng’s dancing drew the eye of Gradimir Pankov, then artistic director of Les Grands Ballet Canadiens de Montréal, and in 2009 he offered both Cheng and Li contracts, enabling the couple to reunite. For the next two years, Cheng expanded her technical range in works by such diverse choreographers as Ohad Naharin, Jirí Kylián, Mats Ek, Mauro Bigonzetti and Christophe Maillot, in whose chic contemporary *Roméo et Juliette* she danced the title role. While both dancers respected the repertoire, according to Cheng they missed classical ballet.

In 2011, they came to Portland and took Stowell’s class. “We fell in love right away with his artistry and the atmosphere of the company. He hired both of us and that is why we ended here.”



For his part, Stowell was impressed by Cheng’s “delicate and refined technique, tireless attention to detail and innate ability to make simple theatrical devices heartbreaking,” he writes in an e-mail from Toronto, where he is now associate artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada. He adds, “She would happily spend hours [in the studio] refining the placement of a foot or subtlety of a glance.”

Those qualities, plus her ability to develop and create a story ballet heroine, made her ideal for the role of Teresina. Possibly no technique in ballet is more delicate and refined than Bournonville’s, and an evening-length ballet like *Napoli* certainly demands highly detailed performance of every step and every gesture to tell the complicated and fanciful story of lovers parted by a sea monster, then reunited by faith in God and each other.

“I have never prayed so much in my life,” Cheng says. By mid-September, she and the rest of Oregon Ballet Theatre’s dancers had been drilled relentlessly in the correct way to cross themselves, a small but important part of the highly detailed mime that is integral to this ballet, by staggers Frank Andersen, former artistic director of the Royal Danish Ballet, and retired Royal Danish Ballet dancers Eva Kloborg and Dinna Bjørn, all of whom grew up with Bournonville technique.



Top left: Xuan Cheng in George Balanchine's *Nutcracker*
Photo: Blaine Truitt Covert

Below left: Xuan Cheng and Michael Linsmeier in
Trey McIntyre's *Robust American Love*
Photo: Blaine Truitt Covert

Above right: Ansa Capizzi and Xuan Cheng in
Nacho Duato's *Rassemblement*
Photo: James McGrew

All photos courtesy of Oregon Ballet Theatre

Andersen was delighted with the way the company absorbed the quick-footed, non-presentational technique, as well as the difficult mime, and particularly glad to be working with Cheng. "Xuan has ears like an elephant," he says, meaning she absorbs everything, from verbal instruction to music he says resembles a movie soundtrack, because it tells the story, too. Cheng's ability to be whatever person she is dancing, and to dance with heart, marks her as a true artist in his view.

Speaking with Cheng about how she views her roles, it's impressive to hear the amount of thought she puts into the development of each one, and the connection she makes between them. As Cheng understands Teresina, she is a real person, "fiery and brave and she strives, she's not like Giselle, who is frail," she explains. She compares Teresina with the American pioneer girl in Trey McIntyre's *Robust American Love*, a role she originated in 2013 and will dance again in June. When making the ballet, she says McIntyre kept reminding the dancers they were real people, and to move like them.

Cheng doesn't consider herself a workaholic, but she does seem to work all the time. During the summer 2018 hiatus, she and frequent Oregon Ballet Theatre partner Brian Simcoe spent six weeks guesting with Barak Ballet, the contemporary company founded by former New York City Ballet dancer Melissa Barak. They spent four weeks in Santa Monica making Barak's new work, *Cypher*, then performed at Los Angeles' Broad Stage, New York's Joyce Theater and Jacob's Pillow.

And four years ago, she and Li founded the Oregon International Ballet Academy. "We believe," Cheng says, "that we are not only teaching ballet, but we are passing on beauty, confidence, health, love and responsibility, inspiring the students to reach their dreams and future."

Li, now retired from performing, works full time at the academy; Cheng works there on weekends. "Teaching makes me a better dancer," she says. As for dancing itself, she is absolutely clear about why she works so hard: "I do it for the joy, for the process of working. I love it, to dance with my friends. OBT is my happiest place." *DI*