

When dancer-choreographer Chou Shu-yi's (周書毅) friends e-mailed him about the Sadler's Wells Global Dance Contest, an online choreography competition launched last March, he thought it was a scam. Besides, last year was already shaping up to be a very busy one for him, so he didn't give it much thought.

On the contest's final day, however, Chou submitted a three-minute clip from *1875*, a 25-minute-long work he had created for some friends who were studying at the National Taipei University of the Arts (國立台灣藝術大學) and needed a graduation piece. He went on to win.

Last weekend, 12 young Taiwanese dancers performed *1875* as part of "Sadler's Wells Sampled" program, which introduced work from troupes such as the Jasmin Vardimon Company, the Birmingham Royal Ballet and Cuba's Havana Rakatan, at Sadler's Wells Theater in London.

Set to Ravel's *Bolero*, *1875* was created for Lin Yu-jun (林祐君), Hsu Wei-lin (許瑋玲), Chen Yi-chun (陳怡君) and nine others and premiered at the National Taipei University of the Arts' Dance Theater in November 2007.

"I first choreographed *Bolero* in 2006 for the Lo Man-fei (羅曼菲) Asian Young Choreography project in Kaohsiung, but I did it again in 2007 totally different," Chou, 26, said during an interview at the National Taipei University of the Arts early last month when he was briefly in Taipei to rehearse for two different shows. "I worked on the project for eight months."

Sadler's Wells received 170 submissions from 34 countries, works that ranged from modern dance to flamenco to hip-hop. A panel short-listed 10 videos and then the theater opened the contest to public voting from Sept. 1 to Nov. 13.

"I didn't hear anything for five months, so I was sure the contest was a fake. Then I was told I was in the top 10. I was happy, excited and very proud ... I told all my friends to vote," Chou said. "I still didn't believe the promise [of a London performance]. We have 12 dancers and that's a big budget."

In March last year the Horse Dance Theater (馬舞劇場), of which he is a founding member, was in New York getting ready to perform *Bones* the first week in April at the Joyce Theater as part of Eliot Feld's Mandance Project. Chou had also lined up two artistic residencies that would keep him in the US until September: a six-month Asian Cultural Council program in New York and a six-week International Choreographer Residency at the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina in June and July.

While he didn't need to create anything for the Asian Cultural Council program — it's designed to allow participants to soak up the cultural hub that is the Big Apple by going to shows, museums and workshops — he would have to make something for the American Dance Festival (which turned out to be the 45-minute *Solo for Musicians*, for 10 dancers from Taiwan and Hong Kong and set to Bach's *Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major*). He was taking classes to improve his English. Then he was headed to Europe, for a three-month residency program at the Cite des Arts in Paris.

He stopped off in London in September on his way from the US to Paris, and went to see a show at Sadler's Wells. Despite his misgivings — and the odds — he tried to imagine his piece being performed there. All he could think of was how nervous he would be.

"They [Sadler's Wells] e-mailed me on Nov. 30 ... saying I won and asking what I wanted to do next and that if I wanted to perform, they would pay for everything," he said. "I still didn't believe it."

"My dancers went crazy," he said. "I called Yu-jun [Lin] and she was screaming and then she called the others and they screamed ... they couldn't believe the public chose Taiwan."

Chou wanted to make sure his group could perform *1875* in its entirety, so he sent Sadler's Wells director Alistair Spalding a DVD of the full piece. Spalding said yes.

Since Chou was in Paris at that point, he had to rely on Lin to start rehearsals in Taipei for *1875*, which included

finding two dancers to replace the two who now work for Cloud Gate 2 and wouldn't be able to go to London. Meanwhile, he had to act as manager and technician — "Sadler's Wells thinks I have a company. They keep asking me questions."

"I never thought about what winning means for my career, I am just excited that I can show my work, and showcase Taiwanese dance," Chou said.

His family was very proud, he said, adding, "Mothers are always proud of their sons." Plus, since half the costumes in the piece were his mom's "from when she was a young woman," she was thrilled that the dresses would be seen in London.

"But they still don't understand why I chose dance because the pay is so bad. They always ask me if I want a 'normal job,'" he said.

His family has always supported his desire to dance, which began after learning that a classmate was taking classes at a dance studio in his hometown of Jhongli.

"When I was 10 years old I started learning dance, two classes a week — Chinese dance, Taiwanese, kung fu ... In high school [National Chubei Senior High School] I started modern [dance] and ballet. I had had some classes at the studio before, but I didn't like them. They were too boring. But I did find the training helpful for the music," he said.

While he liked dancing, Chou wasn't a good student academically. The idea of dance career never entered his head.

"No one tells you in Taiwan what dance is, what choreography is. I didn't know anyone in dance. My family doesn't know what dance is — my grandmother and grandfather wanted to know if I was going to dance behind the singers on TV," he said.

When he was 17, a high school teacher asked for a volunteer to choreograph a piece for a school performance. Chou raised his hand, even though he didn't quite know what she wanted.

"I wondered: What is choreography? I didn't know how to start but I tried. After that performance I fell in love with dance. Then I knew I wanted to get into the dance department at college. So I studied very hard to get into college. I wanted to go to Banciao [National Taiwan University of Arts] because every year they have student choreography competition," he said.

Luckily dance departments have lower exam grade requirements, he said with a grin.

Once there, however, he found academic life didn't suit him.

"I never stayed in college when I was at school. My teachers hated me for it. I did KCB [Kaohsiung City Ballet] with [Chen] Wu-kang (陳武康), Taipei City Ballet, my own stuff. Now they have rules that students can't work outside, but it was good experience for me ... I still love that school, but I think you need to go out into the world,

let students know the world."

One of his professors, Yang Kuei-chuan (楊桂娟), encouraged him to apply to the National Theater's New Ideas competition when he was 19.

"The first year of the contest, no one knew my dances. I got in and I was so happy. They didn't know my age. Now they have an age requirement: you have to be a graduate. I think that's really bad. I hope one day I can do a project for young choreographers with no age limit," he said.

Chou said he was lucky he had good teachers at the studio and high school and mentors such as Kang, Chen, Lo and Cloud Gate Dance Theatre founder Lin Hwai-min (林懷民).

"[Chen] Wu-kang came to teach at the studio [in Jhongli]. He asked if I wanted to join his piece in Kaohsiung City Ballet, so I started working with him when I was 18," Chou said.

"Mr Lin [Hwai-min] always gives lots of homework to young choreographers. He's very kind and cares a lot about young people, like Lo Man-fei did. Lo Man-fei called me in 2005 after seeing a Horse dance performance. She came twice. She invited me to dance as a guest with Cloud Gate 2 ... I remember seeing her dance and crying because she was so wonderful," he said.

Chou said he's often asked what his style is, what his influences are, and whether his choreography is "Taiwanese" — questions he finds hard to answer.

"For my generation the world is very open ... Twenty years ago Cloud Gate was very 'Asian.' I often ponder what is Taiwanese culture or

Taiwanese style. I haven't experienced that history, like Mr Lin, and the older generation. They know about the war, the period of Japanese colonization. For my generation it's very different ... I can use dance to talk to many, many people; it's not like drama. Dance has no limits," he said. "In my choreography, I don't feel any limits."

Chou is now back in Taipei for two weeks to rehearse for Horse's performance *M_Dance 2010* at the Metropolitan Hall from March 5 to March 7, then he's off to Tokyo for 10 days to work with Hong Kong choreographer Yuri Ng (伍宇烈) on a project at a traditional Noh theater. After that, the only date in his calendar right now is the International Tanzmesse NRW in Dusseldorf in August, where he will perform his solo, *Start With the Body*.

He doesn't have any new choreography projects lined up right now and he says he's fine with the uncertainty. He wants time to think about what to do next. Taiwan has many good freelance dancers that he'd like to work with.

He also knows he wants to still be dancing, like Mikhail Baryshnikov, when he's in his 50s and 60s — and still choreographing.

"I saw Baryshnikov in New York with Anna Laguna. He's 62. I hope I can dance when I'm 60," Chou said.

What about 2012, I asked him. Did he know whether he had to perform *1875* at Sadler's again then or could he do a new piece? The question drew a puzzled look. It turns out Chou hadn't read the fine print of the contest fact sheet: Winners of the 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 contests would be invited back to perform at Sadler's Wells during London's Olympic Festival.

"Oh, I'll have to ask them about that when I'm in London," he said. "I have too many other things to think about now."

On the Net: www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYKH1qeJQC8



Chou Shu-yi recently won a worldwide talent search held by one of the world's most prestigious dance theaters — but he nearly missed the boat

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER



Above: Lin Yu-jun, in red flowered dress, and the other original dancers in Chou Shu-yi's award-winning *1875* perform at the National Taipei University of the Arts Dance Theater in November 2007.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHANG CHEN-CHIH AND YI-CHUN WU