

| STAGE |

## Loss and Hope in Shih-Hui Chen's *sisila ila ila: saying goodbye* at Asia Society Texas

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**Photo by Lynn Lane** Asia Society Texas, in partnership with the National Theater and Concert Hall of Taiwan, presents the workshop premiere of *sisila ila ila: saying goodbye* by composer Shih-Hui Chen.

Imagine sitting in a darkened theater, quietly waiting – anticipating – the start of a show. Now, name one sound that could make your stomach drop in an instant.

If you said “Radar,” the iPhone’s default alarm, you are correct. Though, I would also accept any and all ringtones, notifications, alerts, and the clatter of your cell phone falling to the floor between the seats.

One week ago, Asia Society Texas, in partnership with the National Theater and Concert Hall of Taiwan, presented the workshop premiere of *sisila ila ila: saying goodbye*. The work, comprised of an overture and six scenes roughly one hour in length, is an expansion of a shorter musical piece by composer Shih-Hui Chen, now played live alongside a filmed shadow puppetry performance. The result is an intelligently conceived and viscerally perceptive audiovisual experience, one that begins with – you guessed it – a noisy iPhone.

The alarm, the ding of notifications, the sliding pitch of a text message sent and a text message received, the pre-recorded pleasantry of a navigation system helpfully informing you that “you are driving in the wrong direction” – i.e. a variety of intrusive, anxiety-triggering noises indicative of the day – pepper the piece’s overture, called “Modern Cacophony,” and plague the piece’s protagonist, the Viola, represented by a shadow-character with the stringed instrument as its head.

The Viola sits in her big city apartment (probably in New York City if the glimpse of Times Square on a map and a telltale dancing Spiderman can be believed) attempting to practice amid the disruptions of daily life and a bit of Beethoven sticking in her brain. Soon, an indigenous song of the SaySiyat people, as well as a song of the whales, begin to penetrate through, before more interruptions give way to something longing and wistful. The Viola reminisces about playing as a youth in Taiwan, and her family, before “Turkey in the Straw” (you know, the ice cream truck jingle) pulls us into an almost psychedelic transition that drops us in the past – Taiwan circa 1966, to be exact – denoted with an infectious upbeat pop song.

This unbelievable journey takes us to the merriment of the SaySiyat Pas-ta’ai Little People Festival in the second scene, then submerges and surrounds us in an underwater, otherworldly “Symphony of Whales” in the third scene.

Violist Hsin-Yun Huang in *sisila ila ila: saying goodbye* at Asia Society Texas. **Photo by Lynn Lane**

It's here that the vivid imagery, created with Tung-Hua Shadow Puppet Theater, makes its strongest case for being the perfect form to represent the piece's union of memory and imagination. Though captivating throughout, from the starry expanse at the show's open to the beautifully crafted landscapes and delicately designed shadow characters, it's these scenes that best leverage the centuries-old spectacle, perfect for fantastical travel and transformations (such as those seen in a frenetic battle between two shapeshifters).

When the Viola returns to the present, her foray into the past and closer to nature leads her to take a new approach over the last three scenes. A growing harmony overtakes the piece, integrating the prior noises of intrusion and frustration until the curtain is lifted (literally) on an absolutely joyful finale.

It's not an exaggeration to say that Chen stands with a veritable dream team on this project, in particular director Doug Fitch, violist Hsin-Yun Huang and clarinetist David Rothenberg (who is also a noted author whose most recent book is the very applicable *Whale Music: Thousand Mile Songs in a Sea of Sound*.)

The charming Huang serves as an endlessly expressive guide through the piece, conveying the Viola's ruminative moments as clearly as if she were speaking to us. (On cymbals, Huang also enhances a certain fun section with cellist Max Geissler.) The ensemble around Huang includes violinists Evie Chen and Marisa Ishikawa, who both add such supportive color to the piece; percussionist Aiyun Huang, who provided some striking pops of sound; and clarinetists Rothenberg and Joshua Rubin, who play an absolutely riveting passage alongside an exquisitely ethereal humpback whale song.

One thing not entirely clear during the performance is the significance of the year 1966 (and the use of whale songs specifically), but it ends up being a through line for the entire work. It's the year, as we discovered in the post-performance discussion, Congress passed the Endangered Species Preservation Act, the year that whale songs were first (unintentionally) recorded, and the year that the SaySiyat song heard in the piece was preserved by ethnomusicologists. The work itself is ambitious and the talent behind it so strong that it's easy to let the piece wash over you without questioning the disparate elements during the performance. But its context is undeniable fascinating and greatly enhances the meaning unfolding before us.

As the title of the piece indicates, *sisila ila ila* translates to saying goodbye, and loss is a concept woven through every element – a lost past, lost culture, lost language, the loss of nature, even the very tradition of shadow puppetry, with Chen noting during a post-performance discussion that the number of shadow puppet theaters in Taiwan has gone from more than a thousand to now only one. And yet, it's not mournful. Instead, the piece stands as an opportunity, an optimistic one at that. It offers a prescription of sorts in the power of remembering what is gone and honoring its memory, of opening yourself up to nature to situate yourself within the bigger picture, and letting the union of these elements in the present nourish you for the future.

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