Shakespeare’s Hamlet met Chinese Kunqu Opera on Monday to the delight of a New York audience.

Chinese opera star Zhang Jun performed a virtuosic reimagining of the play as a one-man contemporary Kunqu Opera called I, Hamlet at the Asia Society.

Juxtaposing Chinese and Western classic art forms, the pioneering work drew rousing applause.

"I just thought it was riveting, the control the performer exercised over so many different media was astonishing to me," Ivy Bannister, an American author, playwright and poet living in Ireland, said after the performance.

Kunqu Opera (which translates to "Kunshan melody") has a history of 600 years and is regarded as the "mother of Chinese opera". Kunshan is a county-level city in East China’s Jiangsu province.

In 2001, UNESCO declared Kunqu a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.

Zhang said the play also explores the inner world of Hamlet - the fierce fighting between light and darkness, life and death, love and revenge.

The 75-minute production features Zhang in four roles: Hamlet, Ophelia, the ghost of Hamlet's father and the gravedigger - in the method of traditional Chinese opera characters known as sheng (male roles), dan (female roles), jing (painted roles) and chou (clowns).

"The skill of the performer was just mesmerizing. I just couldn't stop watching him. I admire somebody very much, a one-man show artist; I've always thought he was the best that anybody could be, but this man was five times or 10 times better," Bannister said.

Zhang, a UNESCO artist for peace, is one of China's national top-class performers. Born in Shanghai in 1974, Zhang began learning Kunqu at the age of 12 and has been a professional Kunqu actor since 1994.

Regarded as the prince of Kunqu Opera, Zhang plays the xiao sheng (young man) role and has portrayed many leading characters in famous Kunqu plays such as The Peony Pavilion, The Palace of Eternal Youth and The Jade Hairpin.

2016 marked 400 years since the death of England's bard William Shakespeare and Chinese playwright Tang Xianzu (1550-1616). That was when Zhang thought of combining two of their classics.

"I think this is an attempt to have a conversation with a Western classic by using the form of Chinese classic Kunqu," Zhang said.

"The biggest challenge for us was the ancient Chinese prose. The script was translated into Chinese by Mr. Zhu Shenghao (1912-1944), and we again transferred it into the ancient Chinese prose to adapt to the form of Kunqu," Zhang said.

"I was absolutely bowled over by his technical skill, the control he exercised over his voice, the control he exercised over his body, his ability to relate to the light and the sound, it's so endlessly interesting," said Frank Bannister, Ivy's husband, an associate professor of information systems at Trinity College, Dublin.

"I found the music fascinating ... this very high singing and pentatonic singing, I found it so fascinating. I could watch that for another hour," he said.
The performance was the sixth, after four performances in Shanghai and one in London.

"I think one reason why classic performance could be passed along over time is because it has been exercised by artists so many times and then becomes more acceptable for the audience," Zhang said.

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