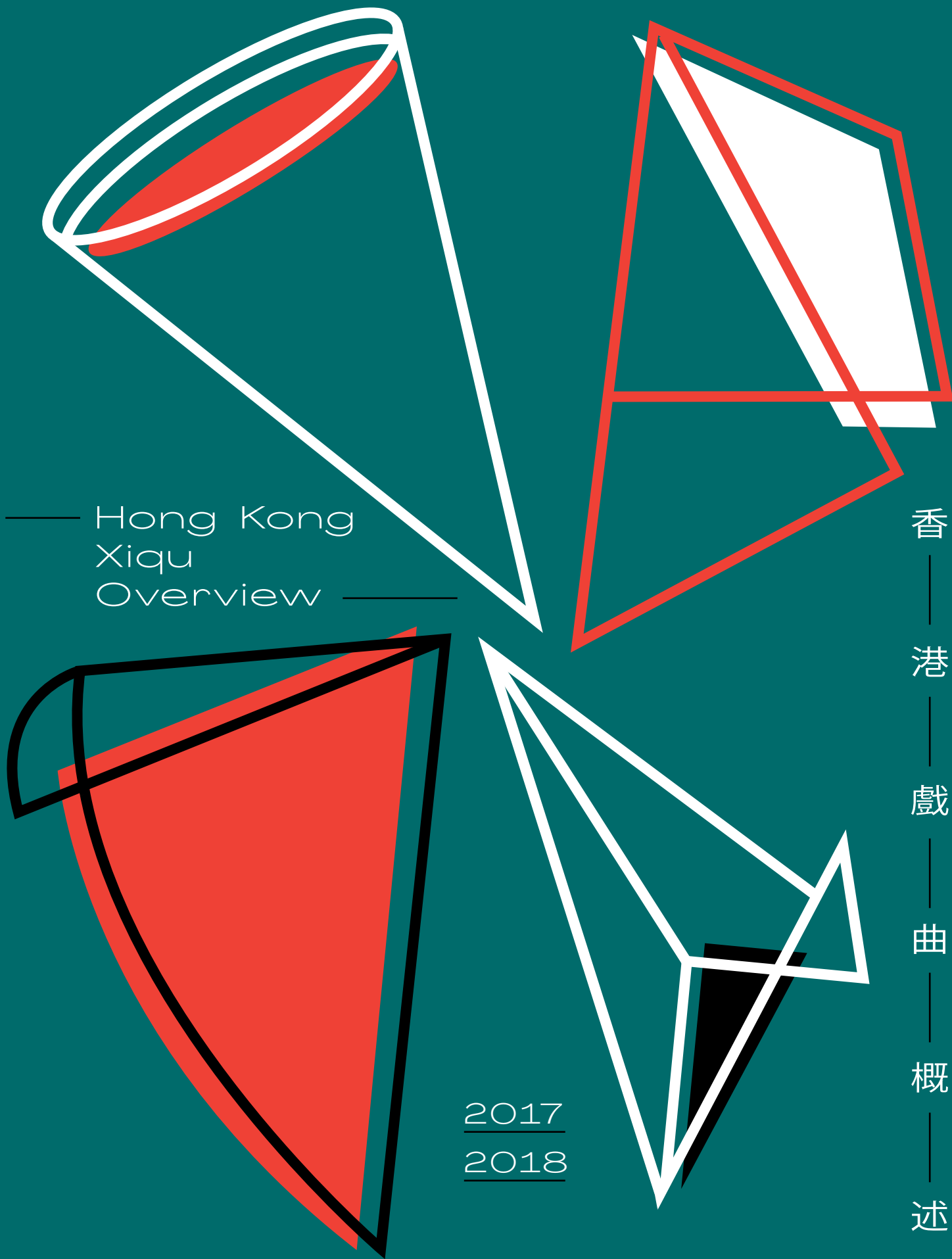
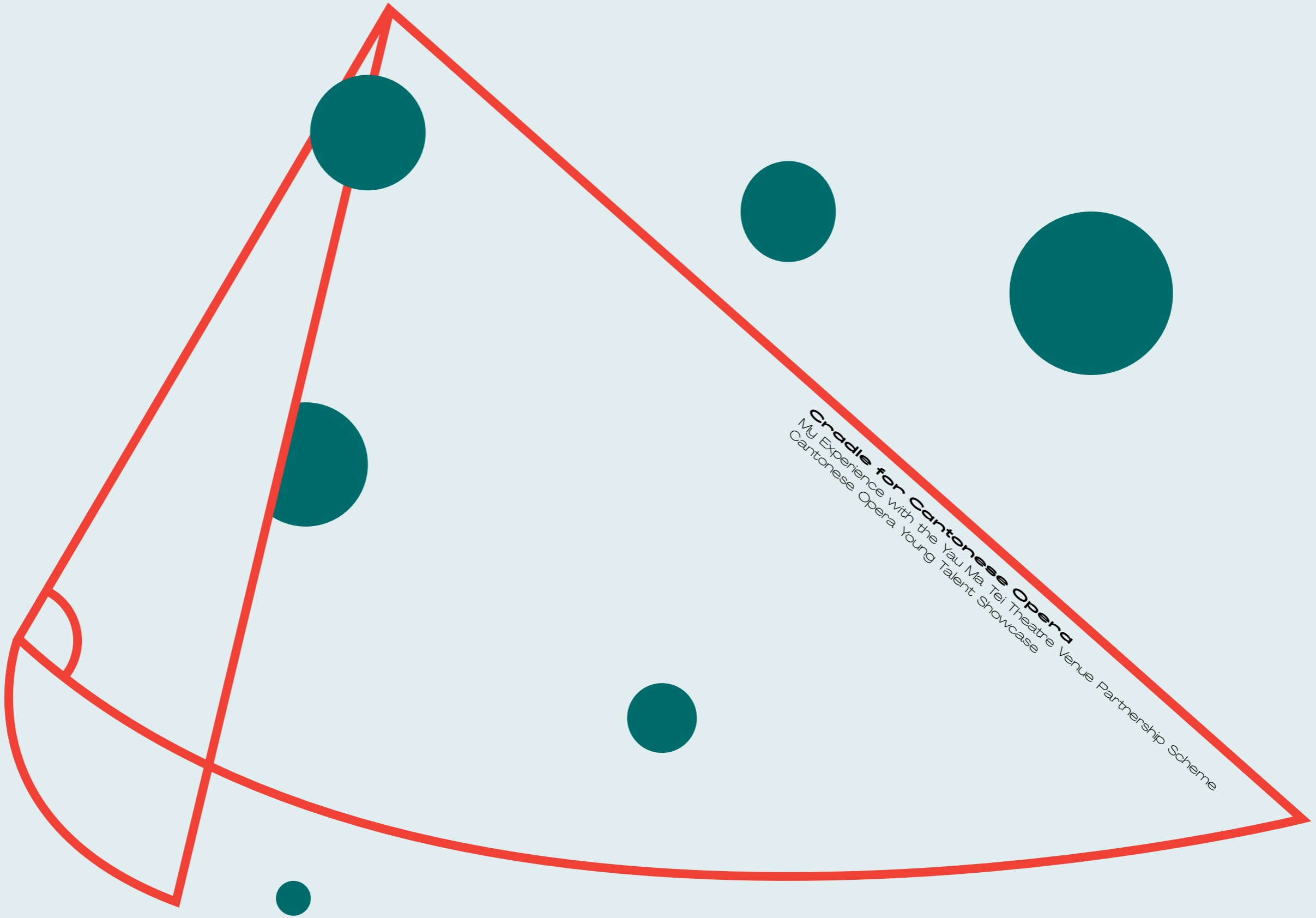


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Cradle for Cantonese Opera
My Experience with the Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme
Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase

Cradle for Cantonese Opera

My Experience with the Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase

Text
Lee Ship

Editor's note: The author has been a participant in the Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme – Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase since 2012. This article mainly covers her performances in 2017-2018.

Presented by the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, subvented by the Cantonese Opera Development Fund, and venue sponsored by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme – Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase was launched in 2012. Upon the scheme's inception, five seasoned maestros were placed at the helm as artistic directors: Danny Li Chi-kei, Law Ka-ying, Yuen Siu-fai, Sun Kim-long, and Lung Koon-tin. They were later joined by two famed actresses, Wan Fai-yin and Wong Chiu-kwan. Through hands-on coaching by the master, the Showcase sets out to pass down the artistic riches of Cantonese opera to a new generation of actors. Since 2012, I have had the privilege of being a part of this big family. Under the nurturing hand of the artistic directors, I have grown considerably as an actor, and gained more recognition and support from the audience.

When I joined the Showcase, I was an amateur actor given bit parts most of the time—the likes of junior soldier, passer-by, minor courtier, and even the *wusheng* (military male) role, which is not my specialty. I learnt how to play a wide range of characters through practice. As well as the opportunity to act on stage, the Showcase offers participants regular training in, for example, stage movements, vocal delivery, and the codified performance techniques unique to Cantonese opera. There are also a range of exchange activities and exposure to other regional operatic traditions that broaden our visions as performing artists.

Back in early 2015, I left my job to fully commit myself to Cantonese opera. The artistic directors began to consider me for meatier roles in plays that were new to me. In 2017-2018, six of the seven

artistic directors walked me through multiple plays in over 50 Showcase performances. During those fruitful years, I starred most often in the great works the late Mr Mak Bing-wing premiered with his troupe, the Tai Lung Fung Troupe, including *When Swallows Return*, *A Triumphant Return*, *Romance by the Peach Blossom Lake*, *A Dream in Yangzhou*, and *The Marshal's Marriage*. The heroes of the plays share one thing in common—they all perform some “explosive” vocal passages and stylised feats—which explains why Mr Mak is fondly known as “Fiery Wing”.

Up until then, I was rather unused to these fiery characters. Following the instructions of Brother Fai (Yuen Siu-fai), Brother Tin (Sun Kim-long) and Brother Yuk (Lung Koon-tin), I got to reinterpret these signature pieces by Tai Lung Fung Troupe, which in turn gave me a better grasp of the craft this kind of drama calls for. For instance, in *A Triumphant Return*, Brother Yuk taught me how to flourish the blade while I entered the scene accompanied by gongs and cymbals; in *Romance by the Peach Blossom Lake*, Brother Tin showed me the feat of jumping high and landing on a chair; in *The Marshal's Marriage*, I learnt how to portray a general fleeing for his life after being defeated. In particular, when I performed *When Swallows Return* over the course of a few years, I received tutelage from three different artistic directors. From Brother Fai I learnt how to embody the hero Wei Jianhun's poise and stamina; from Brother Tin I learnt how to capture all the subtleties in the vocals; and from Brother Yuk I learnt how to make my acting more spirited. The chance to perform the same play repeatedly also boosted my confidence. The rewards were immense.

In 2017-2018, I also learnt two major courtroom plays—*Red Silk Shoes* and *The Murder* from Brother Fai, and *Tomb of the Fragrant Gown* from Sister Yin (Wan Fai-yin). Both were penned by the legendary playwright Tong Tik-sang, and are showpieces of traditional courtroom drama in Cantonese opera with fascinating twists and turns. For example in *Red Silk Shoes*, the hero Zuo Weiming appears in three trial scenes. In the scene in which the embroidered shoes are examined side by side, the hero's shrewdness and witty sense of humour shine through. It truly puts the leading male's acting ability to the test. Lu Shike in *Tomb*, a supporting male role, has to shoulder a some 40-minute-long trial scene. From Lu's carriage being intercepted by the petitioner, his interrogation of the suspect in jail, to the scene of the three magistrates presiding over the court, the drama continues to escalate. During the sequence when Lu reads out the petition, he has to make sure every word is spoken properly and clearly. In Cantonese opera, it is common practice to use a piece of plain white cloth for the petition. Looking at the wordless petition, the actor has to employ his eye movements to mime reading words that only exist in his mind. On top of this, the lines he speaks are accompanied by the drum and gong. That demands a great deal of mental strength on the actor's part, as any lapse of attention may cause mistakes.

In *Tomb*, there is a major scene called “Encounter on the Road” helmed by the *wenwusheng* and *xiaosheng*, the leading and supporting males. It was my honour to act opposite Yuen Tak-cheong. Our physiques made an interesting contrast, so did our personas as the scholarly inspector general and the quick-tempered royal lord. Through dialogue, facial expression and body movement, we brought this climactic scene to life, drawing rounds of applause from an ardent audience. We were both exhilarated after the performance. As a follow-up, I went on to stage a rerun of the play with my own troupe, the Sensational Sprouts Cantonese Opera Association. I made some changes to the script, and presented the play without drawing the curtain between acts. The rerun in this way one-upped the premiere.

In addition, Mr Law Ka-ying also trained me for the part of Zhang Zhong in the antique formulaic play, *Execution of the Duke's Second Brother*. While it is only an excerpt, it nonetheless features a wealth of singing and performing techniques typical of traditional formulaic plays in Cantonese opera, such as the commander's stage movements in grand armour, the feats of crash landing on the chair from a jump and tumbling on the table, and the mime act of closing the city gate. Through this production I gained a fuller grasp of the craft of the *xiaowu* (young military male) role. Few *kunsheng* actors (male impersonators) have ever performed this “tumbling on the table” feat. Taking into account my own physical fitness and martial arts skills, I gave my all and completed the stunt. An opportunity like this does not come around often.

The Showcase allows young actors to try their hand at various types of characters and bring out the best in themselves. In 2017-2018, I was trained for two villainous roles. The first one was Zhao Hua'an in *Revenge at Guang Chang Long*, for which I was coached by Brother Fai. Zhao is a lewd swindler who ends up being strangled to death by a woman's spirit in vengeance. In my first encounter with a villain role, I also picked up the hair-spinning and leg-twirling feats. The second one was the scheming anti-hero Tso Pei in *Goddess of the Luo River*, for which I was coached by Brother Yuk. I love this character because he struggles with a myriad of repressed emotions. The actor must be able to sing well and convey the character's inner thoughts, so that the audience can understand and sympathise with his warped psyche and his pursuit of unconventional romance.

Apart from these, in the same year I also learnt two relatively difficult plays—*The Heroic Breed Defends the Nation* from Mr Law Ka-ying, and *Romance in the Court* from Ms Wong Chiu-kwan. They were difficult because I had never seen the plays, so I did not have any notes about the works for reference. On the other hand, works unperformed for decades naturally have their own



Lung Koon-tin and the cast of *A Triumphant Return* (2017)— Photo courtesy of the author



Law Ka-ying coaches the cast of the antique formulaic play *Execution of the Duke's Second Brother* (2017) — Photo courtesy of the author

stage conventions. Playing the leading male roles, I had to follow the artistic directors' guidance to make out what the characters were like, and communicate my understanding to the audience. On the other hand, since there were no preconceptions about these characters, I could take more creative liberty with my performance. This is great groundwork that will stand me in good stead when I work with new scripts in the future.

Over these several years, performing for the Showcase has enabled me to hone my craft, broaden my horizons, and make the acquaintance of many industry veterans. In early 2017 I boldly invited Brother Tin (Sun Kim-long) to supervise the rendition of *Princess Changping*, which I was planning to produce with my troupe, the Sensational Sprouts Cantonese Opera Association. My intention was to restore this much-loved classic to its full former glory, and the troupe needed Brother Tin to check whether our expanded version was in order. Only after a whole week's contemplation did Brother Tin finally grant my wish. As he writes in his artistic director's note, "To this day, *Princess Changping* has been reprised by countless troupes over and over again. Any survey would prove it to be one of the three most performed Cantonese operas in the past decade. This time, I feel rather nervous to serve as the artistic director for this attempt by Sensational Sprouts, because it is a classic that audiences know inside out. The existing approaches to presentation have gone down so well that there is little room for reinterpretation. Given such constraints, it can be quite a challenge to make even the slightest adjustment... This year marks the centenary of Mr Tong Tik-sang's birthday. Having his magnum opus staged by a relatively young troupe for the first time is itself a learning process, which makes the endeavour all the more meaningful. From script compilation, scene changes, and group rehearsals, to the final full rehearsal, the creative team has put a great deal of effort into the project. I hope our audience will give them patience and encouragement." Obviously, there was quite a bit of pressure for Brother Tin in being put at the helm. Thankfully, with his unreserved support and the excellent contribution by seasoned veterans such as Liu Kwok-sum and Wan Yuk-yu, Sensational Sprouts' *Princess Changping* garnered unprecedented success. We put back into the play some parts that had long been missing from the script, relating the story in its original glory in a 3.5-hour performance uninterrupted by act curtains. The audience's passionate response has since spurred me on to restage other star vehicles of Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin, using the same approach. Its success has also emboldened me to invite other senior artists to join our productions either as actors or advisers, so that Sensational Sprouts will become a fully professional troupe that wins opera goers' approval and support with what we deliver.



Sun Kim-long coaches the cast of *Princess Changping* (2017) — Photo courtesy of the author

The Yau Ma Tei Theatre Venue Partnership Scheme – Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase helps new actors to find fuller guidance. With a fixed venue available for frequent performances, we are able to broaden our experience and enhance our skills in a more systematic way. Government subsidies have made cheaper tickets available, which helps build a larger audience for the art. Many of our regulars today at Yau Ma Tei Theatre seldom watched Cantonese opera in the past, but many of them have now become fans of the young performers. Over the years, the scheme has continued to perfect itself, organising for example promotional shows for primary and secondary schools and universities in order to nurture young audiences. There are also talks on Cantonese opera to raise its academic standing and cement its distinct cultural identity. Thanks to the scheme, many novice actors have matured into artists in their own right. Recent Cantonese opera graduates from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts may also enrol to further their studies. The torch is thus passed down from generation to generation. The results are very encouraging.

(Translated by Elbe Lau)

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graduated from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She later obtained a Diploma in Cantonese Opera from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. She is the chairman, playwright, stage designer and a performer of the Sensational Sprouts Cantonese Opera Association. She is a member of CASH. Since 2012, she has participated in the Cantonese Opera Youth Talent Showcase organised by the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, studying under the artistic directors of the scheme.

香港戲曲概述 2017、2018

HONG KONG XIQU OVERVIEW 2017 & 2018

版次 2021年1月初版

First published in January 2021

資助 香港藝術發展局

Supported by Hong Kong Arts Development Council

計劃統籌、編輯 陳國慧

Project Coordinator and Editor Bernice Chan Kwok-wai

文章統籌、編輯 張文珊

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English Proofreader Rose Hunter

協作伙伴 香港八和會館、八和粵劇學院

Partners Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong,
Cantonese Opera Academy of Hong Kong

設計 TGIF

Design TGIF

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出版 Published by

國際演藝評論家協會(香港分會)有限公司 International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong) Limited

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國際書號ISBN 978-988-74319-1-6



International Association
of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong)
國際演藝評論家協會(香港分會)



香港藝術發展局
Hong Kong Arts Development Council

國際演藝評論家協會(香港分會)為藝發局資助團體
IATC (HK) is financially supported by the HKADC

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*藝術製作人員實習計劃由香港藝術發展局資助 The Arts Production Internship Scheme is supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council