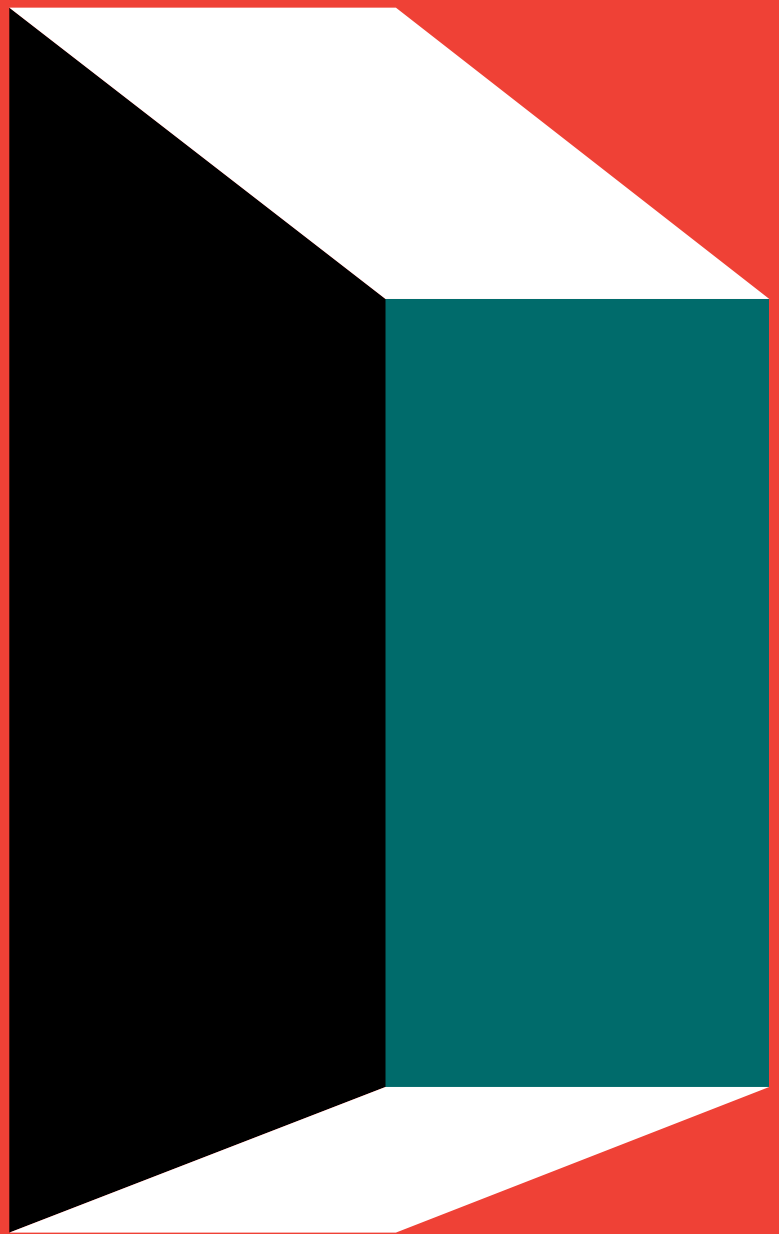
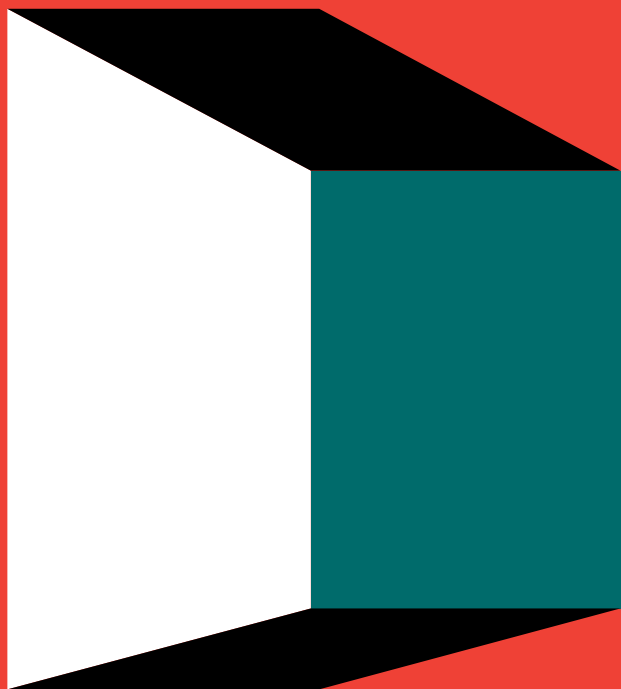
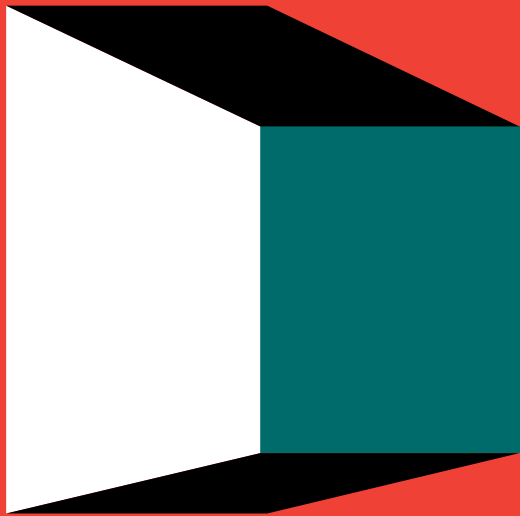


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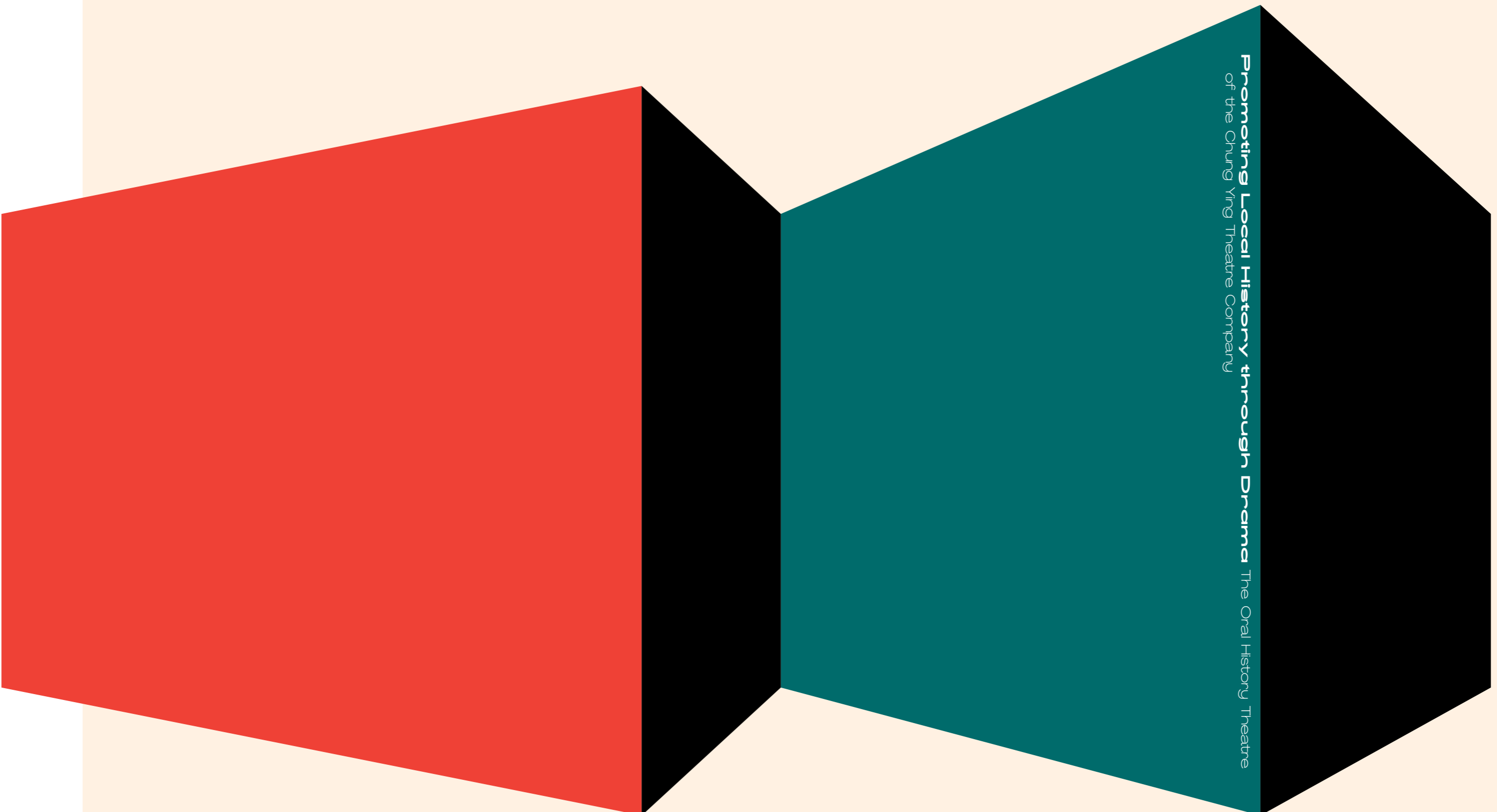


Hong Kong  
Drama  
Overview

2017  
2018



**Promoting Local History through Drama** The Oral History Theatre  
of the Chung Ying Theatre Company



# Promoting Local History through Drama

## The Oral History Theatre of the Chung Ying Theatre Company

Text  
Jack Shu

In recent years, the genre of “oral history theatre” has become more familiar to the local community. In particular the Chung Ying Theatre Company (Chung Ying) has put a lot of effort into presenting works of this genre. I had always wanted to watch this type of drama. Over two years ago, in a discussion with Chung Ying about research studies, I learnt that they were applying to the Hong Kong Jockey Club (HKJC) for funding of a three-year programme on oral history theatre, and that they planned to conduct a research project as part of the programme. Without a second thought, we decided to include efficacy evaluation in the programme proposal, which also fulfilled the requirements of the HKJC.

In September 2017, the Jockey Club “Once Under the Lion Rock” Oral History Theatre Programme was officially launched. As we (the Hong Kong Open University research team) took this opportunity to observe the work of Chung Ying up close, we realised that the company had almost a decade of experience in oral history theatre performance. In this article, I would like to share my observations and thoughts from the perspective of a semi-insider and commentator, rather than from the perspective of a researcher. (Indeed this is not a research report; both the programme and research project are still in progress at the time of this writing.)

Beneficiaries of the “Once Under the Lion Rock” programme include elderly people, young people and the general public. Chung Ying recruited more than 200 elderly and retired people (“Old Friends”) from eight districts, namely Sham Shui Po, Kwun Tong, Hung Hom, Sha Tin, Yau Tsim Mong (Yau Ma Tei, Tsim Sha Tsui & Mong Kok), Lantau Island, Central & Sheung Wan and North Point. Four professional tutors conducted workshops for the Old Friends, collecting stories from them to create play scripts. The tutors then became directors and continued to guide the Old Friends through rehearsals and performances. There are three stages in the programme. Stage 1 consists of touring performances to local primary and secondary schools. Stage 2 features community performances staged in black box theatres and open areas. Stage 3 is a large-scale cross-district finale production to be presented at the Kwai Tsing Theatre. The research is focused

on what (positive) impact oral history theatre is expected to bring to the Old Friends as well as different audiences and, if possible, artistic orientations of the plays.

Let me start with some obvious observations. It is no news that different types of drama, possibly including oral history theatre, can have a positive impact on youngsters and students. Over the years, efficacy evaluations were readily available for programmes organised or sponsored by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the Education Bureau, the HKJC, and other organisations from the private sector. For our research project, the feedback gathered from questionnaires conducted in primary and secondary schools is expected to be positive. A preliminary look at the figures gathered from the questionnaires was indeed very encouraging. I also recall from the focus group interviews I conducted with student audiences that both primary and secondary school students gave concrete answers, evidencing that they did not overstate their responses in the questionnaires in order to appease the teachers, theatre companies or the research team. For instance, some students remarked they have gained new knowledge about Hong Kong in the old days, such as the HK\$0.05 wonton noodles, the terrible queues for water rationing, and the wrath of Typhoon Wanda. I am most impressed by the students’ appreciation of the Old Friends’ remarkable performances (which I originally thought would be the views of adults only, as they have a better understanding of the Old Friends’ hard work). The students were surprised at how energetic the elderly performers were, and how well they memorised their lines. Some students were mature enough to express a desire to learn from the Old Friends, for example their persistence, as well as various other virtues. Others were even inspired to reflect on issues of contemporary life such as our fast-paced life, excessive online surfing, and waste of resources. As well as giving salute to the schoolteachers, I wholeheartedly pay tribute to the four Chung Ying tutors who composed the plays and coached the Old Friends to become performers. During the process, I heard and witnessed that the tutor-directors worked hard to iron out the Old Friends’ relationships with one another, while managing their emotions, expectations and attitudes. It was no easy job for sure. I think Chung Ying should document these experiences and share them with industry peers.

The outcomes of observing the Old Friends are very interesting to me. A few years ago, I took part in an ethnodrama co-created and performed by ex-gambling addicts and their family members, including some senior participants from whom I gained an understanding of elderly people. In the past two years, I have observed rehearsals and performances in the oral history theatre project, and I have also interviewed participating playwrights, directors and Old Friends. I am deeply impressed by how smart the Old Friends are, partly because they proactively participated in the



Interview with an Old Friend — Photo courtesy: Chung Ying Theatre Company

programme. A few of the Old Friends are well-educated (holders of master's degrees), and some are returned emigrants. As stated in their responses in the questionnaires, the Old Friends had high expectations of their participation in the programme, especially in terms of enriching their drama knowledge, and engaging in cultural and social activities. When I refer to current questionnaire feedback and several interview sessions that I conducted with the Old Friends, I see the majority of them experienced great enjoyment from partaking in the programme. They are delighted to have improved their abilities in expression, and they also feel a strong sense of self-worth, as they consider themselves capable of educating the next generation. Some Old Friends feel a genuine sense of relief after revealing their long-buried secrets. (For example, in the creative process of one play, an Old Friend enriched her lines to portray her childhood experience of hiding her identity as a newspaper vendor by ignoring her sister when the two ran into each other in the street. In the interview, she said it was liberating for her to finally divulge this incident to others.) In addition, most of them indicated that they have become more eager to take part in art and cultural activities. Some of them stated that drama has helped broaden their visions and they would like to devote themselves to drama, since they recognised that performance can be both professional and educational. Among them, some intended to try their hand at or continue to engage in playwriting after the first stage of the performance. In addition, most Old Friends said they were happy to share their stories and listen to others during the workshops and rehearsals, which enabled them to gain

deeper insights into themselves and to be understood by others. They saw the drama team as a big family, and participation in drama helped them to expand their social circles. One Old Friend even hoped to elevate his status in his family by performing his life story on stage.

All in all, the impact of oral history theatre can be summed up as empowerment for Old Friends, students and adult audiences. The elderly feel they are living fuller lives with a greater sense of self-confidence, improved relationships with families and friends, and more active engagement with society. Audience members have developed a more positive perception of elderly people and a better understanding of Hong Kong history, while they have also been inspired to reflect on life. On the subject of a better understanding of Hong Kong history, I remember attending an oral history theatre sharing session held by Chung Ying in December 2019. Participants were eager to discuss whether oral history theatre can present history, and how history should be defined. I had to refrain myself from blurting this out: "The discussion of the artistic orientation of oral history theatre we are having tonight is immensely important. I intend to interview several directors and persons-in-charge from Chung Ying during the last stage of the programme, and see how they view and treat history in oral history theatre, especially the handling of artistic directions."

The above discussion brings us to the evaluation of another aspect of oral history theatre: How can Chung Ying enhance the effectiveness of oral history theatre by appropriately handling its artistic form? Before further investigation, let me clarify the meanings of oral history and oral history theatre. According to Dr Graham Smith, the Chair of the Oral History Society in Britain, it was as early as the 5th century BC that the Greek historian Thucydides made much of the accounts of the eye-witnesses of the Peloponnesian Wars. Even as late as 1773, Samuel Johnson expressed a keen interest in oral histories and oral tradition in his study of Scottish culture. With the rising popularity of the printed word and empirical research methods in the subsequent eras, however, professional historians tended to use written evidence drawn from documents, while downplaying the significance of oral sources. It was only in the second half of the 20th century that historians and archivists helped to restore the interest in and value of oral history. According to Dr Smith, it is noted in the 1957 edition of *Amateur Historian* that "the collection of information from old people does not feature in textbooks, yet it is an essential process in compiling local history". Dr Smith defined television, film and drama as an application of oral history, and a way to promote public history. An outstanding example was reminiscence theatre created by community groups.<sup>1</sup> In the

<sup>1</sup> Graham Smith. 2008. *Making History: The changing face of the profession in Britain*. The Institute of Historical Research. [https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral\\_history.html](https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html)

US, oral history initially centred on political and business elites; it started to feature the masses and the underprivileged in the 1960s, gradually coming to represent the voices of people from a fuller spectrum of society.<sup>2</sup>

Chung Ying's oral history theatre is obviously a kind of reminiscence theatre by ordinary people. In recent years, documentary theatre, ethnotheatre and verbatim theatre—staged performative art forms that emphasise authentic accounts of people's lives—have been gaining popularity in Europe, the US, Australia, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Literally, the "oral" account seems to be closest to the concept and execution of verbatim theatre in which every single word and line are directly quoted from or created based on interviewees' words. I am not trying to chew words here; I merely want to state that when the verbatim approach is adopted for oral history theatre, it represents an artistic orientation, as it is one possible interpretation of "truth" and "history". I am not proposing that verbatim theatre is the right form for oral history theatre, since there is an array of other forms available. Instead, I would like to stress that it may be a good opportunity for Chung Ying to revisit the current situation and to explore future artistic approach(es), as the company has made a great contribution to oral history theatre.

When visiting the performances in Stage 1 and Stage 2, I saw that primary school students, secondary school students and adults all had different conceptions of "history". Many define history as events documented in books, commentaries on the actions of historical figures, or incidents with profound consequences, versus the personal experiences and feelings portrayed in the plays. Some audience members (including me) took the side of oral historians; we believed that as long as the plays were constructed based on facts, they depicted human history, or at least the local history of Hong Kong people. However, there remains much debate over the meaning of "documenting facts". It is a common understanding that works of drama that are based on real life events are infused with fictional elements. To what extent can an oral history *dramatic* performance be factual/true/real? If it is not completely factual/true/real, how should an audience treat the "history" that is depicted in the play? In this light, I think Chung Ying could consider the following questions for their future endeavours:

<sup>2</sup> Yang Xiangyin, quoted from Yau Yat, Terry T. P. Yip. 2014. *Fighting in Hong Kong: Oral Stories by Counter-Japanese Veterans*. Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Co.



School touring performance in Kwun Tong (2018) — Photo courtesy: Chung Ying Theatre Company

- What are the objectives of creating and producing oral history theatre, e.g. the promotion of oral history, or the empowerment of the Old Friends, and how to strike a balance between the two?
- What are the sources of historical materials for play-making, e.g. interviews, workshops, documents, and how to record these materials?
- How to select the right materials to be put into the plays, e.g. how to decide on the proportion between facts and fictional elements, or how to decide what is subjective and what is objective?
- How to present the selected materials, e.g. the use of lines, visuals, sounds and symbols? How to bring the characters to life through the script and the actors' performances? How to arouse and sustain audience interest? How are all these methods related to the portrayal of history?

It is important for drama to be intriguing; the same could be true for history as well. Dr Yau Yat, my colleague and a scholar in the field of local history and the oral history of Hong Kong, believes the writing of history needs to be "credible and interesting". He interviewed people from all walks of life to gather oral history sources and then took inspiration from the work of William Faulkner, an American writer who used personification and multi-perspectival narration in his fiction, as a way to present facts from multiple angles. In Yau's writings, old villages and abandoned cattle are personified as their psychological and physical conditions, behaviours and desires are revealed.<sup>3</sup> This point of view will be welcomed by oral history theatre workers. Aside from historical interest, they will surely agree that theatrical interest is essential to the performing arts.

In conclusion, I hope that with the development of Chung Ying's oral history theatre, we will see their creative and production teams devising valid and convincing approaches that are complemented by sound artistic choices. Apart from arousing audience interest, the performances can also make the audience see the value of oral history theatre in presenting history. In addition, I believe the company should promote a clear concept of the genre to our industry peers. This will allow us to develop oral history theatre together, and strive to pursue this art form as an effective applied theatre for promoting local history.

(Translated by Carol Lai and Jack Shu)

<sup>3</sup> Kam Shui-yung, Yau Yat. 2016. *Hundred Years of Mui Wo—Old Villages, Abandoned Cattle and People*. Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Co.

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# 香港戲劇概述 2017、2018

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