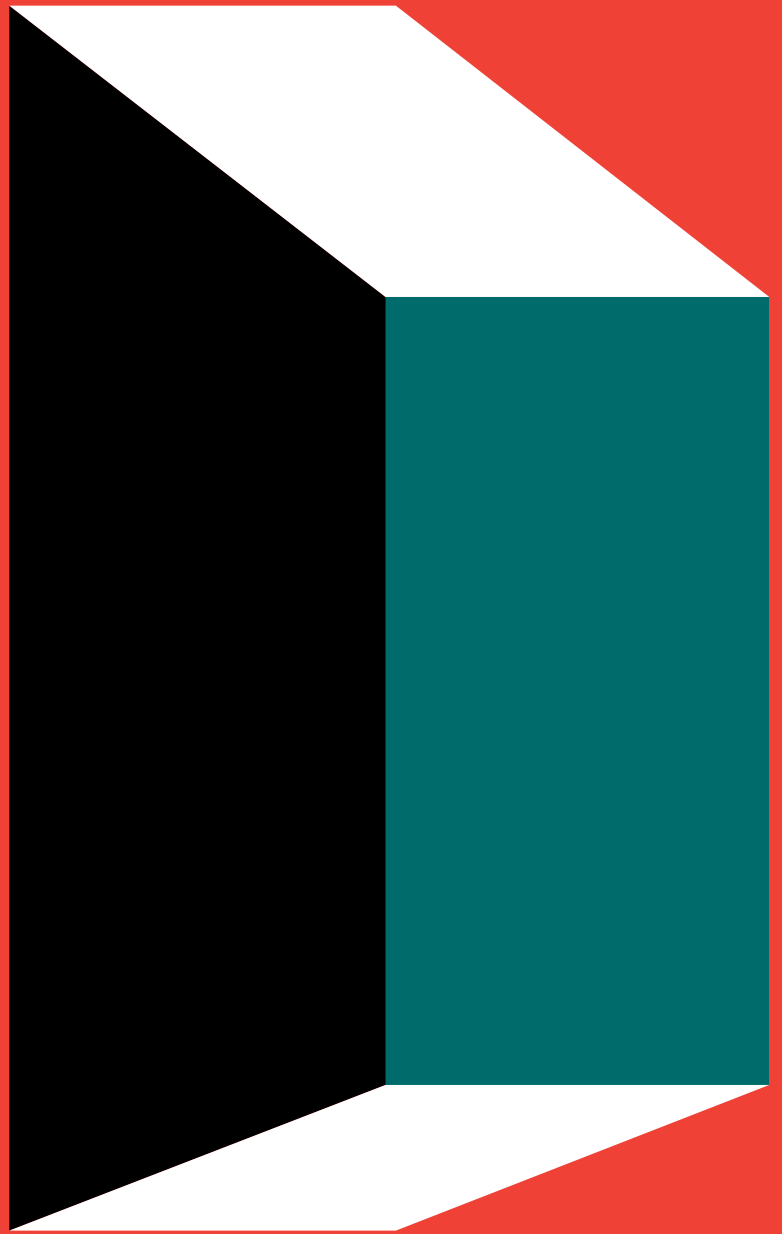
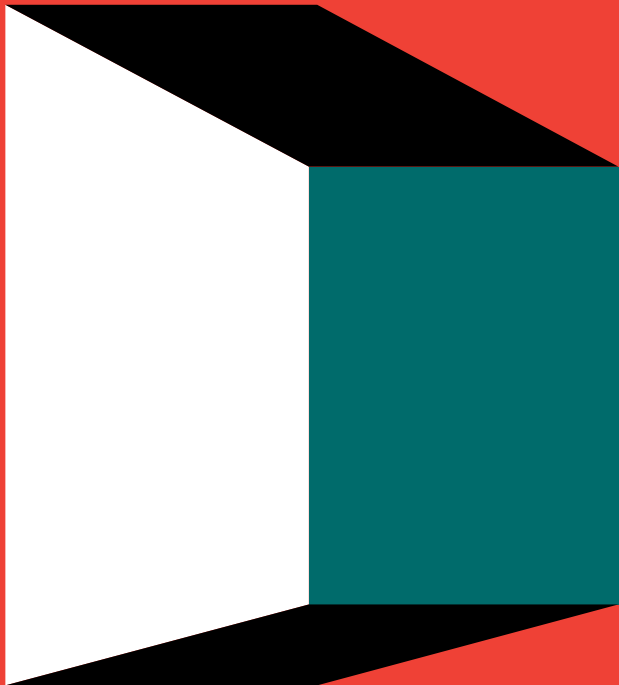
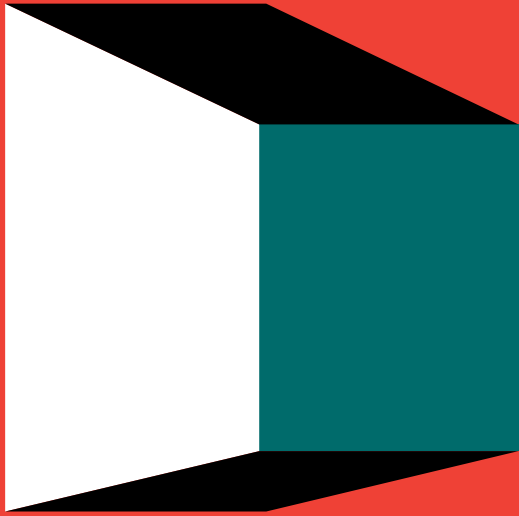
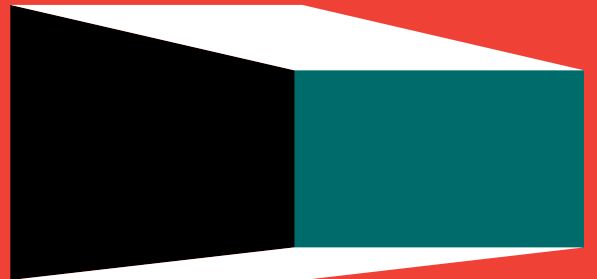


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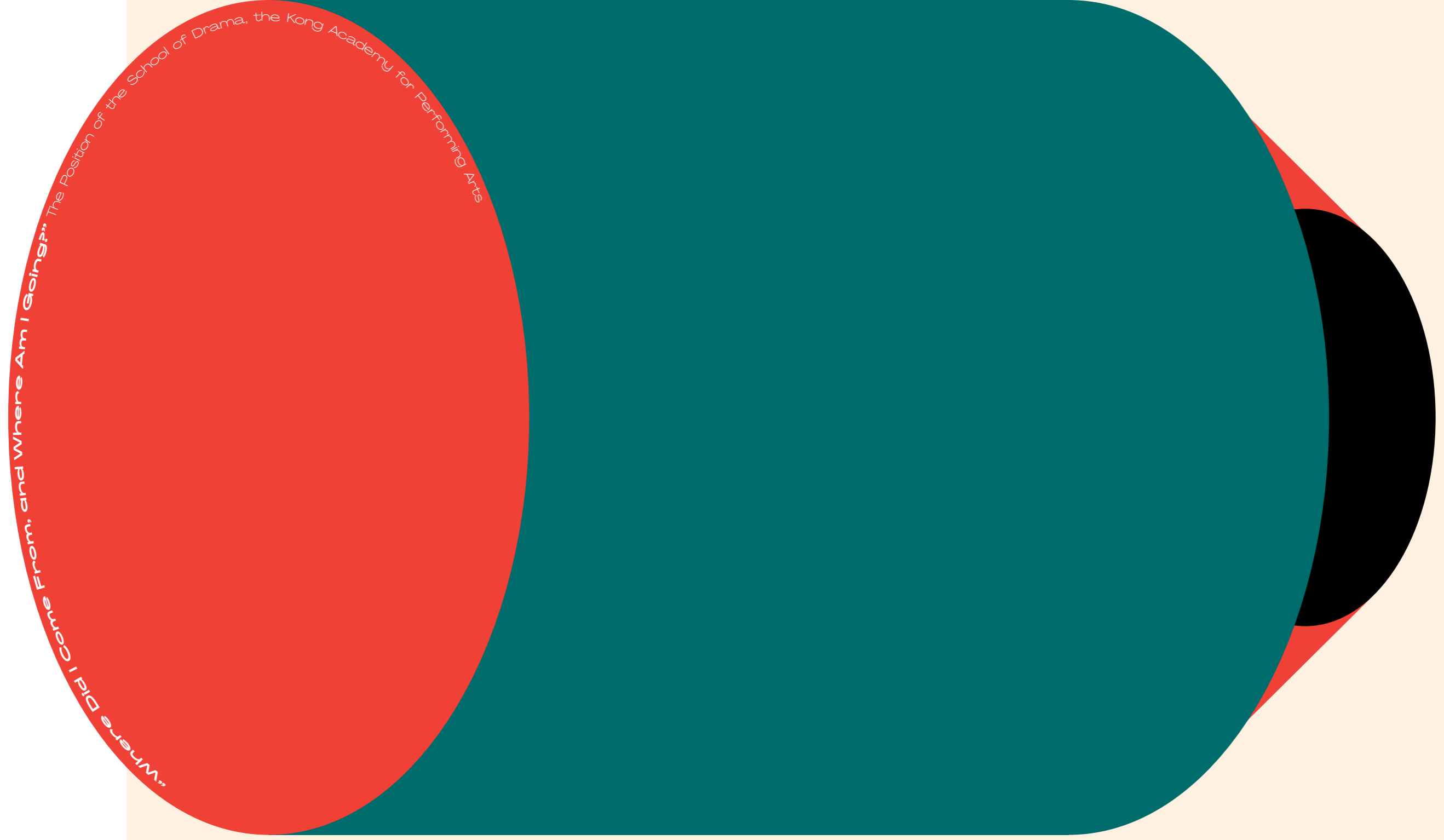


Hong Kong
Drama
Overview

2017
2018



"Where Did I Come From, and Where Am I Going?" The Position of the School of Drama, the Kong Academy for Performing Arts



“Where Did I Come From, and Where Am I Going?”

The Position of the School of Drama, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts

Date	30 December 2019 (Monday)
Time	2pm-4pm
Venue	The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts
Transcript editors	Mon Fu, Kwok Ka-ki

Speakers (in order of speaking)

Cheung Ping-kuen (Cheung)

Chairman of International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong)

Poon Wai-sum (Poon)

Dean of the School of Drama, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts

Cheung: People say there are a few different kinds of relationships we have to examine in life: the relationship between human and nature, the relationship between human and society, and the relationship a person has with themselves. It sounds like a simple question, but it is the most difficult and fundamental one: “Who am I?” Let’s start with this fascinating and philosophical question. Poon Sir, when you took office as the dean in 2017, did you ask what kind of academy the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) was? What is the academy’s position and niche? From a broader perspective, what role does the academy play in Hong Kong, Asia, and the world? The first question for today is: What has been happening at the HKAPA’s School of Drama, since you took up your role two years ago?

Poon: At a meeting I had with my colleagues a while ago, I also raised this question of “where did [we] come from, and where [are we] going?”. The HKAPA will undertake Periodic Institute Review (PIR) by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic & Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) in March 2021. In the past few years, we have had constant discussions about the PIR. We have been reviewing the academy’s programmes to see if they are well designed, and if there is room for improvement. Our teaching staff have often wondered: We are here to teach. Why do we have to handle all this tedious and complicated paperwork?

I explained this question of “where did [we] come from, and where [are we] going?” to my colleagues in this way: Our students did not enrol in the HKAPA just to study, but they need to get a certificate. Students will only enrol in a school if the certificates are recognised by the Hong Kong government. The government set up the HKCAAVQ, which demands that the academy undertake different evaluations in order to prove its programmes fulfil certain standards and procedures. The [academy’s] entire apparatus has to comply with this, and we must produce the proof. Therefore, the job of the teaching staff is not only to teach, but to make sure our programmes are recognised and accepted.

As for Cheung Sir’s question about the position of the HKAPA’s School of Drama, we started working on that three years ago. We are heading towards a really big change. The HKAPA has obtained Programme Area Accreditation, which means we have achieved autonomy in the field of theatre. If we launch new majors in the future, we will no longer have to pass external assessment for each of them, since we have an internal mechanism for accreditation of the programmes.

Cheung: If you explain some of these particulars to the HKCAAVQ, they may not understand them as they are not from our industry. That is why there should be both industry practitioners and those from other fields in the council, or it will be very hard for us to convince them. In terms of apparatus, however, it may be a positive because [the council] represents people in our society



Cheung Ping-kuen (left) and Poon Wai-sum — Photo: Hong yin pok, Eric

who do not know much about [what we do]. We need to introduce and explain things to them, and make them understand.

Poon: That is right. For many years I did not fully understand what I was doing. The teaching staff also believed if they did a fine job of teaching, the students would turn out fine. They did not see why they had to perform this perfunctory work, and they kept doing it even though they did not feel good about it. All this came down to a lack of understanding: They did not know where they were, where they had come from, or where they were going, so they had some grievances. When they understand all this, the public can also learn about what we are doing, and they can use this apparatus to assess whether we are achieving our goals.

I remember that upon my return to Hong Kong, I started working for Sha Tin Theatre by chance. Shortly after, I joined Prospects Theatre, where I stayed for almost 20 years. I gained extensive experience in running a theatre company and in theatrical creation, and I was grateful to the theatre company for giving me this opportunity. After two decades, another opportunity came my way. The HKAPA invited me to join its teaching faculty. I felt it was the right time, so I left Prospects. With the academic training I received during my school years and my two decades of experience as a theatre practitioner, I believed I would be a competent teacher at the HKAPA. That explains “where I came from”. Our students have worked hard to earn a place in the HKAPA. They cherish the opportunity to learn, and they have a real passion for the theatre. I had the chance to share my experience and knowledge with them, as well as the room to create my own work. I found immense pleasure in it, and I enjoyed the changes. When the position of dean became vacant and the academy was seeking the right candidate, I received a lot of support from the academy and my colleagues, so I accepted the post. It gave me deeper insights into “where I came from”, and what kind of work I should be doing.

All our former deans have made remarkable contributions, especially our founding dean Mr Chung King-fai. He launched the first and the only School of Drama in Hong Kong, which saw the start of professionalisation of theatre. The upgrading of the initial diploma programmes to bachelor’s programmes was another milestone. It was no small feat to build it all from scratch. The establishment of a well-designed apparatus laid a crucial foundation for the development of Hong Kong theatre. The second dean, Mr David Jiang, launched the master’s programmes in addition to the bachelor’s programmes, which further enhanced the school’s programme offerings. The next dean, Mr Tang Shu-wing, was keen to promote physical theatre, as he saw substantial room for development for the genre. It was a pity he had a rather brief term in office, so he did not get to

implement the initiative. The next dean was Mr Ceri Sherlock. Under his leadership, the School of Drama entered a more stable period.

When I assumed office, I felt there was a lot of room for the school to grow. The HKAPA will celebrate its 35th anniversary in 2020. Compared to before, what do students need nowadays? I believe the theatre industry today is vastly different from what it used to be. As our mission is to nurture blooming talents, I hope we will achieve more than the transfer of knowledge with our teaching, and that the School of Drama will play an important role in Hong Kong culture. If I am to describe in one key phrase what I want to see these talents bloom into, it is “theatre makers”, meaning they will become artists who make things.

Traditionally, both the director and actor are considered people who “make” things. At this point in time, however, the notion of “making” should be discussed in a broader context. What is the relationship between our society and our work? As “makers”, we cannot just wait for opportunities to come our way; we have to proactively create the theatre we want. We also have to make certain choices in response to our industry’s needs, although we can certainly broaden the scope of training in order to expand [our students’] thinking. For instance, a student who majors in acting cannot focus solely on being an actor, but that is easier said than done. We work within the framework of a four-year programme at the academy, and it is very difficult to make adjustments to the programmes. That is why we have many internal discussions, and we have to stay informed about what is happening in theatre in Hong Kong and around the world. In the past few years, we have started various discussions. We reflect on what kinds of talents we seek to nurture, and how we should redesign our programmes based on the foundation we have.

“The maker”—educational policy after 35 years

Cheung: What is interesting is that none of the four former deans is a playwright. They are well known for their respective expertise, such as director, actor, arts administrator or scholar, and they are all “makers”. You are the only playwright of the bunch. Your “making” begins with a concept, and it manifests in the production on stage at the end. My first question is: As a playwright, do you approach your work as the dean with a different mind-set than the four former deans? Secondly, just now I asked about how the HKAPA’s position has changed with the times. Over 30 years ago, learning was mostly skill based. More than three decades later, the academy must respond to the needs of society if it is to produce greater accomplishments.

In Hong Kong in the 1980s, only actors, singers and producers were sought after [in our industry]. There was little demand for directors or playwrights, who needed not be a “maker”. Like Poon Sir said just now, if a student takes the initiative to “make” a theatrical work, they are being proactive rather than waiting for the chance to be an actor, and they are taking control of and living their own lives. This is different from over three decades ago, when graduates would search for their paths in the existing industry. Today, we hope [students and graduates] can be proactive in thinking about this question and become leaders. Taking up the leader’s role does not necessarily mean being the leader of a theatre company. It means they have to consciously pursue what they think they should be doing, and have a deeper understanding of society and their lives.

Poon: The birth and presentation of a script is a process. I often try to get students of playwriting to see that they cannot expect others to follow their scripts or ideas in interpreting the works. A lot of what happens is unforeseeable, and it may turn out completely differently from what you have imagined. And that is not necessarily a bad thing. Since I have joined the HKAPA, I have never put playwriting at the forefront of what we do. As we find ourselves in the midst of a shifting theatrical order today, the playwright’s position, value, and role can be very broad, or it can become non-essential. Some people see it as a crisis, but I do not feel this sense of crisis yet.

In my teaching and educational administration, I have not amplified the focus on playwriting at the School of Drama. Quite the contrary—the bachelor’s programme in playwriting has been put on hold. If we are not getting high-calibre students, we would rather not take any student at all. But the perspective Cheung Sir brought up just now makes me reflect on one thing. My decades-long experience in playwriting may be helpful for me in my current position: Through it I have developed an ability to plan and organise, and this drives me to make certain decisions. What will I do to steer the School of Drama forward? What are the things that I can do? What are the things that I need to do? There are similarities between this line of thought and what goes into writing a script.

The School of Drama is modest in scale. Getting the team to work well together, which in turn creates a better dynamic, is not unlike developing a script. We often talk about “dramatic action” and momentum. There is a force that drives things forward, and we have to find it through action.

Cheung: You have answered the question already. The drive for teaching comes from working with students. The 20-plus cohort you accept will become emerging artists in Hong Kong theatre in the future. What are the differences between students today and over three decades back? More than 30 years ago, it was enough for young talents to focus on “making” their own roles. The

director’s job is to augment the script and create different designs based on it. When playwrights are conceiving ideas for a play, they are starting from zero. But why does the playwright write the script in the first place? It is a matter of “drive”, which we were talking about just now. The talents we need today must respond to society in vastly different ways compared to talents from over 30 years ago.

Poon: What does it mean exactly when we talk about responding? What kinds of talents do we need to nurture today? It has to do with what society needs. We also ask our students what they expect. Those expectations are often decided by what is happening in society as a point of reference. We have made many adjustments and changes to our programmes. In addition to the Acting and Directing majors that have been our key focuses, we will launch three new majors soon: Acting for Musical Theatre, Applied Theatre, and Dramaturgy.

There are objective conditions at play in the establishment of these three new majors. Firstly, some of our colleagues have expertise in these fields. Secondly, the majors are designed to meet students’ needs. Over the years we have offered programmes in playwriting, directing and acting, so those areas are well defined at the school. We have to think about our students’ future prospects.

Over the past three decades, we had a graduation cohort of 20 plus students every year, and the number will keep rising. What kinds of prospects do they have? Of course, Hong Kong’s theatre industry is different now compared to over 30 years ago when it comes to work opportunities, but we are far from the point of having a gig for everybody. Students need to have the awareness about being “makers”, meaning they have to create their own worlds. It is about having an entrepreneurial spirit in order to proactively create their own careers.



Cheung Ping-kuen — Photo: Hong yin pok, Eric

And that is how the major Acting for Musical Theatre came to be. We are not launching it just because we think we should do it—we see the genre becoming a momentous trend in Hong Kong or even Greater China. If we look at the development of [performing arts] in China, including Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, cities that have more vibrant performing arts scenes, musical theatre is definitely a major trend to watch. There is a cluster of energies converging, and it is set to surge. Hong Kong seems to be lagging behind a little. As an academy, we have to develop in response to

the needs of theatre companies and organisations. We need to answer their energies by nurturing professional artists for the field. Between traditional theatre and musical theatre, there are some common areas of training, but there are also different focuses and objectives. That is why we must teach them as separate disciplines.

[At the school] we teach Western theatre, which is different from traditional Chinese opera. How do we define our position in Hong Kong? In what ways do our students differ from students from the West or the mainland? This touches on some fundamental, very difficult and very sensitive issues. We do not have our own theatrical forms, but draw on what we consider the most essential curriculums and syllabuses in Western theatre in designing our programmes. I think there should be more to our theatre education, and it should evolve to encompass a broader scope. The training should not centre on any particular Western style or theatrical form. Rather, we should investigate how to rediscover the Eastern body.

For instance, the body of a Chinese person is rather different from that of a Westerner. Squatting is easy for us, but it is a bit difficult for most Westerners. That is because we have different physiques. Coming back to performance training, many directors have divergent views on it. Since we are not content with borrowing from the West, the natural course is to go back to our cultural background, and perform using the Eastern body and aesthetics. Whether it involves the terms Eastern, Chinese, or China, it is a discussion about cultural identity.

Physical training—Western influences on Eastern training and traditional artistry

Cheung: Poon Sir was right on. I have some further questions about Acting for Musical Theatre. As a major study area, it is a pretty paradoxical one. The term “musical theatre” originated in the West, and most musical theatres we see around here are Western imports. In my understanding, musical theatres in the mainland are also modelled on Western works. Poon Sir shared some of his views on the Eastern body. I think musical theatre is inseparable from the Western body. It may be hard for Westerners to squat, but they are good at fast rhythmic dances and vocals. They have the gift for that kind of dynamic expression, so it is easier for them to make productions like *Cats*. It is a style that comes naturally to them, but not to the Chinese.

Our musical theatres are influenced by conceptions of culture and the body from the West. We Chinese have our own operatic forms. In Kun opera, the mother of Chinese operas, all sounds are singing, all movements are dance, and the mix of song and dance is drama performance.

Kun opera is musical theatre in the Chinese tradition as it combines song, dance and drama performance. We have to design the curriculum for acting for musical theatre, but what is “musical theatre”? We have to study musical theatres from the West. It is a process, but what are the goals? Poon Sir mentioned the Eastern body just now, and I remember he has taught tai chi, drumming and sword dance. They may be connected with musical theatre, since they are physical training for students. The focus on how to train the body underlies the creation of Acting for Musical Theatre as a major programme. Will every student at the School of Drama take a course in sword dance, tai chi or drumming? For instance, the Taiwanese troupe U-Theatre introduced Grotowski to Taiwan and transformed it into a localised artistic expression. I joined their performers once on tour to the Chishang Autumn Rice Harvest Arts Festival, where I practised walking, drumming, meditation and tai chi with them. These regimens are parts of the troupe’s training of the actor’s body. Under Poon Sir’s leadership, will the School of Drama introduce these forms of physical training? Are they connected with acting for musical theatre?

Poon: There will be two streams. One is acting for musical theatre, and the other is the traditional stream of acting for drama, so there are clear distinctions. There are core courses in fundamental training that students from both streams are required to take during the first two years. The streams branch out into different focuses after that. No matter what stream they are in, we hope to offer comprehensive training to our students. I approach it as sharing from a broader point of view, or the making of a “theatre maker” to an extent. We do not only focus on playwriting, directing or acting, rather we expect students to have a solid understanding of every aspect. Besides learning the fundamentals, physical training is just as important. Two years ago, we started to introduce elements of tai chi and kung fu into our programmes. Some students have voiced their doubts about it, and I have tried to explain the concepts of the new programmes to them. This is apparently a very long process. We hope to develop a firm grasp of traditional performing arts and physical training, like Chinese opera and tai chi, and include them in the fundamental training at the School of Drama one day. We are slowly trying out different formulas.

Cheung: I remember there was a teacher who taught Commedia dell’arte at the School of Drama, as training for actors in using their bodies in street performance. I also asked this question at the time. Why teach Commedia dell’arte to our students at the School of Drama? Why not tai chi? Both of them are about the body. When we put aside a deeply traditional and acclaimed skill from our culture to learn something Western instead, what is the rationale behind this decision?

Poon: We are working to incorporate elements like tai chi, yoga, drumming and kung fu into our programmes.

Cheung: In other words, every dean leaves their mark on their students, and graduates from different periods carry certain imprints of the dean in office during their years at the school. If a student who was there during Poon Sir's term says they do not know tai chi or kung fu, people may wonder if they have really graduated from the HKAPA. Perhaps we can assume that HKAPA graduates from the 2020s will have picked up some basics in tai chi, kung fu, and training for the Eastern body. These are the imprints you leave on your students. Would that be a fair assumption to make?

Poon: The direction that the School of Drama is taking is shaped by objective circumstances. It is also the consensus among our colleagues, rather than my preference. I would not venture to say the graduation cohort from any particular year would excel in certain areas. I do not see it like that at all. What we are doing now is an experiment and a beginning, and it will hopefully take shape over time. Just now we mentioned dramaturgy. There have been courses in dramaturgy in Hong Kong in the past. Now we are presenting a more concrete option with the bachelor's programme. After the summer holiday of 2020, we will begin student recruitment for our master's programmes, and we will add dramaturgy to the list. We hope it will change the modes of theatrical creation, and introduce different entry points for appreciating theatrical creation. We also hope to serve as a bridge that connects theatrical work to society, not just an expression of aesthetic concepts.

Cheung: So is it appropriate to offer dramaturgy as master's programme? Does it allow students to understand theatre from a macro perspective, with a more progressive vision and greater cultural depth?

Poon: That is what we would like to see happen in the theatre in the future. I hope it will get students to expand their imaginations and apply theatre in society, rather than stick to existing, established and traditional roles like director or actor. I do not want to see the theatre assuming a purely artistic or aesthetic position. We should think about how this artistic medium can function in society, and how it can respond or contribute to society. That is why we are launching Applied Theatre as a major programme.

Cheung: To examine all this in a larger social and cultural context. At the beginning I asked about the position of the School of Drama. These new majors will help the School of Drama define its position.

Poon: To look at it from a macro perspective, you summed it up very nicely. It is not just a discussion at the professional level. Nor is it an inquiry into this field alone. We want to look at things from an elevated perspective, or look farther ahead.

Does Cantonese come first in a trilingual theatre?

Cheung: We have just spoken about physical theatre and musical theatre. In the past, the School of Drama has presented English-language and bilingual productions. Perhaps there has been some pressure on the school to present Mandarin productions? In these practical dimensions, what are some of the considerations the School of Drama has? Has the school come under any pressure regarding Mandarin? Why is Cantonese the main language at the School of Drama?

Poon: I do not see it as pressure. When Mr Chung King-fai founded the School of Drama, Cantonese was the logical choice of language. The majority of audiences and actors in Hong Kong are Cantonese speakers. It would be unreasonable if we were to use Mandarin. Naturally, we use Cantonese in our teaching. At the academic level, Cantonese is the root of Lingnan culture. It is a unique dialect theatre in Chinese-language theatre. In the mainland, for instance, the main language in Shanghai is definitely Mandarin, but there are other dialect theatres as well. Cantonese theatre is the mainstream theatre in Hong Kong, and it is intrinsically linked to our culture. It is something extremely precious that we should safeguard.

Still, there is the question of our students' future prospects and the markets. What exactly is the Hong Kong market? Hong Kong has a population of seven million plus, and the mainland has a population of over one billion. If you are happy to only present your works in a place of seven million plus people, that is perfectly fine. But there are over a billion people in the neighbouring region. Are you going to go there? Or are you resistant to it? Of course you can feel that way, but I cannot make assumptions about what future choices our students might make, or that they cannot see these particular prospects. If we are to nurture talent for this enormous region, should language not be a part of the equation? This is a topic we need to probe into. At present, we use Cantonese as the main language in our teaching, and especially in our productions. In some cases, there are other objective conditions to consider. For instance, if some students are highly proficient in English, they will be able to handle English-language performances. I do not rule out those sorts of possibilities. By the same token, we do not want their talent for musical theatre to go to waste. Why not produce some musical theatre for them? It is the same line of thinking.

For musical theatre in particular, besides performing the songs in English, we are trying to translate them into Cantonese for performance. We also have some courses on musical theatre creation, so we are starting to see original musical theatres written by our students. At present, Cantonese is the main language of the School of Drama's performances. But there will be some productions in which students perform in English, because they have the flair for it. If you ask me about the future position of our school, first we need to understand the notion of medium of instruction. At the HKAPA, English is the medium of instruction for many major programmes, while the teachers are biliterate and trilingual in their teaching. The medium of instruction is related to the academy's position. In areas that are directed by the School of Drama, however, Cantonese is still the main language. We train these young actors, who learn certain skills and graduate from the academy. They may enter into mainland and overseas markets in the future. It is possible if you have the language skills. That is why we do not emphasise the use of English or any other language during our training. Rather, after you have picked up the skills, and if you have a good command of foreign languages, you can try to go further with them.

Also, there are aspects of performance that we can discover, or unique cultural dimensions of it that we can present only if we are using the native language. Would that mean we have to speak English or Russian, if we want to study Shakespeare or Chekhov? It is closely connected



Poon Wai-sum — Photo: Hong yin pok, Eric

with language. Sometimes language does play a crucial role, but I do not think there is anything that fits everything. Actually, it is a kind of choice. In the context of Hong Kong, I do not see anything about Cantonese instruction or performance that needs to be changed at this time.

Cheung: Up until now, has the School of Drama come under any pressure from the

government or the academy's senior management, regarding the use of Mandarin or English as the medium of instruction? This touches on another interesting question. We think about our students' future paths, and we want them to succeed. Realistically speaking, when you recruit mainland Chinese students who are highly proficient in Mandarin, or whose native language is Mandarin, it is only logical to have them perform in Mandarin productions. But if we get Hong Kong students to study Mandarin and cast them in Mandarin productions, it would be very difficult for most of them. When they are looking to reach the 1.4 billion people in the mainland, auditioning becomes a real

challenge for them, since they are no match with the locals in Mandarin fluency. It is the same with musical theatre. No matter how well they speak English in everyday life, most Hong Kong students do not do very well in an English-language play, because they do not have perfect fluency and pronunciation.

Poon: I have some optimistic views regarding this topic. They come from my personal experience. Two of my plays were staged in the mainland by Hong Kong theatre companies—*Hu Xueyan, my Dear* and *The Emperor, his Mom, a Eunuch and a Man*. Both plays were performed in Cantonese with subtitles when they toured the mainland. Some people said they found it difficult to follow the speech, but it was well received by most audiences. I think this opens up some new perspectives. The second point is that as the performing arts are burgeoning in the mainland, is standard Mandarin absolutely essential? This is what I had in mind when I talked about being optimistic. The first time I saw *Couching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* by Ang Lee, when I heard Chow Yun-fat and Michelle Yeoh speaking "substandard" Mandarin in the film, I was both astonished and thrilled. I wonder when people will stop worrying about if [an actor] can speak standard Mandarin?

Cheung: It depends on the style and genre. For *Three Sisters*, for instance, if you cast two Beijing actors as the two elder sisters, and a Hong Kong actor as the youngest sister, it just does not work.

Poon: Of course not. It would be like staging a drama that originated from the hutongs of Beijing, and casting a Hong Kong actor and making them speak an unfamiliar dialect—it does not make sense. A while ago, Fung Wai-hang directed a production of my old play *Moon Story* (originally titled *Central Deconstructed*). It featured the Hong Kong actor Birdy Wong as the female lead. The male lead was played by a Shanghai actor, and there were some mainland Chinese actors in the cast. In her performance, Wong spoke "substandard" Mandarin, mingled with some English and Cantonese lines. Of course, there is room for such mingling in the play, since it is not specified which era in Shanghai the story is set in. I find the possibilities of language deeply interesting. I have an optimistic and open mind about the concept of standard language.

Cheung: This shows that mainland audiences have become more open towards language in the theatre. It is a marvellous change. Thank you, Poon Sir, for sharing these examples. The Hong Kong people have brought their possibilities and hybridity into their work, as they venture into the populous arts scene in mainland China. Hong Kong has set a singular example. It is very positive, and I hope there will be similar developments in the future.

Poon: Hopefully these concepts will be accepted over time.

Cheung: We started with a macro perspective, examined the practical dimensions, and here we are coming to a beautiful conclusion. From this perspective, Hong Kong culture and Hong Kong theatre embody an inherent adaptability. It is indeed a kind of hybridity, and is what we need, be it for working in China or making art in general.

Poon: I think Cheung Sir made excellent use of the concept of hybridity. If we are to sum up how I see the future development of the School of Drama, I think our niche is exactly one of hybridity. We have what it takes to create a hybrid state. Today, we no longer limit ourselves to any traditionally Eastern or Western concepts. Many labels are not so distinct anymore. A lot of things have started to permeate into one another. That is why Cheung Sir's keyword is a great one.

Cheung: We had a lovely conversation today. Thank you, Poon Sir, for arranging it!

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

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Hong Kong Arts Development Council

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