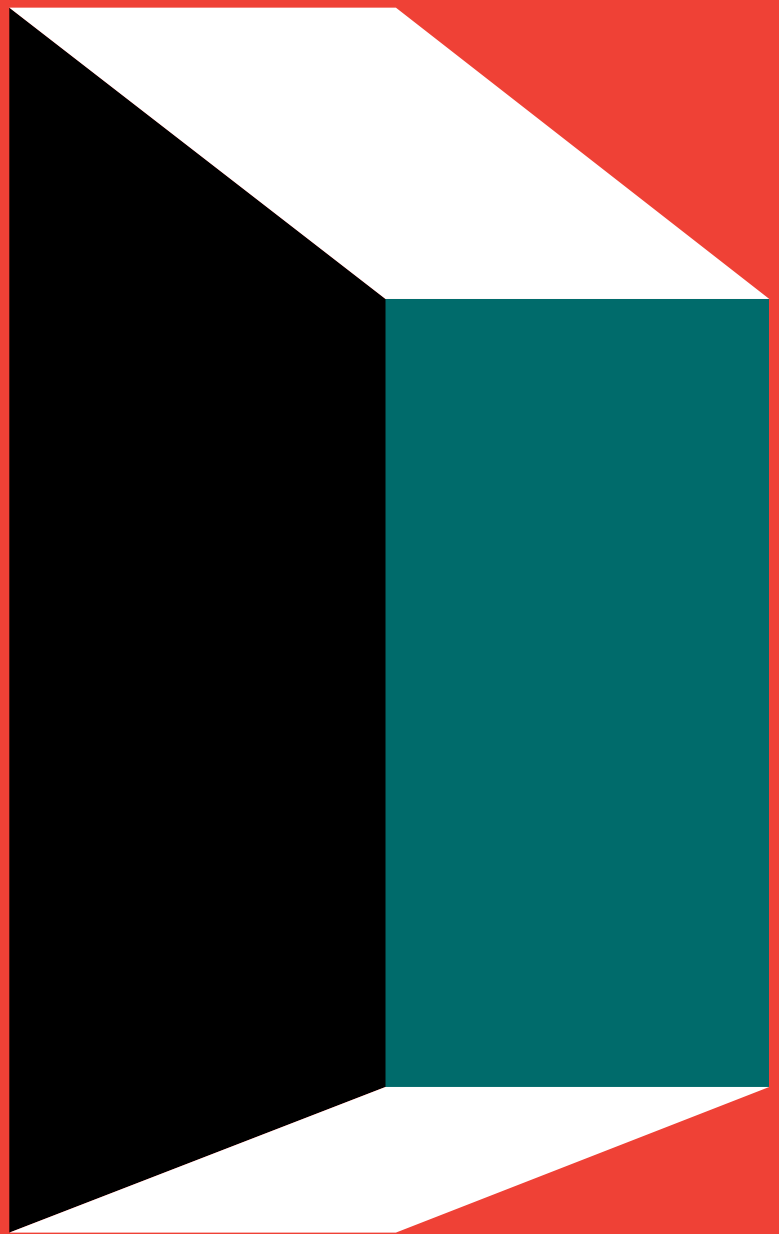
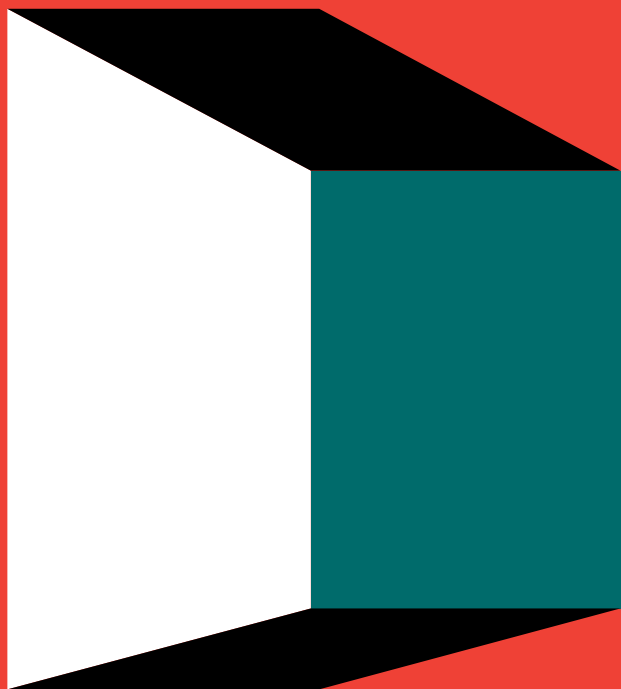
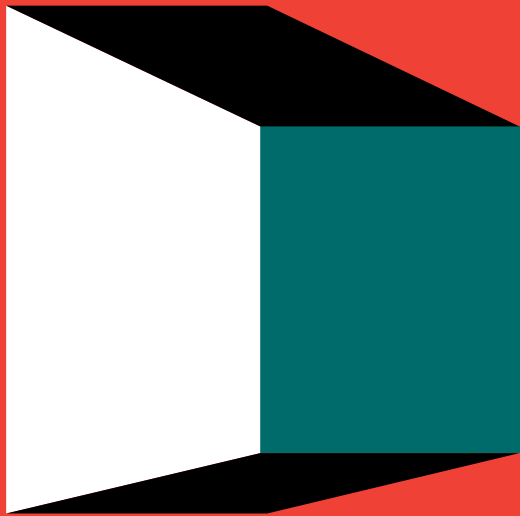


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Hong Kong
Drama
Overview

2017
2018



Playing, Talking About and Being Oneself Onstage

Approaches of Non-professional Theatre Performances in 2017 & 2018

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Approaches of Non-professional Theatre Performances in 2017 & 2018

Text

William W.Y. Chan

The famous American writer Mark Twain once said: "Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't." We are likely to feel this way when looking back at the local social and political chaos in Hong Kong in recent years. The people and things we see on social media and in the news are often stranger and more intriguing than the stories presented on theatre stages. Also, there has been a steady increase in Hong Kong people's curiosity about and exploration of local history since the handover. In recent years, theatrical works based on or inspired by real stories have grown in number, and those in which lead roles are performed by "amateurs" have begun to appear.

Generally speaking, a non-professional theatre performance denotes one in which "ordinary people" who have never received training in professional performance participate, and in which either the subject matter revolves around their real life experiences or the creative emphasis is placed on the particulars of their identity. It takes their everyday life as its point of departure, brings their personal identity and experience directly into the theatre, and inspires the audience by various artistic means. It stands in contrast to the conventional performance created by an imaginative playwright and presented on a theatre stage, where professional actors are entrusted with the task of interpretation.

In the past, most non-professional theatre performances in local theatres exemplified either theatre of oral history where the participants talk from their own experience or community theatre presentations that have the air of empowerment. Local non-professional theatre performances in 2017 and 2018, however, each had its own creative concept and presentational strategy. The following considers the approaches taken by these works, and discusses and briefly analyses this new trend.

Influence of the Documentary Theatre of Rimini Protokoll

Speaking of non-professional theatre performances, the German creative group Rimini Protokoll is a leader in the field. Ever since its founding, Rimini Protokoll has in nearly two decades been

exploring different forms of documentary theatre, from performances in traditional theatres and environments involving people of specific identities or in specific occupations in real life (such as *Airport Kids*, featuring children of multiple nationalities, and *Cargo X*, a travel experience led by cross-border truck drivers) to spatial installations the designs of which are based on interviews and historical materials (such as *Situation Rooms*, a video installation theatre piece constructed with audio recordings of interviews about arms trade).

A principal creator for Rimini Protokoll, Stefan Kaegi came to Hong Kong in 2015 at the invitation of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, and participated in the inaugural International Workshop Festival of Theatre. There he gave a public lecture and conducted a two-day workshop, which acquainted many in the local performing arts industry with Rimini Protokoll's idea and experience of creating and performing that centre on "experts of the everyday". At the same time, it awakened the desire of local creators and curators to create performances of this kind and to invite participants in such. A relatively straightforward example is the theatre work *Regarding O*, which was subsequently produced by HerStory Polygon in the first Documentary Theatre Festival. Its strategy and mode of presentation are clearly modelled on those of Rimini Protokoll's *Remote X* and *100% City* series. It guides the audience in an experience and observation of a real environment or space, and has transgender non-professional performers talk from their own experience, thus deepening the audience's understanding of transgender people.

Both *Remote X* and *100% City* series are Rimini Protokoll's evergreen classics, regional versions of which have been produced in cities around the world. The former uses a mechanical voice to guide the audience as participants in a stroll on the streets, and lets them think from multiple angles about the rapid changes in the city and its people. The latter, in each city to which it is toured, puts on stage a hundred amateurs so selected as to correspond to the demographics of the city's population. It presents in the form of a game their likes and dislikes, their lifestyles and habits, as well as their stances on various public issues. *Regarding O* focuses on different issues, but its first half, "Audio Tour", borrows the method of *Remote X* nevertheless. While listening to an audio recording on their mobile phones, the audience members, which are divided into many groups, walk on the streets, traverse supermarkets, markets and a train station, wander in Choi Hung Estate, and imagine how transgender people, whose voices are steering them, deal with all sorts of looks and norms every day. The second half, "Reality Theatre", returns to the theatre. Seven transgender non-professional performers appear on stage and talk directly to the audience about or otherwise present their life experiences and anecdotes, as well as invite the audience to

think together about issues that include gender, justice and happiness, using methods such as a game of asking questions like that found in *100% City*.

Playing Oneself Onstage

This may well be the clearest and most straightforward type of non-professional theatre, with “ordinary people” from specific communities or with specific experiences in real life invited to go on stage and tell their own stories to the audience. The concept is somewhat similar to that of the Human Library events introduced to Hong Kong in 2011, which allowed people with stories to tell to tell them on stage in the first person and communicate to the audience their own thoughts and feelings. The content shown in the performance always consists of the experiences and emotions of the person that is the performer. The performance may include some dramatic touches for effect, but at least the content shown in it remains largely based on the non-professional performer’s baring their soul (or, at the very least, on what the performer chooses to hold back or lie about, rather than on someone else’s second-hand creative account).

Regarding O selects as participants seven transgender people of different personalities and backgrounds, and gives them as much room as possible to talk about their attitudes towards life in a direct dialogue with the audience. Each account is interspersed with a variety of theatre games and designs that enhance or respond to it. As regards the performance as a whole, although transgender non-professional performers are used in the second half to present their life stories, the creative team probably does not (solely) aim to show the audience a few things about this marginalised group. In combining these things with the experience of the stroll in the first half, as well as the action in the theatre of taking a stand through questions and answers at the very end, the creators invite the audience to think about how they themselves deal with taboos and to reflect on justice.

If the use of non-professional performers in *Regarding O* is a mirror that prompts the audience to examine themselves, then *One Fine Day (Hong Kong Version)*, which Beijing’s New Youth Group brought here in the Hong Kong International Black Box Festival jointly presented by Hong Kong Repertory Theatre and the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, is a prism that shows 19 vivid colours in the broad spectrum of Hongkongers, offering the audience an opportunity to listen to personal anecdotes in our city one by one.



Regarding O (2017) — Photo: Cheung Chi-wai Photo courtesy: HerStory Polygon



One Fine Day (Hong Kong Version) (2018) — Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Repertory Theatre & West Kowloon Cultural District Authority

Talking About Oneself Onstage

Rather than targeting a specific group, *One Fine Day* recruits from the public. Director Li Jianjun and Hong Kong Repertory Theatre's production team specially selected 19 Hongkongers of diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, ages and social classes, and with differing personal experiences and political views. They share with the audience their most personal stories and attitudes towards life, in a distinctive interactive set-up at the HKRep Black Box.

Throughout the show, which is about one and a half hours long, the 19 non-professional performers remain seated side by side facing the audience and speak freely through wireless microphones—starting from their schedule of the day before gradually turning to topics such as their own identity, their experiences and what they have learnt from them, and their outlook for the future. One by one, these real stories, which range from details of daily life to twists and turns of life experiences, interweave into a big story about the city. In this veritable heteroglossia, the audience can select, whether consciously or randomly, channels on the portable radio and headphones provided by the theatre and listen to any of the non-professional performers on stage, so as to construct their own unique line of narrative.

Non-professional performers share stories in both *Regarding O* and *One Fine Day*, but, unlike those in the former, the 19 in the latter do not have any “acting” to do, nor do they have to worry too much about issues of live performance such as movements, props and rhythm of speech. The only challenge is to remain seated, face the audience and talk without interruption. In this set-up, the non-professional performers are able to tell their stories and speak their minds more frankly. It is especially valuable that people of differing stances can share the stage and express themselves at a time when the society is becoming increasingly fractured. The audience, too, through the act of choosing which of the voices to tune in to, can think further about the issues of pluralistic society and information control.

No Encumbrance but No Control

There is another work of which Hong Kong Repertory Theatre has also produced a Hong Kong version for the 2018 Hong Kong International Black Box Festival, namely, *Oedipus Schmoedipus*, created by Australian theatre artists Zoë Coombs Marr and Mish Grigor. It also features a large group of non-professional performers recruited from the public, but its mode of performance and directorial strategy are a far cry from the two aforementioned works.

Premiered in 2014 in Australia, *Oedipus Schmoedipus* has toured the world in English and Spanish; the adaptation in Cantonese performed in Hong Kong is carried out by Yan Pat-to. Each performance is hosted by Hong Kong Repertory Theatre actors ManMan Kwok and Man Sui-hing, and involves the participation of 25 non-professional performers, who go on the stage just three hours before the curtain rises. The performers have no rehearsal but only brief introductory remarks from the directors, and, until the performance has begun, they will know neither how it goes nor what roles they are assigned to. In the course of the show, the performers, each allotted a number, have to act according to the instructions displayed on the screens backstage and facing the stage. For instance, performer number seven lies down centre stage; odd-numbered performers exit; all performers mirror the movements of the dancer on the screens.

The non-professional performers in *Oedipus Schmoedipus* do not have any personal opinions or stories to share, but are simply members of a group in a performance, or a set of tools in a presentation, that follow the directors' instructions and act on the spot. The creative strategy is not to mine the life experiences of the amateurs, but to allow these performers to play free from the encumbrance of acting, to make good use of their real reactions to sudden developments, and thereby to present all sorts of things in life of which we have no control, such as unpredictable death, which we may have to face at any time—a response to all the death-related scenarios and imagination in the texts on which the work is based.

Playing Oneself in a Constructed Space

In addition to the three aforesaid productions that take place at a traditional theatre and feature non-professional performers, *Zoo as Metaphor 2*, the 2018 New Vision Arts Festival event held at the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences, invites a group of amateurs to take part as well. Strictly speaking, this is not really a formal theatre performance. The house programme puts it this way: “A crossed form of exhibition and performance evolves into an experiential journey of social experiment”.

Zoo as Metaphor 2 is a sequel to the 2014 exhibition-cum-performance *Zoo as Metaphor* at Oi! in North Point. The audience enter the Museum of Medical Sciences, formerly the Bacteriological Institute, within a specific time frame, and experience and explore various spaces on each floor. The creative team has refurbished the entire museum as a “cabinet of curiosities” with places that include a waiting room, a dining room, a KOL live broadcast room, a laboratory, an archive room and a clubbing room. In some places there is interaction between performers and audience,

while in others presentation takes the form of a static display. Most of the performers are not professional actors, and even those with performing experience are not traditional theatre actors. Several performers are complete amateurs.

The non-professional performers in their roles in *Zoo as Metaphor 2* all perform work that they perform or used to perform in real life, such as that of nurses, security guards and bouncers. They have to act to a certain degree in the work's specific set-up, but this acting is relatively natural for them thanks to their thorough knowledge of the jobs of their roles. The creative team puts these amateurs, who have the actual experience required by their roles, into the non-realistic, magical space it has constructed and lets them work seriously in this fictional realm. This echoes the intentional blur in the work between the real and the unreal, and responds to such issues as the lack of autonomy in the face of a more powerful class, thus adding another dimension to the work.



My (City's) Stories (2017) — Photo: Wisley Chan Photo courtesy: William et al. Creative Lab

My Experience of Casting a Non-professional Performer

Finally, from the perspective of a creator, I would like to share my experience of collaborating, creating and rehearsing with amateurs. In early 2017, my William et al. Creative Lab participated in the Outer West Kowloon Theatrefest presented by Theatre Horizon, and performed the work *My (City's) Stories* at Water Margin Theatre. Early on while conceiving this performance, I had, in response to the Theatrefest's theme, "Disappearing City", decided to invite Prince Wong to take part. This former spokesperson of Scholarism was a hunger striker at the Admiralty occupation site in the Umbrella Movement of 2014. I hoped that with her first-hand experience she would talk about whether young people who had been involved in the occupy movement thought differently about our city.

My (City's) Stories has as its creative blueprint the real experience of growing up of the five devising performers including myself. It tells the story of personal history and the city's development by recollecting and contemplating events and things of the past. Among the performers were a former full-time actor in a flagship theatre company and an amateur with considerable performing experience. Prior to her involvement in this work, Wong had only participated in a small theatre workshop and presentation, so she was still an amateur as far as formal theatre performance is concerned.

Admittedly, Wong's inexperience in performance means that she was weaker than the other performers were in articulation, speech rhythm and sense of space, so we spent quite some time with her looking for effective ways to recount and interpret her story on stage. To my surprise, however, in the creative process of mining one's own experience, the amateur, compared with the experienced actors, was more in her element and found it easier to open up about her feelings. On the other hand, the experienced actors found it difficult for a while to break their habit of "acting" and become accustomed to playing themselves without "roles" to rely on.

In the end, of course, there was a difference between the two with respect to the effect of their performance on stage. The experienced actors were more self-possessed while performing, and had the room to improvise as well as the courage to drive the performance forward. The amateur's performances, coloured by her own temperament, were more variable and exuded different levels of energy each time: She might be highly involved emotionally in one performance but quite detached in another. It is certain, though, that bringing a real person who had only been seen in the news media into a performance at a theatre—where her own stories were narrated at length—increased the empathy felt in the drama. It made it easier for the audience ensconced in the theatre

seats to refresh their own personal memories of the occupation site. This helped me achieve the goal of making the audience think about what was gained and lost in our city's development.

Conclusion

Apart from the five performances discussed above, there were many other ones in which non-professional performers either played lead roles or were interviewed for research and collaborated with professional performers in 2017 and 2018. These include Chung Ying Theatre Company's Community Oral History Theatre Project, which had since its inception in 2008 spread to all 18 districts of Hong Kong and in which the elderly both created and performed; On & On Theatre Workshop's *Best Wishes*, which interviewed a hundred Hongkongers, placed the video recordings into an installation and transformed such content into performance content; and Theatre du Pif's environmental theatre *The Journey of the Isle*, which interviewed residents of Cheung Chau about their daily lives and had some of the interviewees appear in the performance and engage the audience in conversation.

The emergence of such non-professional theatre performances may have to do with the development of documentary theatre, which in recent years has received more and more attention in the Chinese-speaking world. In an age when things are more absurd and dramatic in reality than in the theatre, the participation of amateurs is definitely a highly effective means by which theatrical productions stay relevant and respond powerfully to changes in the social environment.

The creators of these productions all have very clear objectives in using non-professional performers as a performance and creative strategy, and make flexible use of the amateurs' realism and non-performativity. Different frameworks are set up in which the amateurs can express themselves, and the results are generally satisfactory in that (personal) history is mined while at the same time the plurality of the everyday is presented. Observation over a longer period of time is still needed to see whether amateur theatre performances will become a main direction for the development of local theatre creation.

(Translated by Ernest Wan)

William W.Y. Chan

A veteran arts critic and media producer, William W.Y. Chan has been writing criticism and feature articles on theatre, dance and visual arts in various media in Hong Kong and Macau since 1998. He is the founding artistic director of the amateur theatre group Friends' Theatre and the president of William et al. Creative Lab, and has over the years created more than 20 works of small theatre and multimedia theatre. In recent years, he has been engaged mainly in performing arts research, documentary theatre creation and media education.

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