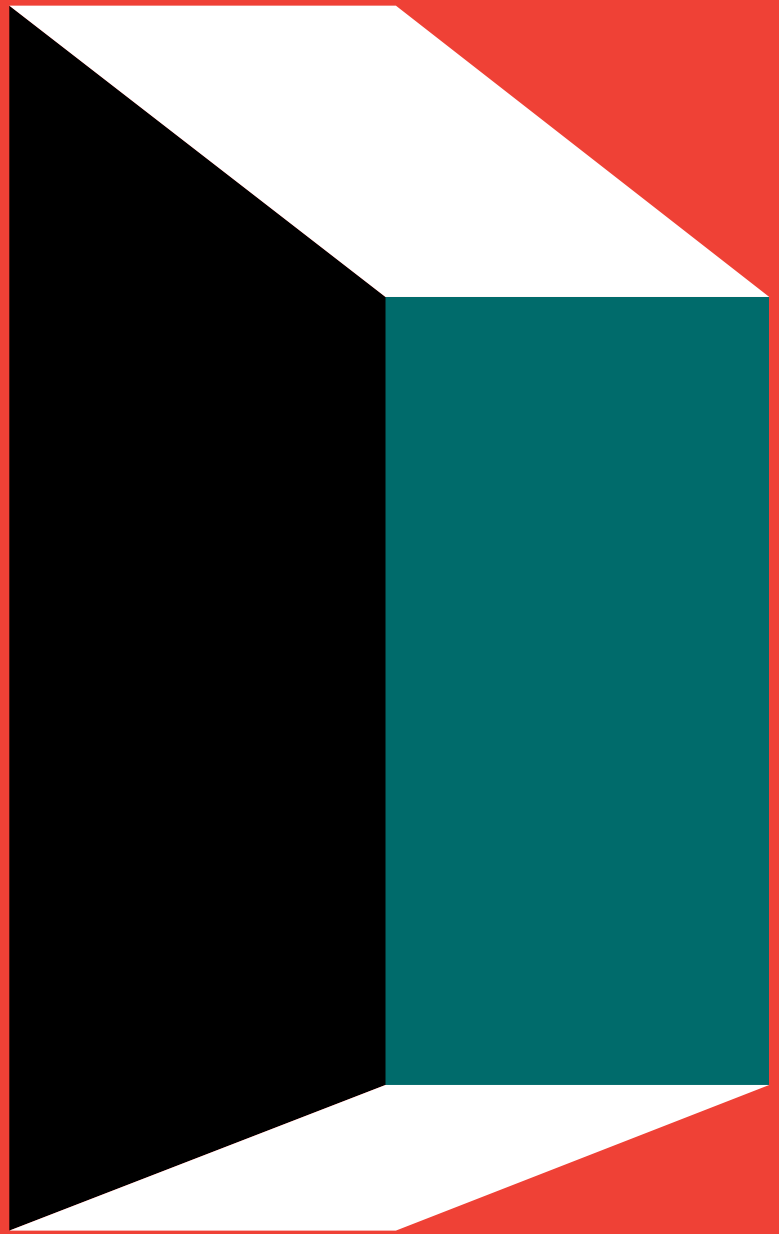
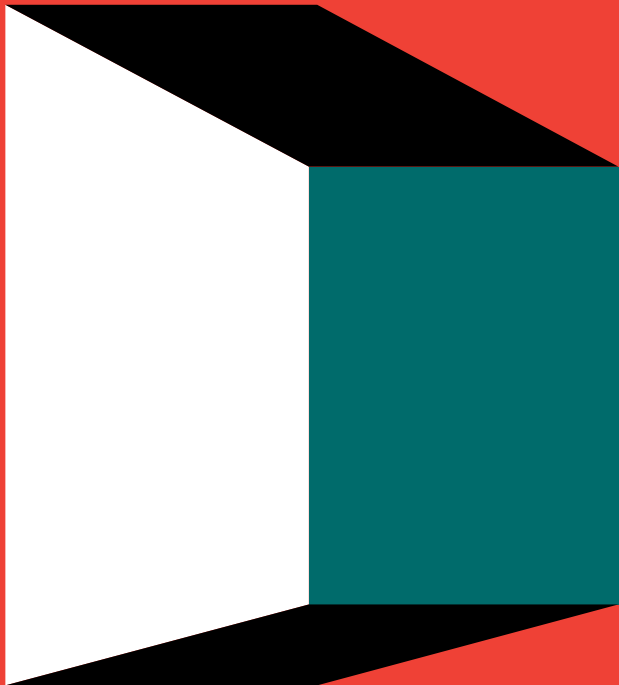
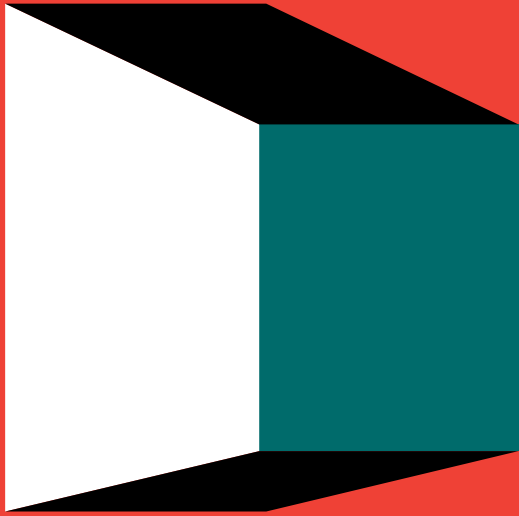
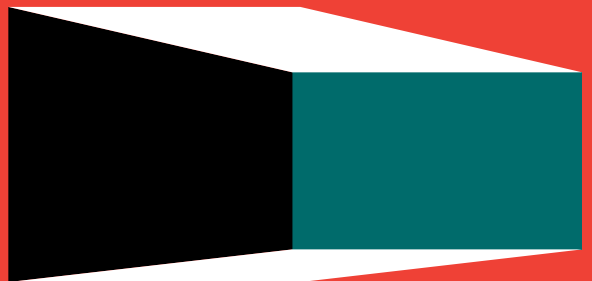


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Hong Kong  
Drama  
Overview

2017  
2018



Manifold Developments in Theatre Making

Original Works of Theatre in 2017 & 2018 and Sociopolitical Issues

# Manifold Developments in Theatre Making

## Original Works of Theatre in 2017 & 2018 and Sociopolitical Issues

Text  
Daisy Chu

Hong Kong has undergone rapid changes in many respects since the 1997 handover, and the year 2014 saw its largest and longest-running social movement in nearly half a century. With participants on all sides, the movement affected people in every walk of life in all of Hong Kong, and naturally had an impact on the performing arts. One of the functions of theatre is to reflect and examine social reality. The build-up of changes in Hong Kong's situation and the explosions in recent years have galvanised many theatre makers to portray and respond to these events in a variety of ways. Many performances in 2017 and 2018 are related to this. Perhaps some of such relationships are not a direct result of the said events in society, but they stem from the imagination fired in the creators. A close look at the performances in those two years, then, reveals the ways in which local works have developed through the borrowing of foreign texts or aesthetic forms or engaged in various kinds of exploration on the basis of local aesthetics. Such exploration includes formal or aesthetic responses involving text, stage design, sound effects and space.

### Borrowing from Foreign Texts or Forms

Many works in 2017 and 2018, whether adaptations or original creations, attempt to present either the situation in Hong Kong society after the handover or people's thoughts on the Umbrella Movement, which lasted more than 70 days in 2014, and its impact on the participants and society. Numerous original works take the social situation as the starting point for their creative content. Works inspired by foreign texts or forms include *A Floating Family — A Trilogy*, On & On Theatre Workshop's *Best Wishes* and Rooftop Productions' *The Furies Variations*.

Written by Loong Man-hong, *A Floating Family — A Trilogy* is a Hong Kong Arts Festival commission and production. The trilogy of traditional, popular dramas depicts the changes in Hong Kong over two decades after the handover by telling the story of three family dinner gatherings at three critical junctures: around the time of the handover, after SARS and before the 2017 Chief Executive election. This is probably the first work to attempt a wide-ranging examination of the changes in Hong Kong society since the handover. The characters created by Loong are fine embodiments of

the attitudes held by Hongkongers of differing social classes and political views (if any). The work cleverly allows people of different stances each to take from it what suits them, and on the whole manages to accommodate many sides.

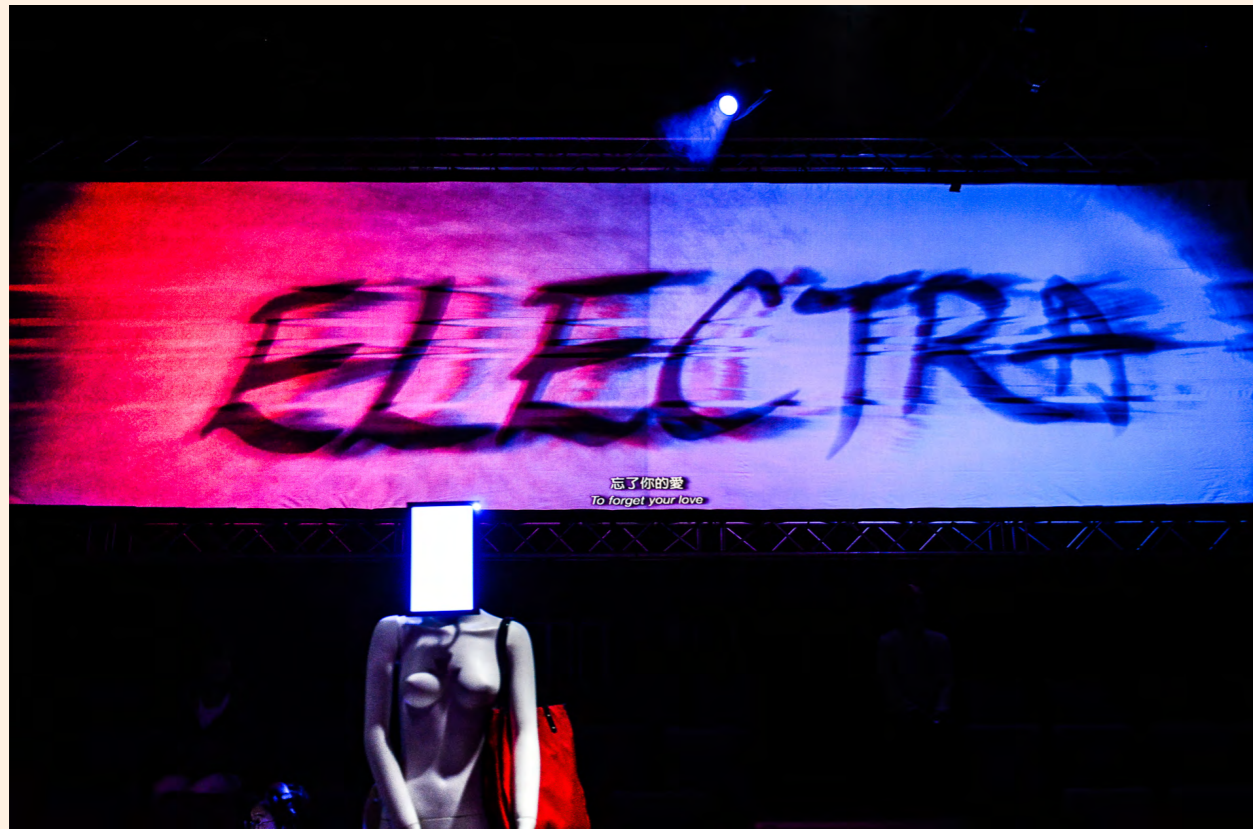
The story of *A Floating Family — A Trilogy* concerns the situation and changes in Hong Kong society, but its form of storytelling and the concept of its approach avowedly derive from *The Gabriels: Election Year in the Life of One Family*, produced by New York's The Public Theater and performed in the same edition of the Hong Kong Arts Festival. *The Gabriels* is set at the dinner gatherings of a family on three important days in a US election year: after "Super Tuesday", before the first televised debate between the candidates from the two parties, and election day. It covers a shorter period of time, but the rationale behind its concept is similar. Other than having three meals as the backdrop, the three plays of *The Gabriels* are all set in the kitchen, while *A Floating Family* has the living room as its sole setting. Changes in the scenery of this living room symbolise changes in society; these are highlighted by the gradual evolution of the decor and furnishings of the household from the styles of the 1980s and 1990s to those of the 21st century. The set design has not only practical utility but also a storytelling function, and is a distinctive mark added to a borrowed foreign form.

Among works that borrow from foreign forms, On & On Theatre Workshop's *Best Wishes*, directed by Chan Ping-chiu, is arguably one of the most important. Over a period of almost two years, the creators decided on the make-up of Hongkongers to be interviewed according to government-released demographic details of gender, age and ethnicity, interviewed a hundred people on this basis, and gathered up the interview materials for investigation. This method of creation is reminiscent of *100% City* by the famous German documentary theatre company Rimini Protokoll. In each city where this work is performed, a hundred citizens are invited to take part and answer questions in such ways as moving to different positions in the space, thus showing the distribution of responses. There are similar segments in the first and second parts of *Best Wishes*.

*Best Wishes* in fact employs the form of participatory theatre often seen in recent years. Whether in the first or the second part, every audience member at some point has to make a choice, be it between hearing about other people's lives and about their views on Hong Kong, or between expressing their own attitudes towards their living conditions and towards their future outlook. Under the director's design, the audience's thinking is much stimulated as they come across differing views and possibilities of attaining societal reconciliation in the process of walking through the spaces of Cattle Depot. Chan, who sorts out the texts as well as directs, provides no answers

but suggests hope for the possibility that differences will be put aside and common ground found in Hong Kong. Apart from *Best Wishes*, there are performances created using a similar form of documentary theatre, such as HerStory Polygon's *Regarding O*, which explores problems faced by transgender people. Arts groups in Hong Kong do not necessarily adopt Rimini Protokoll's form of documentary theatre directly, but adopt the approaches offered by this form in order to create performances that deal with issues of the local environment.

More special is Rooftop Productions' *The Furies Variations*, which uses the *Oresteia* trilogy of great Greek tragedies as its text and is created through data collection and compilation. Rooftop productions has always focused on collecting data and depicting the conditions and problems of Hong Kong society. This time, however, it contrasts the Greek story of parricidal vengeance with post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong society, especially in terms of parent-child relationships. It moves between the interpretation of a classic and the actors' narration of their own experiences, uses the past to scrutinise rather than metaphorise the present, and offers an additional angle from which to reflect on reality.



*The Furies Variations* (2018) — Photo: Fung Wai Sun Photo courtesy: Rooftop Productions

### Going Further in Local Aesthetic Exploration

Another work of On & On Theatre Workshop, *The Phenomenon of Man: REVOLVER*, written by Wu King-yeung, aims to analyse the feeling of powerlessness in the wake of the Umbrella Movement, but its scope is broad in that its textual content attempts analogies to historical events. Wu links a Russian actress who played in Chekhov's *The Seagull* in the early 20th century with the female protagonist who plays a Hong Kong theatre performer, and uses the Peking Man incident to compare the French priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who was also a philosopher, theologian and archaeologist, with the male protagonist who plays a videographer making promotional films for the Culture Bureau and who used to be actively involved in social movements. Added to these are the Russian Revolution and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, and there are now three lines that reference and are woven into one another. Setting the work in 2021, Wu tries to create a sense of distance from which the sense of powerlessness shared by many people after the Umbrella Movement is manifested.

As for bold attempts regarding aesthetic form, the intermedia work *Claustrophobia*, directed by Vee Leong, stands out with development and breakthrough simultaneously in visual, sound and performing arts. Visual artist Tam Wai-ping reveals internal, personal changes and external, social ones through the process of a room designed by him breaking in two. Leong's concept of the double text (triple if the English version is taken into account) is interesting, too. In an exploration of the relationship between sound effects and performance, the sound design of *Claustrophobia* is an important element that propels the performance forward: the relationship explored is that between sound and listening. Two different stories are transmitted through headphones, which throughout the performance are the sole source of sound for the audience, each of whom can only know the story he listens to. The stories have to do with Hong Kong history as well as the present, however, and the delicate sounds construct for the audience a private yet shared environment in reality and are joined to their imagination. This is a highly valuable attempt at expanding the performance stage.

Another work that gives an original treatment of space and sound is Heteroglossia's *Foreign Land*, written and directed by Fong Ki-tuen, from early 2019. As in *Claustrophobia*, the set is a room divided into two parts, but the space here is a concrete representation of content and reality. The activities of either protagonist are confined to the space in one of the two boxes, which differ markedly in size and point to the contrast between the protagonists' actual locations: the larger space on the stage shows the interior of a place in Canada in 1996; the smaller part, that of a



*Castle of Glass* (2018) — Photo: Carmen So Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Repertory Theatre

subdivided flat in Hong Kong in 2014. Another feature of the performance is its use of ambient sounds, instead of dialogue, to drive the action; this evokes the atmosphere of repression and silencing in society. This kind of non-dialogic approach has previously been employed, but, if memory serves, the use of ambient sounds rather than dialogue to present and drive the action has no precedent. It can be seen that the creator has given more thought to forms of performance.

Leong continues her exploration of sound in 2018 with *The Plot*. Written and directed by her, this work is about bringing it all to an end and starting a new life, with the set design calling to mind various scenes from the Umbrella Movement. The sounds create a mood throughout suggesting a lack of any way out of a predicament, but are completely different in terms of texture in the two halves of the performance. The cacophonous electronic music and multiple dialogues in the first half are powerful gestures indicating a chaotic state of affairs that borders on obliteration. The second half focuses instead on a conversation between husband and wife, and, by means of sounds, concludes with a reflection on new life. The experimental nature of Leong's attempt at presentation with sounds is apparent.

Formally special, too, is Hong Kong Repertory Theatre's *Castle of Glass*, performed at the end of 2018. Although the work concerns Hong Kong's battle against Japan, the set's treatment of space brings to mind the direct impact the Umbrella Movement has had on every person. Around the T-shaped stage, which resembles a catwalk, audience members sit close to one other, and the performers sometimes run amid them. The entire venue is thus turned into a performance area. Such a treatment is in line with the demands of the subject matter, but its conception may have some connection with the Umbrella Movement, which got to the heart of civic life.

The use of space in *Tête-bêche*, Chan Ping-chiu and Birdy Wong Ching-yan's adaptation of short stories by Liu Yichang and a piece of criticism by Dung Kai-cheung, also reflects the social situation at the time. The large mirror at the back expands the theatre space, and the scene with people watching a movie while lying on the floor mirrors the topsy-turvydom of Hong Kong. There is also *Piece of Shit*, produced by Little Theatre Workshop, in which war serves as a metaphor for the Umbrella Movement. It ingeniously transforms the performance area of the Jockey Club Black Box Theatre in Shek Kip Mei into a bunker, and is another example of a work that responds to the social situation by making good use of the characteristics of a venue space.

The script of *The Attic*, an On & On Theatre Workshop production, is not original but translated from a Japanese play about the well-known *hikikomori* in Japan. The creators have the entire

performance take place within a small model of a garret. This not only successfully presents the actual physical limitations described in the story, but also implicitly illustrates the ways in which people deal with a repressive environment.

### Subjects of Concern to Playwrights

Apart from adopting foreign forms and exploring aesthetics, playwrights also engage in the exploration of subjects out of concern for the realities of Hong Kong. Commissioned by the Hong Kong Arts Festival and written and directed by Tang Chi-kin, *The Great Learning* and *Doctrine of Happiness* are sequels to *Chinese Lesson*, written by the same playwright and commissioned by the same festival. The two works, in describing the several protagonists' lives in the Umbrella Movement and in the years thereafter, respectively, attempt to depict people's differing attitudes following the movement, from compromise to pertinacity.

In Windmill Grass Theatre's *No News is True News*, playwright Wong Kwok-kui directly enquires into freedom of the press and journalistic ethics, which are his concerns. Set during the 2012 Chief Executive election, the play investigates the rapid decline in press freedom after the handover. With a plot concerned with a news anchorwoman at a television station trying to expose the dark secrets of the candidates in the election, and through her conversations with people around her including her professor, her former classmate now working in internet media, her boss and her husband, it raises many questions about the morals and freedom of journalists. The models for the characters are quite obvious in this highly critical work.



*No News is True News* (2018) — Photo: William Ward@Wewow House  
Photo courtesy: Windmill Grass Theatre

### Manifold Developments in Theatre Making

I have briefly discussed some works from 2017 and 2018 that are directly or indirectly inspired by political or social issues. Among these works, *A Floating Family — A Trilogy*, *The Great Learning*, *Doctrine of Happiness* and *No News is True News* show, in the form of traditional drama, how things have changed since the handover. *The Phenomenon of Man: REVOLVER* projects an imagined future state of affairs, while *Best Wishes* attempts to distil from real people the ways of life of Hongkongers in the past few years. Works such as *Claustrophobia*, *The Plot*, *Castle of Glass*, *Tête-bêche*, *Piece of Shit* and *The Attic* explore forms and aesthetics. Differences in the premises of all these works and the creators' methods of experimentation are indicative of the manifold developments in the exploration of theatre making in those two years.

(Translated by Ernest Wan)

#### Daisy Chu

A veteran editor and critic on culture and the arts, Daisy Chu has worked for many newspapers and magazines, and has collaborated with many arts organisations. Her observations and commentaries on dance and theatre regularly appear in various newspapers and magazines.

# 香港戲劇概述 2017、2018

## HONG KONG DRAMA 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

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英文校對 Rose Hunter

English Proofreader Rose Hunter

協作伙伴 香港戲劇協會

Partner Hong Kong Federation of Drama Societies

設計 TGIF

Design TGIF

鳴謝 香港教育劇場論壇

Acknowledgement Hong Kong Drama/Theatre and Education Forum

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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 978-988-74319-0-9



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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Hong Kong Arts Development Council fully supports freedom of artistic expression. The views and opinions expressed in this project do not represent the stand of the Council.

\*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