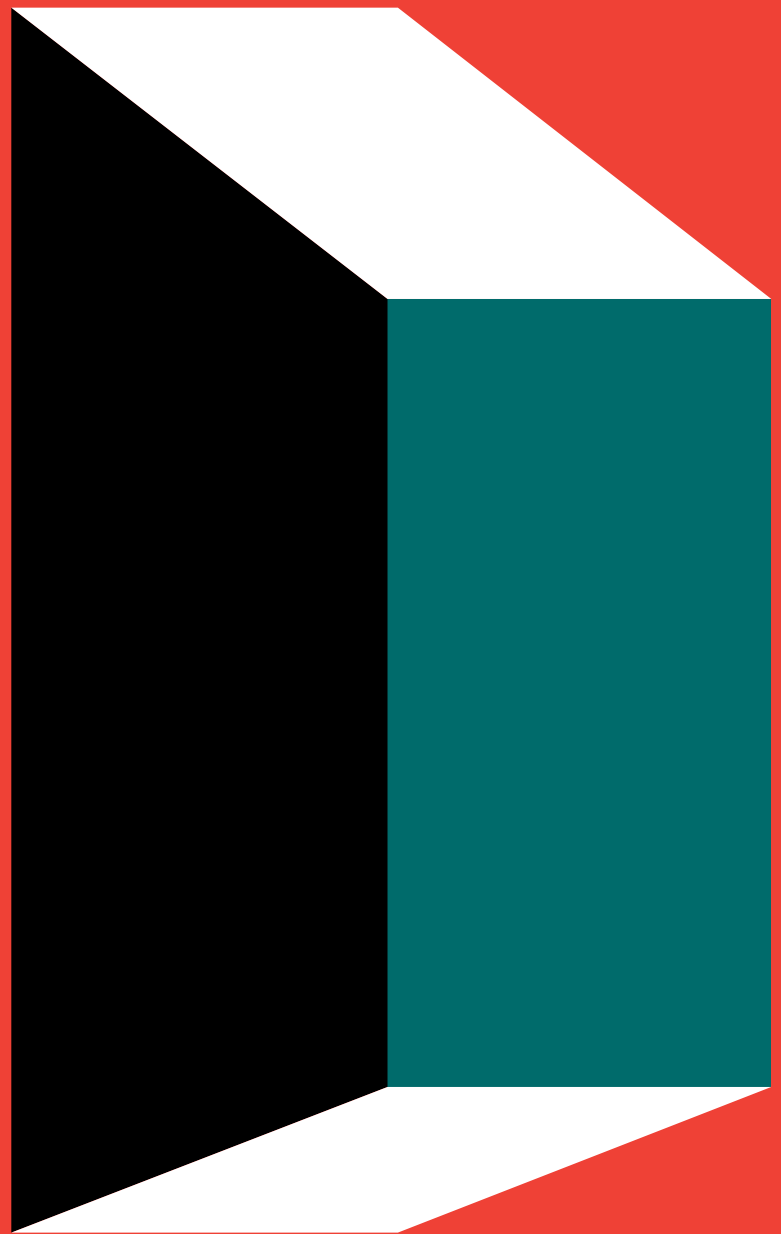
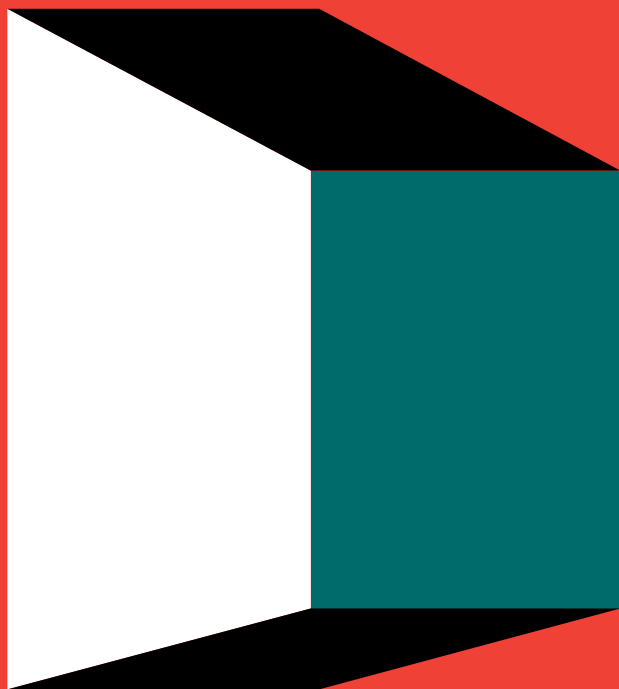
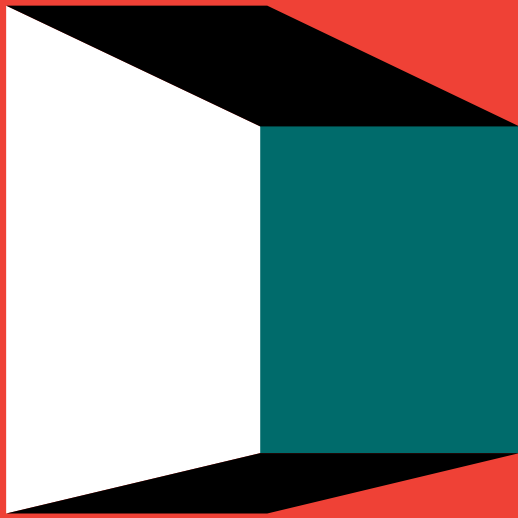


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Hong Kong  
Drama  
Overview

2017  
2018



Hong Kong Theatre on the International Stage

# Hong Kong Theatre on the International Stage

Date 20 July 2020 (Monday)  
 Time 3pm-5pm  
 Format Zoom Meeting  
 Moderator Bernice Chan (Chan)  
 Transcript editors Miu Law, Kwok Ka-ki

## Speakers (in order of speaking)

**Alex Tam (Tam)** Artistic Director of Theatre Ronin  
**Tang Shu-wing (Tang)** Artistic Director of Tang Shu-wing Theatre Studio  
**Marble Leung (Leung)** Executive Director of Hong Kong Repertory Theatre  
**Brenda Lam (Lam)** Hong Kong Independent Producer

**Chan:** Today, we have representatives from a flagship theatre company, and small and medium-sized arts groups that are funded [by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC)], and an independent producer joining us in this conversation. All of them had experience in overseas performances in 2017 and 2018, so they can share their insights about creative exchange in different settings and places. The term "overseas" includes the mainland and other places around the world. What do you think are the biggest strengths of Hong Kong productions, when they take part in overseas arts festivals or tour overseas? Apart from the question of resources, what is the biggest challenge or difficulty that they face?

**Tam:** Theatre Ronin is a group of wanderers. When I founded the group, I believed my theatre was not meant only for the local audience, but that it would travel to different places and reach different audiences. I have considered this the essence of theatre since I was young. That is why after we became a HKADC-funded group, we have stayed true to this notion, and we hope to tour to a different place every year. We have toured to Shenzhen, Beijing, and Taipei, as well as Avignon and Edinburgh in Europe. The farthest place we have toured to is Argentina.



Screen capture of the Zoom Meeting (Left from the upper row: Marble Leung, Bernice Chan, Brenda Lam; left from the lower row: Alex Tam, Tang Shu-wing)

Speaking about "strength", interestingly enough, I see my own position to be similar to that of Hong Kong. When I tour to the East, I borrow from local features of the place we are performing in; when I tour to the West, I accentuate the Eastern qualities of my work. For instance, when we perform in Asia, I pick a production with more distinctly local characteristics. At the Taipei Fringe Festival, we performed *Playing with Xi Xi*, which was adapted from the work of Xi Xi, an author who rose to fame in Taiwan in her early career. For our Shenzhen tour, I presented *Wilderness of Soul 2.0*, which was adapted from the work of Cao Yu. It was promoted as a contemporary theatre and multimedia work, since the local audience had less exposure to this kind of production. When we tour to Europe, we highlight the Eastern aesthetics of our work, or the east-meets-west fusion that is uniquely Hong Kong. *Hoichi the Earless*, an adaptation from a Japanese literary work, was performed in Cantonese. It also featured the Taiwanese-style *nanyin*. The overseas audiences were intrigued by this hybrid form of Eastern aesthetics.

While language is very important, my shows usually take imagery or visual perception as their starting points. I remember when we took part in the Festival OFF d'Avignon for the first time, I was playing the singing bowl during the parade. A French girl walked over to me, and said she loved the singing bowl and Eastern culture. Some European people have a strong interest in Eastern culture, so they come to see our shows. I think it is a great thing.

**Chan:** It sounds like your group has a range of productions, so you can tour different shows to different places. When you are planning your season programme, do you think about mainly Hong Kong-based projects, or do you consider overseas exchange as well?

**Tam:** To an extent, we are able to partake in overseas exchange by keeping our productions to a modest scale. It offers us more flexibility. We produce a new work every year, and I do not mind that Ronin remains a small-sized group. It gives us autonomy in terms of coordination and making arrangements, and communicating with other artists about creative possibilities. This strength makes it easier for me to adjust the scale of our works. Taking the Taipei Fringe Festival as an example, we were able to participate in the festival even though we had limited funding for the exchange. That is because we tend to pare things down, and do away with any unnecessary hardware.

**Chan:** In 2017, Shu-wing's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* and *Titus Andronicus 2.0* toured to several European cities. This was probably a different situation than that of small-sized funded arts groups. Many of [Shu-wing's] productions are commissioned works, although his group also applies for funding from Hong Kong. Shu-wing, you have more experience with this kind of situation. What are your views on this?

**Tang:** On being invited to perform overseas, the background [of how the creative exchange comes about] is an important factor. The European Shakespeare Festivals Network organises the Shakespeare Festival in different cities every year. In 2017, we were invited to perform *Macbeth* at the Shakespeare Festival in Germany, Romania and Serbia. In addition, the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office (HKETO) in Berlin invited us to tour to Berlin, Warsaw, and Vienna. There were three stops for *Titus*: Poland, Czechoslovakia, and London at the invitation of the HKETO, London.

The reason for our many touring opportunities that year dated back to 2012. We took part in the World Shakespeare Festival (2012 London Cultural Olympiad), and the Shakespeare connection helped us to establish a new network. They started to take an interest in what we do: How do Hong Kong people produce Shakespeare's plays? It is a distinct artistic focus—to observe how Shakespeare's plays are situated in contemporary society in other cultures, and how they are interpreted in new artistic representations. It was rather special that we were invited to participate in these themed arts festivals.

On being invited to three festivals, I think the biggest strength of our group is this: Shakespeare is an important part of Western culture, and there are established traditions of staging Shakespeare's plays in many European countries. To an extent, we are a representative of Eastern culture, and they are interested to see how we interpret Shakespeare's plays. There are two reasons for that.

The first is artistic inquiry. The second revolves around one question: As Shakespeare's plays are a part of the world's cultural heritage, what kinds of understanding and reflection do they inspire in different cultures? I believe that is our biggest strength.

Taking *Macbeth* as an example, it so happened that all the festivals were held during the same period. It was challenging for us to tour to six cities in three weeks. It was a test not only of our resources, but also our capability. I learnt a great deal from that experience. How can we tour so many cities in such a short time? After such intensive touring, our team developed a much deeper bond and understanding.

Another challenge comes from our own expectations. Let's say our show is well-received in one city. Will we get the same response in the next city? There is a degree of speculation and anxiety around that. Morale is extremely important when we are on tour. The whole team is far away from home, and we can feel worn out in a foreign country. The audience size and the recognition we get for our shows have a huge impact on our morale.

**Chan:** Marble, could you tell us about the overseas exchange that Hong Kong Repertory Theatre (HKRep) took part in between 2017 and 2018?

**Leung:** Before our company was incorporated, HKRep had only gone on a few tours in two decades. In the past ten years, we have had a lot more opportunities, and we have been much more driven. I think our strength is that we are constantly working to enhance the standards of our productions; with the refined quality and content of our programmes, we keep expanding our audience. We never create a new production for a particular touring opportunity; we select from our company's repertoire productions that are of an acceptable standard, and which reflect the spirit of Hong Kong and the company. Most of the works we perform on tour are original plays, as we hope to bring the voices of Hong Kong artists and the fruits of our work from over the years to wider audiences. For overseas audiences, I think our productions feel fresh and exciting in a way. Taking in these audience responses, the artists can look at their own productions and creative process in a new light. It is a new form of development for the works.

During those two years, we mainly toured *The Last Supper*, *The Sin Family* and *Field of Dreams*, three productions of different scales. Every overseas tour is a challenge. There is always the question of scale. We have to ensure that for every stop we are touring to, all the details such as the logistics and technical requirements are well taken care of. Like Shu-wing said, we learn

from touring. At the start, you may tour to one city. Throughout the process, you keep expanding your experience of touring. Gradually, you may start to tour larger scale shows to more cities. *The Last Supper* was a rather special case. Some Korean students, who watched the play when we performed it in the mainland, translated it into Korean and published the script in 2018. After the publication, a Korean theatre group produced a Korean version of the play. We attended the show, where we spoke with the audience and the creators. The performance received the Best Production and Best Performer of the 7th Seoul Theatre Artists Awards.

**Chan:** Brenda, you have worked for the HKADC in the past, where you were involved in many exchange projects. Could you share your views on this from a producer's perspective?

**Lam:** Between 2017 and 2018, I had a change of roles. In 2017, I was still at the HKADC, and my main responsibility was to manage the council's cultural exchange projects. After I left my position in 2018, I started to take part in overseas tours of Hong Kong theatre groups as a producer.

You were just talking about strengths. Apart from funding, the HKADC has been offering another form of support to the performing arts industry since 2015, which is leading Hong Kong performing artists to participate in overseas exchange. For instance, the council led its first-ever delegation of arts groups and artists to participate in the Performing Arts Market in Seoul (PAMS). In 2017, it also organised programmes such as the "PAMS Night – HK", so as to create more opportunities for overseas organisations and arts groups to get to know Hong Kong artists. At the same time, the HKADC also approached some overseas festivals, as it stepped up its efforts to help Hong Kong performing artists gain exposure in the international arts scene. For instance, it partnered with the OzAsia Festival in Australia, and it provided support for staging the works of Hong Kong artists at the festival. Before that, Hong Kong performing artists were on their own in seeking opportunities for overseas tours and collaboration. These opportunities were hard to come by for various reasons. During those few years, the HKADC devoted increasing resources to help artists secure opportunities to perform overseas. It was a significant change at the time.

Following these activities initiated by an official organisation, more and more overseas arts festivals and organisers started to enquire about Hong Kong performing arts programmes. Meanwhile, I had a change of roles at work and became an independent producer. Part of my job was to introduce Hong Kong artists to overseas organisers. The first question was whether they would be drawn to the themes or artistic styles of these Hong Kong programmes. The second question was that even when we had these programmes, like Alex said, when he was curating his programme he would



*The Last Supper* (2017, Chengdu) — Photo courtesy: HKRep

think about whether it would be feasible to tour the works at a later time, and he would make plans around considerations such as the scale of the production and human resources. In reality, most theatre companies did not give so much thought to how they could adapt their works for overseas tours, probably because touring opportunities were rare at the time. Rather, they would create the works and look for touring opportunities later on. As a producer—and an agent who liaised with other arts festivals—whenever I showed the recorded performances to the organisers, I would hear comments about how our productions involved large crews and high costs. It was a major issue when I introduced our works to overseas organisers at the time.

**Chan:** For a while, everyone took part in those arts markets, and they should have made some connections. But like Shu-wing said, many of these connections do not come from arts markets, but from partnerships between arts festivals. Do you think these connections or networks are helpful? Does participation in arts markets increase exposure for small-sized arts groups or for Hong Kong among overseas audiences? Is the possibility of staging the work overseas something you think about during the creative process?

**Tam:** We participated in PAMS in 2015 and 2017, where many of us connected with overseas organisations at the speed dating sessions. The Argentina tour I mentioned was the result of our participation in one of these sessions in 2015, where we met some producers from South America. They sent us an invitation about half a year later, and we toured *Landscape in the Mist* to Argentina in 2016. Prior to that, the play had had three theatre runs, in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shenzhen. We had perfected our grasp on managing the scale of the production, and retaining the impact of the work even with a minimalistic presentation. The biggest difficulty was getting the play translated into Spanish, and it took us some time to find a translator in Hong Kong. As for the performance, the tour producer said it was very well-received.

I think arts markets are useful. For small-sized arts groups in particular, those HKADC-led delegations opened the way to something new. Are they necessarily beneficial? I do not know, but they at least offer us an opening. At the time, as an artistic director, I started to consider carefully the relationship between the artistic director and the producer. When I started to hear about the term “producer” in Hong Kong in the 1990s, I thought there was a lot of room for development for this role, especially in the theatre. From what I have heard, it works in dance. As an art form, dance is suited to the mode of art making that centres on “processing”. For instance, many dance artists create pieces that are five to ten minutes long. These works require little production resources, but they embody really strong concepts. The artists then showcase the works at arts markets and forums—I do not use the word “sell”—and these pieces carry a lot of substance. This opens up a possible prospect that encourages the artists to continue developing their works.

Can we apply this mode of art making in the theatre? I like to revise a play through touring. Revision is not just about streamlining a play. To an extent, it gives me the time to reflect on the work. Taking *Landscape in the Mist* as an example, it started out as a 30-minute presentation. In 2008, we turned it into a formal performance after receiving a full grant from the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). Maestro Lin Kehuan saw our play and liked it, and it was subsequently featured in the Beijing Fringe Festival. We were later invited to perform it at the Urban Drama Festival in Shenzhen, and in Argentina. It has been more than ten years since this work was born in 2006, and I feel there is still room for us to develop it. For small-sized arts groups, there may not be such room for artistic development if they only perform their works in Hong Kong. Through overseas tours, however, they can make changes to their works in terms of human resources and artistic expression, and adapt them to different situations and places. These changes are interesting experiences for me.

**Tang:** I do not usually take part in arts markets, but some of my questions are: Who do we network with? Why do people network with you? Why do you network with others? There are always reasons why someone organises events and arts festivals. Perhaps they have to fulfil certain cultural policies or ideas that are prevalent in their home countries, so they want to engage in exchange with overseas artists. It may develop into a more regular platform in the future, or it may be a one-off exchange about programming that is intended to fulfil certain expectations. That is why I think the most important aspect of networking is the spirit of the people who engage in it. After you have connected with someone, you may not have concrete plans for collaboration right away. But if you have laid a solid foundation for relationship building, it may lead to other dialogues in the future. As I see it, this is something arts practitioners working in different capacities should consider in today's globalised world.

For instance, while we expanded our network with our Shakespeare productions, it also shaped our decision to organise a Shakespeare festival in Hong Kong. Networking is not about working on one or two projects, but about maintaining relationships with people over time. After learning about why other organisers hosted Shakespeare festivals, we were inspired to organise our own, and we were able to draw on the support of others. This is how I understand network building at different levels.

**Chan:** Just now you talked about “people”. At arts markets like the PAMS, someone you meet may represent an arts festival or an organisation. Is the person or the arts festival more important to you? The arts festival may embody a concept, or a vision that you might like to work with, but [this concept or vision] might not come across when you talk to the person.

**Tang:** It is a matter of cause and effect. The key is whether you feel there is compatibility. When there are expectations at different levels, you also have to approach the situation at different levels. Let's say you meet someone who is looking for programmes for their theatre. The expectations they have would be somewhat different than those of an arts festival organiser. The organisation of an arts festival is grounded in an idea. Different arts practitioners meet at the arts festival and share their insights. It depends a lot on the background of the networking occasion and the expectations of different parties.

**Chan:** Marble, what do you think about network and arts markets? How is the situation in the mainland? Could you share your experiences?

**Leung:** I agree with what Shu-wing said. For the most part, networking is about building relationships with people, although I am not trying to benefit from these relationships. We rarely take part in arts markets. When you say market, it means there is a product or a production waiting to be sold. That is not something we are able to do. For me, it is complicated planning a production for touring, and there are many things to consider. I am not able to present a few productions and say: "I will bring these shows over if you are interested in them". It is impossible for me to do that, so I do not have anything to "sell".

Over the years, we have coordinated our exchanges and tours on our own, without any agent involved. On some occasions, we receive formal invitations from arts festivals. Most of the time, we have direct discussions with the theatres. These networks come from our experiences over the past ten years. We got to know these theatres; we know they are genuinely invested in presenting productions, and the people in charge are responsible. This is the most important thing.

**Chan:** Is that really important for touring to the mainland?

**Leung:** It is particularly important for touring to the mainland, but it goes for any overseas performances. We are careful about selecting the theatres and production companies that we work with. Many people want to work with us, and most of them speak of grand plans that do not materialise. It is not easy for us to make time to tour overseas. Why would we commit our productions to uncertain prospects? That is why I strongly believe in network building. But there is an issue with [the performing arts industry] in the mainland—it is developing too fast. There are theatres being built and companies being established all the time, so the arts professionals keep moving from one place to the next. The staff of a particular theatre may leave their jobs after a few years, and there goes your link with that theatre. Also, the theatres are not too reliable. Once there is a change at the top, the theatre can take an altogether different direction. In some cases though, your contacts may stay in touch after they have left their previous workplaces. This may bring other opportunities.

**Lam:** All of you were right on in what you said. The heart of arts markets is network building. You make yourself known to others through these networks. In fact, an arts market is a "process"; it is not an auction, a platform for you to auction your works to overseas organisers. There are many pitching sessions at an arts market, like the speed dating sessions that Alex mentioned. There was no one who would come up to me and say: "Do you have any works that you want to sell to

me?" There are arts markets being held in different places, because it is a prominent trend in the arts world. After you have built new networks, the crux is how you develop new works or form new partnerships by utilising the resources of different parties.

**Chan:** There are commercial considerations, so it may be different from taking part in a creative exchange. In fact, the presence of arts markets has motivated our arts groups, especially dance artists, to go overseas in the past few years. It also has to do with the ways dance productions are very different from theatre productions in terms of form.

For arts groups, what is the significance and what are the rewards of touring and taking part in arts festivals overseas? What other responses can theatre groups get from touring? In the past, most arts groups might not have given much thought to the audience when they took part in exchanges. In the past few years however, there seems to be this new concept of audience development through touring that has emerged. Please share your views on this.

**Tam:** Just now I was mostly talking about my personal ideas about the arts or my own artistic practice. There are two points I would like to elaborate on. Looking back at our performances in Avignon, the ten of us rented a house and spent three weeks together. This kind of experience is something young performers long to have. Even for those of us who are middle-aged guys, it was an interesting experience. This kind of experience is memorable for both Hong Kong young people and the development of Hong Kong theatre.

Secondly, speaking of connections between people, we had plans to go to Edinburgh again this year, but we cancelled our trip because of the pandemic. But we have developed a close relationship and a sense of trust with the theatre. They asked us if we planned to go there again in 2021, and how they could help increase exposure for our group if we did make the trip. This is a case where we met the right people during overseas exchange, and we seized the opportunity to present the works of our theatre group. I think this is an important development for our theatre group, as we think about how to export our shows and engage in exchange with different people.

**Tang:** In a culturally mature city, there has to be a balance between certain things. Simply put, are you aiming for popularisation or excellence? The former focuses on the relationship between local productions and local audiences, and the latter centres around international exchange. Be it exporting or importing, there is significance to creative exchange at different levels. When you bring

overseas productions into Hong Kong, you are hoping to see creations by others that you do not usually get to see. When elements of these works are transferred into local productions, it opens up a deeper connection between the international works and the local audience. It inspires you to create different works and conceive new ideas, which helps you to export your creations. But different groups or arts practitioners may have different focuses in what they do. Some gravitate towards local productions, and this focus may be decided by their capacity for resources allocation or their mission. To an extent, it is also strongly related to funding organisations.

In the past two decades, Hong Kong has started to explore the balance between these aspects. In the past, the notion of "local productions for local audiences" was the main driving force for making works because it was what the funding organisations expected. As for importing shows, the Hong Kong Arts Festival has been doing that for many years. There is less exporting from our side, although it has picked up in the past ten years. The government and other funding organisations are now willing to include it on the agenda; they are open to discussions about funding for exporting rather than just importing. That said, it is overseas audiences, rather than the Hong Kong audience, who benefit from this exporting. These are questions that funding organisations think about when they give support to arts groups.

That is why an arts group needs to strike a balance between local productions and local audiences. When you are taking your work overseas, are you exporting your production, or an idea, or are you exporting Hong Kong? As a representative of Hong Kong, what are some of the qualities of the city that others can see in you? When someone approaches you, are they interested in the theme or artistic format of your work? I guess in the next five to ten years, Hong Kong may enter a new phase where we will see a stronger balance between the three aspects that I mentioned: the relationship between local theatre groups and local audiences, importing and exporting. There are a number of performance venues that will be completed in the near future, such as the East Kowloon Cultural Centre and the West Kowloon Cultural District. After that, we will see a wider range of relationships emerging between the three aspects. Will there be a degree of overlap between them? Will it inspire more systematic and higher-level thinking? It is possible, but how do we make it happen? It is not an easy question to answer.

The situation of Hong Kong is peculiar. Culturally and societally, it is hard to pinpoint Hong Kong's identity. What is Hong Kong's identity? When you are networking, there are many things to consider regarding any identities you represent other than your own. In the next phase, I think there are likely to be more substantial discussions and initiatives that centre on this issue of identity.

**Leung:** Shu-wing is right. We often talk about exchange, not just touring, and there are elements of both exporting and importing to it. For instance, with the [Hong Kong] International Black Box Theatre Festival that we organise, we are not only presenting what we have in Hong Kong. We also want to broaden the Hong Kong audience's perspectives, and we hope our colleagues can find new inspiration for their own productions. When it comes to exporting, we put great emphasis on the work we will be presenting, because it represents the creators' thinking in that particular creative environment the work was made in. Overseas audiences tend to look at your work as something created by a Hong Kong person. It is reflected in their feedback after the performance. I think it is a good opportunity for us to communicate with them and provoke ideas through our productions. After audiences share their thoughts with us, we get to see different angles for looking at our own works. I feel this is something we can do, when things develop to a certain point.

When we toured our works overseas ten years ago, there was always someone in the audience who would say: "It is so interesting for me to see your show. I thought Hong Kong was a cultural desert". They did not have any exposure to the diverse spectrum of Hong Kong culture. In the past few years, we have not heard these sorts of comments. Our company has been presenting our works overseas, and other organisations and artists have been doing the same. It is changing the impression that overseas audiences have of what we do. I think Hong Kong's performing arts have started to develop into a brand, at least in the world of Chinese-language theatre. I feel all of us are striving for this. It is very important.

**Lam:** Artists can certainly expand their visions through the experiences and insights that they gain from touring overseas. But it is costly for Hong Kong arts groups to tour overseas in terms of human resources. Even though we receive a decent quantities of resources overall, we only get a modest amount of funding, so it is hard for us to go overseas. Also, a lot of the time we only present one or two performances on one tour. There are small audiences, but rather high expenses. That is why as a producer, I would ask: What is the meaning of touring overseas? Apart from expanding one's vision, it is crucial for an artist to think about how to refine a work through touring it. When you get to look at your work from different people's perspectives and from other vantage points, it is an opportunity for you to refine it. It has a real impact on an artist in that it drives them to reflect on the quality of the work. Of course, there should be refinement to a production every time it gets a rerun. Unfortunately, there are few opportunities for reruns in Hong Kong. Such opportunities should be available in the local theatre scene, but we do not have the right conditions for that to happen. We can only look for opportunities to tour our works as a way to refine them.



In 2019, Shu-wing and I took *Macbeth* on several tours. My work as the producer for this show brought me many opportunities. When many people get to see your work and they think it is a good production, they will approach you about possible collaboration. That is why you must put yourself out there so that others can see you. As a producer, you also have to ask yourself: "What do [I] want to achieve with this tour?" Touring a work is an excellent experience for a producer.



*The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2018, re-run in Hong Kong) — Photo: Fung Wai Sun  
Photo courtesy: Tang Shu-wing Theatre Studio

**Leung:** In the past two years, we have devoted more time to another venture. We collaborate with other organisations to restage our productions in the hope of creating greater exposure for our plays. In 2019 we restaged *De Ling & Empress Dowager Ci Xi* as a co-production. In 2020 we had plans to stage the mainland version of *The Last Supper*. Unlike some previous productions where we handed over our plays to someone else, we are more actively involved in, and have more control over, these restagings. For instance, we will take up the director's role. In 2019, we partnered with the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre to restage *Moon Story*. We think we have created many excellent productions in Hong Kong, and the question is how to bring them to wider audiences. That is something we have been working on. We also hope the restaging of these productions can be done on a self-financed basis. We accomplished this goal in 2019, when we were able to tour our productions overseas without any subsidies.

Through overseas performances, we came into contact with 31,000 audience members outside of Hong Kong last year. It was a very encouraging result, and we were able to achieve it without turning our works into products. We will keep experimenting in the future. It comes down to what I said earlier about network building: how to select the right partners to collaborate with, so as to ensure the quality of our works. It is a challenging task, and I am still learning.

**Chan:** This reminds me of Shu-wing's experience with Baiguang Theatre Studio. It is a different kind of exchange than touring *Macbeth* overseas. You exported yourself, not your work. Is there any congruity or synergy between this experience and your experience with *Macbeth*?

**Tang:** When I create a new play for another organisation in my role as an individual artist, there is always a higher level of expectations. Perhaps they see certain qualities about me as an artist, and they hope I can create works that fulfil particular operational considerations at their organisation. To a large extent, you have to play it by ear. It depends on who you are dealing with and what resources are available. On this basis, my responsibility is to work at something that seems easy to do, and turn it into something better. It is to create a new work by maximising the limited resources available within time and space constraints.

I think it is fine to work on this kind of project sometimes, but it is not a good idea to do it on a frequent basis. That is because the organisation will ask you to stay away from Hong Kong for some time. There are many freelancers around the world who work in this manner, and they are free to travel anywhere. But there are the questions about what kind of reward you are going to get, and how your next work is going to pan out. The situation plays out differently in different

circumstances. Also, when you are working independently, you need to be really flexible. It is different than when you have your own team in Hong Kong, especially when you are making a new work. There is a degree of risk to it. It is much easier to manage if you are producing an older work. But I think this kind of exporting and exchange will grow in the next phase, as everyone is looking for new ways to partake in overseas collaboration or promote their brands in other countries. In this light, it is possible for a practitioner to export themselves as an "expertise/brand". It depends on the situation, and it probably happens more often in the mainland. It is more complicated if you want to go farther afield.

**Chan:** Alex, we were just talking about the future development of overseas exchange. Do you have any plans for expanding your participation in overseas exchange? If so, what are the dimensions of your participation that you would like to strengthen?

**Tam:** There are two dimensions. Just then Shu-wing spoke about working as an "individual" artist. In 2018, I travelled to France, and I also attended the Asia Playwrights Festival in Bucheon in South Korea. They wanted to organise a play reading, and a forum featuring Asian playwrights. At the time, a friend of mine gave me some information about the festival, and I sent a script of mine to Bucheon as an individual artist. They translated the play into Korean. I was completely unaware of it, and I ended up seeing a performance of my script in Korean. The marvellous thing was that I laughed throughout the performance even though I did not understand a single word. I felt they had given me new inspiration, and it made me look at my work in a new light. Last year, I attended the Prague Quadrennial as an individual artist. I did a presentation featuring works of literary theatre by my theatre group. Over time, like Shu-wing said, I feel I may be turning into a product. I think about what I am, and I think about ways to export myself.

This is a process of change for a creative artist. I think this process gives me the drive to create; it enables me to import and internalise what I receive, and then think about how to create and export a work. It is a very special process. I am rather conscious about keeping my work as a theatre group director and my work as an individual artist separate. When it comes to exporting a work, I talk everything over with my theatre group staff. When I go back to my own artistic pursuits, I put myself out there, and it is something rather autonomous. After touring and discussions with producers over the past few years, I have come to have my own perspectives. I would think about whether my ideas can be gathered into something that can be exported, and what kind of impact it has on my work. Earlier we spoke about the question of identity. When Hong Kong has developed

to a certain point, can our government do more to bring together artists from arts groups of different sizes, and take them abroad? This is not only the job of the HKADC. It may also involve the Hong Kong Tourism Board. If Hong Kong is a brand, and our theatre has achieved a degree of maturity as Marble puts it, should everyone make more efforts to promote it?

**Chan:** What does HKRep think about participating in overseas exchange in the future? Unlike the Cloud Gate Theatre of Taiwan, which has an array of productions that the group presents in overseas exchange on an ongoing basis, [arts groups and artists] from Hong Kong rely more on opportunities that come up and the circumstances in a particular year. Will large-sized groups continue their endeavours in this area? As for exchange in the mainland, it may be easier for HKRep since you have been consolidating the connection. In your view, what are the dimensions that [HKRep] wants to strengthen the most?

**Leung:** We define ourselves as a professional platform for Hong Kong artists. We have had various people working with us at different stages of the company's development, and they represent Hong Kong during the particular eras in which they worked with us. There are different meanings to the works created by arts practitioners who worked at or collaborated with our company. We are like an agent who has established a more solid network, apparatus or approach, as we enable artists connected with this platform to bring their works to various places. We try to take our productions to different regions. The mainland is a prominent destination because of the large number of cities and theatres across the country. But we are keen to go to other places as well. In the past few years, we have toured to Singapore, Korea, Taiwan and Japan. We do not stick to any single format or approach.

We will continue to stage performances in the mainland, as the exchange [between the two regions] is ongoing when Hong Kong artists keep creating new works. We are living in the age of the internet today; once we announce the details of our season programme and advance booking, the Beijing audience starts talking about which plays they would like to fly to Hong Kong to see. This model of theatre going is no longer unique to Hong Kong. Of course, there are limitations to how these audiences can have access to [Hong Kong theatre]. Are there other ways for them to have access to our works even if they do not travel to Hong Kong? At present, [theatre practitioners] all over the world are looking for new formats and combinations that can transform the theatre. Of course, we will keep up our live performances, since they are the most important aspect of what we do. But we are open to new channels that connect us with audiences in different places.

**Chan:** Shu-wing, speaking about the development of overseas exchange, you are importing [overseas works] to Hong Kong for the Shakespeare Festival. Will you do more importing in the future, rather than devoting your resources to touring overseas as you did in 2017 and 2018? In the future, do you think your theatre group will go on intensive overseas tours like the ones in 2017 and 2018?

**Tang:** I would define our group as a creative platform led by artists, and a medium that embodies the artists' wills and visions. We are different from other groups that receive more resources. I refer to those groups as "cultural institutions". There are arts directors at these groups, but they are more akin to being a public platform in terms of mentality. As our group manager, I think about how to balance different aspects of our group's operation. As the artist who directs this theatre group, I ask myself: What do I want to do? What expectations do my teammates have? What is interesting is how to balance the group's operation and my creative pursuits and reflections as an arts practitioner. Sometimes I decline some invitations. If it is not a scheduling conflict, I ask myself: "What are the benefits of doing it again?" Every time we tour overseas, it not only involves me, but also many others and a great deal of resources. All of us know it is not easy to obtain a lot of



*Playing with Xi Xi* (2017, Taipei Fringe Festival) — Photo: Atou Hsu Photo courtesy: Theatre Ronin

resources given the present circumstances in Hong Kong. There are quotas, and there are many limitations. Therefore, I tend to think more about this question: What do I really want to do?

In their artistic pursuits or practices, artists may have different needs during different phases. It may not be necessary to keep touring. Of course, this will be influenced by the nature of the organisation. But I think that at some levels, we have to work on how to achieve the balance between touring, importing and the Hong Kong audience in the next few years. As well as bringing overseas groups to the Shakespeare Festival, I also hope to export works from Hong Kong via this platform. We have been focused on Shakespeare-related endeavours, as we are trying to see whether we could create another form of exchange. [This new platform] should combine the substance of an arts festival and creative pursuits led by artists; as a platform or an organisation that is funded by the government, it should also make constant adjustments to what it does. Another question is: How do we nurture the emerging [arts practitioners]? This is one of my main considerations.

**Chan:** Does Theatre Ronin plan to keep touring one production every year?

**Tam:** We will keep doing that. Our thinking about this is rather simple. Like I mentioned just now, some things were shelved because of the pandemic. In this state of the new normal, the exchange we had before is now broken. Over the past few months, many theatre practitioners have been pondering this: If these connections are lost, or the essential dialogue between theatres has stopped, what do exporting and importing mean? This is something I have been contemplating. It is not just a question about whether we plan to tour one show each year, but also about the nature of this endeavour. What can I present in an exchange with others, and how do my works hold up in this new era? The answers may be rather elusive. Yet this elusiveness is real, as it is happening in reality.

**Chan:** Brenda, in your view, what are the areas in which Hong Kong theatre groups need to strengthen themselves, if they continue to take part in overseas exchange? Should they have bilingual websites?

**Lam:** That is a basic requirement. Imagine when you take part in an arts market, and there are people who want to check out your works. The moment they look at your website...I witnessed this issue at the PAMS in 2015. The websites of some theatre groups were only in Chinese, or the information was not updated. It stopped many overseas organisers from making further

connections with them. From an administrative perspective, as a promoter of the arts, you must be well-prepared in this regard. The theatre groups of our three speakers today have done really well in this respect.

Of course, there are also technical issues to consider. Like Alex said just then, you have to think through how many people are involved in a production, and whether it is cost-effective. When I introduced some works to the overseas festivals, they would say: "The work is good, but it incurs really high costs. There has to be a reason for me to buy this show, but I do not see anything special about it". What they mean by "special" is that the work should have a unique artistic style and a Hong Kong identity. We were just talking about this. I am not talking about gimmicks like the lion dance, but about what we are trying to say. There has been a lot of progress in the past few years. Our artists have started to consciously define their positions and to tell their own stories.

**Chan:** How will Hong Kong theatre be seen on the [international] stage in the future? Shu-wing mentioned it just then. If we want to showcase a Hong Kong production, do we look at the work or the concept it represents? Our identity and the issues we deal with may become more complicated in the future. Some topics are more likely to draw the attention of overseas audiences. How do we address these topics through artistic expression?

**Tang:** Hong Kong is a special place, and I think there will definitely be more controversial and confrontational topics arising from the questions about ideology, identity and societal structure that you mentioned earlier. I think when it comes to topics and artistic representation, there are several angles from which we can take them forward. The two can blend well together, but it is not easy to achieve that. That is because when you have achieved a particular artistic style, you tend to hold on to it, and you may or may not have the guts to try something else. As for topic or content, you need to examine it even more rigorously. Do you want to "sell" a topic? Someone else may think: "I just want to hear about this topic. It does not matter to me who is presenting it". That is not what I want to do, unless my work can inspire reflection on the topic from different perspectives. A work that centres around certain topics can only be successful if it includes multiple dimensions.

As for artistic representation, I think it needs to be both open and cohesive. It does not work if you limit yourself to a certain formula, because people will think it is the only thing you can do. But it does not work either if you scout around for new elements all the time. It takes wisdom to find the balance between when you open yourself to other influences, and when you insist on what you do. In the end, it comes down to one concept: "identity". Is it essential for you to have an identity? If so,

what is this identity? Would it be better not to have an identity? I believe there is never a clear-cut answer, since it is not a yes-no question. For the most part, it is an intricate matter.

But there is one important thing: What technology brings into our lives is far more than technological applications. Technology has changed the logical thinking of an entire generation, and its conception of things and the world. Our generation do pay attention to it, though it is hard for us to grasp the philosophy of this technological age. The young people can do it. They are a "technologically born" generation, and they have a vastly different mentality than we did when we were their age. Perhaps in a few years' time their mentality will be so different to ours that we cannot communicate with one another, even if we speak Cantonese.

**Tam:** In the present circumstances, I think our community is definitely being seen whether we are staging performances or not. If that is the case, there is a question I would ponder: How will Alex Tam or Theatre Ronin be seen in Hong Kong in the future?

I realise the future is a kind of fragmentation. Like I said earlier, a dance work may be developed from minute details. The realisation of these minute details can be presented as a work and showcased on some platforms. What I care about is whether we can use this approach in the theatre and let the fragments in our minds—a speech, a graphic pattern, a few lines of dialogue, or an excerpt of a song—grow into something. The media has also entered the age of fragmentation. There is not a main stage at present, and the cinemas are closed. How do we tear our works apart? It is like what happens in the film *Akira*. Everything disintegrates, and seeps into different places and points in time. After it has fermented and matured, it is transformed into a work and returned to the theatre.

It lends a temporal dimension to what we do. Let's take Poon Wai-sum as an example. In the 1990s, he developed his works into the "Insect Series" over the course of five years. Simply put, it is a gradual gathering of small pieces. There is a degree of continuity to it. The audience can follow its unfolding, and they will see a "vision" at the end. We are not a big group, so we do not have a large number of productions for the audience to choose from. But we can go back to the start of everything. Maybe it all begins with the creative impetus behind our work—we have to discover its unique value and reveal it through different representations, which will translate into our "vision" over time. This is where I see things are going, and how we are going to be seen.

**Chan:** Marble, the HKRep is a large group. Can the company deconstruct and reconstruct what it does in this way?

**Leung:** Our company is a platform that provides support [to artists]. Most artists like to start with topics that they are concerned with, so it is hard for them to create original works that are detached from the historical and social contexts or the circumstances that they live in. More than ten years ago, someone said that nobody seemed to care about Hong Kong anymore after 1997. I think we may be witnessing a resurgence. People are taking an interest in Hong Kong again, and this interest encompasses various perspectives. As for what we have to do, I think it is to stay receptive and support artists that are worth supporting, so that they can say what they want to say through our platform.

I am a bit more traditional, as I do not believe the internet will subvert the nature of theatre. Theatre speaks to a human need, and I feel this need very strongly. When the social distancing measures were relaxed a while ago, I could see the audience's desire to return to the theatre. I feel it is an instinct. If you ask me whether technology will bring changes to the theatre, of course the answer is yes. But I have faith [in live performances in the theatre].

**Lam:** Actually, identity is not just a topic. Any unique content or expression can encapsulate an artist's identity. When someone buys your work, they may not be interested in your Hong Kong story. They may be drawn to your style of expression because it is special. For instance, *Macbeth* has toured to many places, because the artistic representation in the work is unique. This is one of the ways in which an artist's identity is defined. We do not always have to tell our story.

Over the past few years, we have had a stronger desire, and more opportunities, to go overseas. Just then Shu-wing and Alex spoke of technology and fragmentation. It reminds me of the way many arts festivals and arts centres are organising some projects that bring different artists together, where they discuss the conception of their works starting at the initial moments. Alternatively, some arts markets will "sell" an idea, while artists from around the world combine their resources and work together to develop new projects. These are endeavours that can thrive during the technological and internet age. It is like how we all have Zoom meetings nowadays. As long as we keep an open mind and make good use of technological applications, we can transcend geographical boundaries to create new works and inspire one another.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

# 香港戲劇概述 2017、2018

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計劃統籌、編輯 陳國慧

Project Coordinator and Editor Bernice Chan Kwok-wai

編輯 朱琮愛

Editor Daisy Chu King-oi

執行編輯 楊寶霖

Executive Editor Yeung Po-lam

助理編輯 郭嘉棋\*

Assistant Editor Kwok Ka-ki\*

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English Editor Nicolette Wong Kei-ming

英文校對 Rose Hunter

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香港九龍石硤尾白田街30號賽馬會創意藝術中心L3-06C室

L3-06C, Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre, 30 Pak Tin Street, Shek Kip Mei, Kowloon, Hong Kong

電話 Tel (852) 2974 0542

傳真 Fax (852) 2974 0592

網址 Website <http://www.iatc.com.hk>

電郵 Email [iatc@iatc.com.hk](mailto:iatc@iatc.com.hk)

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