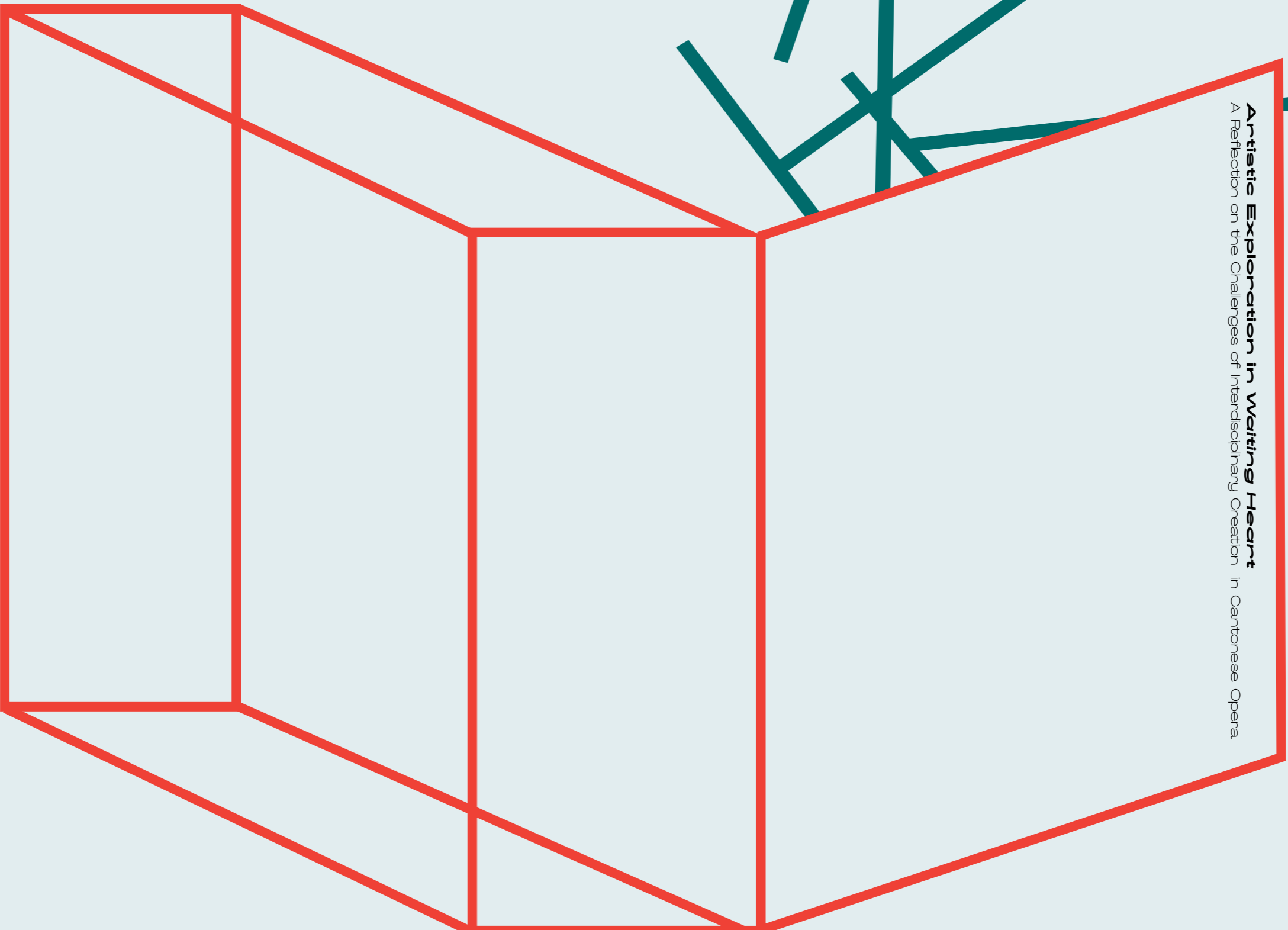


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Artistic Exploration in Waiting Heart
A Reflection on the Challenges of Interdisciplinary Creation in Cantonese Opera



Artistic Exploration in *Waiting Heart*

A Reflection on the Challenges of Interdisciplinary Creation in Cantonese Opera

Date	16 July 2020 (Thursday)
Time	2:30pm-4pm
Venue	Hong Kong Dance Company
Moderator	Bernice Chan (Chan)
Transcript editors	Mon Fu, Kwok Ka-ki

Speakers (in order of speaking)

Rex Ng (Ng)

Chief Executive and Creative Officer, Utopia Cantonese Opera Workshop

Yang Yuntao (Yang)

Artistic Director of Hong Kong Dance Company

Chan: It has never been easy to explore interdisciplinary creation in Hong Kong. *Waiting Heart* is an interdisciplinary collaboration between Cantonese opera and dance. At the level of artistic exploration, what do you think are the greatest strengths of this production, and the most difficult challenges that you faced? Do you see any unique advantages to the crossover between Cantonese opera and dance?

Ng: Our first interdisciplinary collaboration, *Arena*, is positioned as a Cantonese opera production. This interdisciplinary work is positioned as a dance work. I have no criteria in terms of which artistic disciplines I would like to engage with when it comes to interdisciplinary creation. If I see things falling into place, I get involved in it. I like to experiment with merging different elements. I often liken this collaboration to a cup of *yuan yang*—it mixes the flavours of coffee and milk tea to create a new flavour. I hope to experiment with something different next time. The meaning of an interdisciplinary collaboration is not defined by the elements it features or its format, but whether the creators have the daring to cross boundaries and search for new possibilities.

Yang: I think Rex is right on. *Waiting Heart* is primarily a dance work. Although it is an interdisciplinary collaboration, it is easy to lose sight of its vision if we are not clear about its premise. More than 90 per cent of interdisciplinary works turn out to be failures. I say this from experience: Experiments do not always work out.

Ng: This mindset is essential to creative experimentation. It is difficult to experiment if you think you must succeed. There is a rather unhealthy attitude in Hong Kong, where artists think they should only experiment if it is going to be a success. This hinders them from discovering new creative possibilities.

Yang: In Hong Kong, people are not supposed to fail. *Waiting Heart* made it to the stage because we were clear about its premise before we turned it into a performance. It is a dance work and an extension of dance; it is a reflection on Cantonese opera and drama through dance. To me, Chinese opera and dance are rather similar in that they are both performing arts that revolve around the body. I have been searching for the origins of dance. There are deep ties between dance and drama. In particular, many dance companies are exploring Chinese dance. That is why we must address this question. Apart from its creative expression, I also want to shed light on this exploration in *Waiting Heart* through its form. We call it an experiment.

Chan: In your view, what is the biggest challenge in producing interdisciplinary works featuring Cantonese opera in Hong Kong?

Ng: I think there are many challenges both onstage and offstage. The biggest difficulty is finding the right performance opportunities. There are many bizarre obstacles. Apart from the question of money, it depends on whether the [person who may be commissioning your production] is able to see the strengths and uniqueness of your idea. If they do not see these elements, you will not succeed in selling your work. In this collaboration, I think we both made room for each other. It was a chance encounter, and it was a wonderful one. Some people only want to tread on others' ideas and promote their own. It is hard to work with those kinds of people.

Yang: Drama is not my forte. I think every story is marvellous, and it depends on who the storyteller is—a children's story may be delightful when it is told by a mother, and it may become something else when it is told by a father. A work of art stems from the unison of content and form. The story is not my primary concern, since I am more focused on form. If I am to think about how to

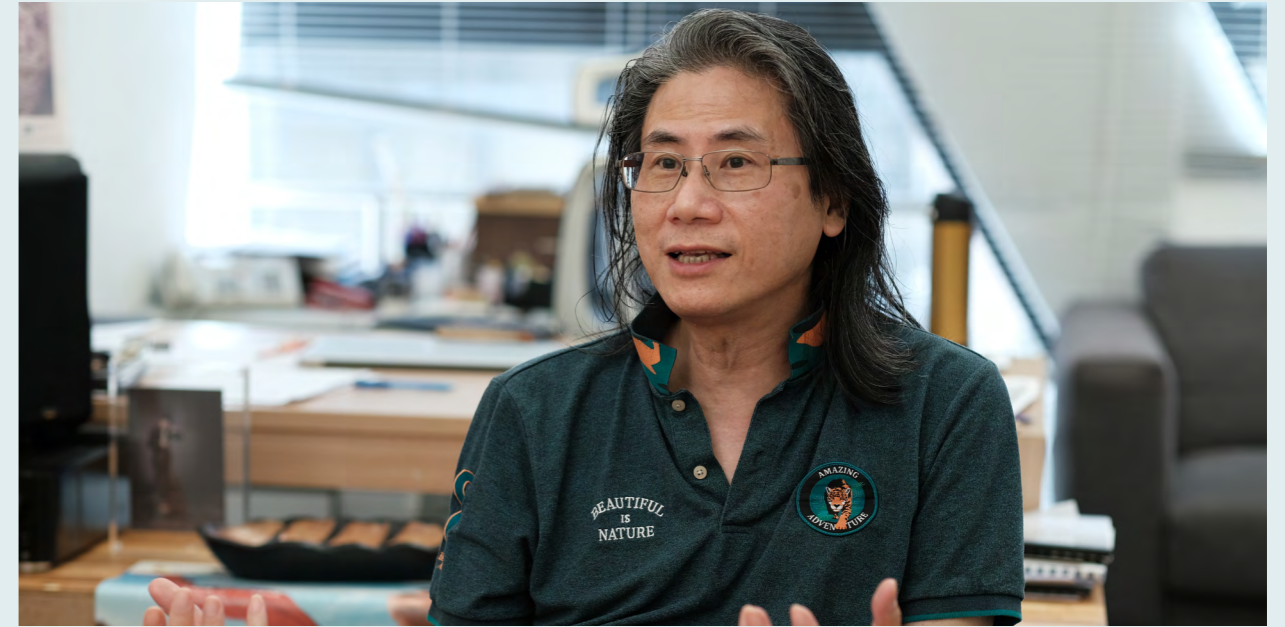
achieve the balance between Cantonese opera and dance in terms of form, I am more interested in the new form that is born of the merging of the two. Perhaps it has to do with Rex being a director—his understanding of *Princess Changping* goes beyond our imagination of the work, and he enriches the story after tearing it apart. He opens my eyes to the tremendous room for interpretation in this story.

Chan: Which aspect of the production are you most pleased with, as it represents a new form that originated from an interdisciplinary collaboration?

Yang: I always have a clearly defined goal when I am creating a work. As an experiment in form, I want to illuminate the possibilities in theatre and dance through this production. There is no right or wrong. This work does not present only Cantonese opera and dance, but a creative space that embodies a fresh interpretation. *Waiting Heart* is a work that I feel rather confident about. It is a pure work of art, and it does not take into consideration anything but itself—not even the audience. It is a self-centred, even imprudent, thing to do. It is what artistic creation is about. We make all kinds of compromises in our everyday lives. Why can't we cater to ourselves in our art? That is why I rarely talk about results. It is a complicated matter. How do you define success or failure? Many artworks only become famous after the artists have passed away. Is there any meaning to talking about success or failure in these cases? Personally, I have grown more confident in my art in the past few years. I believe I have grasped and accomplished certain things. I am happy with that, and I do not need to explain it to others. When you feel the desire to talk about the strengths of your work, it is probably because you are aware of its shortcomings. That is why you feel the need to keep talking about it in a positive light. I do not feel like talking about it with others. Those who get my work will get it.

Chan: Rex, as a Cantonese opera creator, do you feel you are carrying greater burdens?

Ng: I do not feel that way. The key is to seize the right performance opportunities. In my many years of working in the industry, I have written many proposals that were rejected for ridiculous reasons. To foster the development of a healthy arts ecology, I believe we need assessors who are versed in the arts, and who evaluate funding applications solely based on artistic considerations. Otherwise, we will eventually witness the demise of Hong Kong's arts. I am really pleased to have collaborated with Yuntao on this production. After the theatre run was over, we spent a long time talking about one thing: Even at that moment, we had not defined the nature of the performance. Most of the



Rex Ng — Photo: Ka Lam

time, however, we have to outline the outcomes of a production when we are writing the proposal. I can see how it may seem like a reasonable thing to do from an administrator's viewpoint. In reality, we should not pin everything down at the inception of a project. It is a double-edged sword. You get a clear picture of the entire process right from the start, but you are also ruling out other possibilities even before the project takes off.

Experimentation is a simple thing. It is tapping into the unknown. As is the case of any experiment, there are countless failures before an experiment succeeds. If you want to succeed on the first try, it is not an experiment—it is a lie. It is simple logic. But we are often hamstrung by the administrators' misconceptions. I hope arts administrators will gradually come to understand this concept. In this light, I am only able to fathom an abstract answer to your question: I have discovered a sense of aesthetics in *Waiting Heart*.

Yang: I second what Rex said about the sense of aesthetics. Aesthetic beauty is a process in which you reach for the zenith of your perception and express the feeling of pain. It is the realm that we strive to reach. Imagine you want to put a glass somewhere. There is no right place for you to put it. If you think you should put the glass in a particular place, and you feel comfortable during the act of putting it there, it is an experience of beauty. At any given moment, a performance exists simultaneously in different forms, as we explore different openings within it. This is the right state

and a comfortable state to be in. That is what artistic creation is. If you know what you are going to do from the start, you are not creating art, but churning out something based on a formula. You can only experience the sense of aesthetics when you are making art in the right state. This sense of aesthetics is at the heart of our pursuit. Whether my creative partner is a Cantonese opera artist, a director, or a choreographer, we are walking down two separate paths until we cross paths at the intersection. If it had not been for my collaboration with Rex or this crossover with Cantonese opera, I would not have discovered this sense of aesthetics. If this work had been solely an expression of dance, its vision would have been incomplete.

Ng: We instil traditional elements that we have a firm grasp of, and which embody a sense of aesthetics, into a mix of sensibilities that is yet to crystallise. The work may or may not centre around a traditional approach. When we were working on this production, we had an understanding: We would not ask the dancers to learn Cantonese operatic singing, or the Cantonese opera performers to train in dance. Supposing Chinese dance and Chinese opera share the same origin, each art form has its unique characteristics. There are similarities between the two, but they are distinct from each other. Our task was not to get our performers to train in another artistic discipline, different from the one they ordinarily perform in. It would not have worked at all.

It is an intricate balance to achieve, and I have learnt a great deal from it. When a performer plays a double role, like a mentally handicapped person and a sage, some people may praise the performer's acting ability. But what is so difficult about playing two dramatically different roles? It is a much greater challenge for a performer to play two similar roles and bring the nuances of each character to light. Despite their shared origin, Chinese dance and Chinese opera have branched out into different schools and genres. When you look at the similarities [between these schools and genres], there are delicate differences that carry a significant impact. That is why I always go back to the essence of Cantonese opera. How should we further develop the performance forms of Cantonese opera? We do not necessarily need to subvert it and turn it into something else. What we have to do is to discover its nuances and work at enhancing the genre as a whole.

There are more impromptu performances in Cantonese opera. When there is a lack of rehearsal opportunities, the actors spend less time refining their performances. For instance, many actors make associations between lyrics and movement. When you do not take the time to feel the subtle shifts, you end up making movements that feel empty—you point at the moon when you are singing about it, and you point at the floor when you are singing about the underworld. It takes on a singsongy style. In the world of dance, performers have a singular focus: They devote their

attention to movement, as they explore and develop the intricate possibilities that lie within it. Even a tiny shift can cause powerful ripples. When you have grasped these delicate connections, you may still be making the same movement on stage. But is there a genuine change in your gesture of pointing at the moon, and in the feelings that it conveys? Some people see an aesthetic change. Others see the simple gesture of pointing at the moon. These are nuances that only experienced Cantonese opera practitioners and enthusiasts are able to discern. If there are some people in the audience who notice the finer details, it means my performance is catering to an informed audience who can truly appreciate it. The average audience may not catch the nuances, but they can feel them. It is similar to how a child can feel whether they are loved without thinking about it. I think this is fine [for the average audience], and it fulfils their longing for artistic experiences. These subtle shifts are what we pay attention to and reflect on. I am not opposed to innovative attempts, but they are not the focus of what I do.

Yang: As I see it, the maker of an interdisciplinary work looks at different subjects from a director's perspective, while the performers do what they do best on stage. But is that what defines an interdisciplinary performance? Simply put, we need to think about the reasons for, and logic behind, the existence of different art forms. You need to have an understanding of the art form that someone else practises. It is fine if you do not understand it, but you have to like it, and you have to ask yourself why you like it. In my case, I did not understand Cantonese opera, but I realised that I liked it. From there, I discovered many unique features of Cantonese opera—such as the singing styles, and the coordination between the hands and the arms, glance, gesture, posture, and step. I often say dance is very raw, because there are many changes and variations in dance. In Cantonese opera, the forms have been streamlined and refined, and they are relatively static. To me, it is an art form that encompasses everything. When different people look at the same thing from their unique vantage points, it reveals different possibilities.

I do not have a thorough understanding of Cantonese opera, but I am really curious about it. I approach and respect it from my own perspective. Although it seems like I may be “ruining” Cantonese opera, I am trying to interpret it, and extract from it elements that I consider essential to the art form. I can forsake the costumes and styling, or the length and form of vocal performance in Cantonese opera. To me, the singing styles are indispensable—it is amazing how Cantonese opera, as an art form or an artistic technique, possesses an array of incredibly subtle tones. I will not present Cantonese opera in the form of a pop music performance. There are some musical experiments in our production that answer one of Rex's artistic inquiries: Can we take away loud percussion and the full ensemble, and present music in a minimalist expression?



Yang Yuntao — Photo: Ka Lam

We share the same vision of showcasing the essence of Cantonese opera, without being constrained by traditional Cantonese opera music. It is impossible to compare different audiences and decide who are the most avid lovers of Cantonese opera. For instance, traditional audiences of Cantonese opera have a profound love for it, and we cannot expect everyone else to be equally passionate about it. To these traditional audiences, Cantonese opera is part of their memories of their growing-up years. For many of them, it is a belief and a way of life. To me, Cantonese opera is an imagination. I did not grow up in that era, so I do not have the same kind of emotional attachment to the art form. But this has not stopped me from falling in love with Cantonese opera. Rex and I had many exchanges when we were working on the experiment together. He was aware that I consider certain characteristics of Cantonese opera to be absolutely essential, while I could see Rex loves the beauty of dance. Before getting involved in a collaboration, I think people should have an understanding of each other's sense of aesthetics and see whether they can communicate. You can only create art together with someone else if you can appreciate each other. Otherwise, there will be conflicts. You may not have a deep love for an art form, but you must have respect for it. You respect it because you understand it. For instance, if you are working with music or drama, you must have a solid understanding of singing, acting, or physical movement. It is only then that you can truly engage in it and handle it well. This is an important experience that I have had of interdisciplinary creation.

Chan: As Yuntao mentioned just then, Cantonese opera is a highly refined art form. Do you think it has evolved into a relatively solid or well-developed system to an extent? How do you search for other possibilities within such a well-developed system? Does this undermine the possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration in Cantonese opera?

Yang: I think we need to make space for one another. We are talking about Cantonese opera being a refined art form, and we may have different ideas about it. Frankly, I do not have the skills to perform Cantonese opera, just as Rex does not have the skills to choreograph. That is why we make space for the other and accept each other's views on our artistic disciplines. I think we both have an open mind. In this collaboration, Rex left room for my positioning of Cantonese opera. To an extent, I was ruining Cantonese opera, but it was how I approached it. For instance, do you think archaeological artefacts should be cleaned? I think so, even though they lose their value as archaeological artefacts after the cleaning. The general consensus is that archaeological artefacts should be restored and preserved with scientific methods. It is only when the dirt—which is a kind of "divide" between an artefact and humans—is removed that the public can have a clear view and understanding of it. If the artefact is preserved in its original state, what is the evidence of human care for it? I can see why some people do not accept my approach to Cantonese opera, because I have taken away the traditional elements. I agree the music and styling in *Waiting Heart* are non-traditional, but it is my vision of Cantonese opera. I think this version of Cantonese opera is melodious and moving.

Ng: I think that is true to an extent. Nothing is perfect. We look for things that can be refined, and we seek the capacity to refine ourselves. If you content yourself with a static state of refinement, you are actually going downhill, because you have lost the capacity to refine yourself. The world keeps changing, and so do people. If you do not change, your life will be a downward spiral.

Yang: Sometimes you are moving even as you stay put—like when you are rowing against the stream. You need to keep rowing if you want to stay where you are, or you will be washed down the stream.

Ng: Let's go back to the example that I mentioned just now. Perhaps the actor is still pointing at the moon or the floor, but I can see the subtle shifts that convey a sense of aesthetics. When I am able to discern the differences, I am developing my capacity for self-refinement. If you do not even have this kind of judgement, how do you refine yourself? If you think of what you see as something

sacred that cannot be challenged, you are only going to go downhill. It does not work either if you are hung up on yourself. For instance, if there is someone in the audience who is highly critical of the performance, we should try to understand their reasoning. I am open to criticism as long as someone can explain their reasoning. Can we try to think about it from their point of view?

Just now I said that in the world of dance, performers devote their attention to movement. When someone is focused on developing a particular area of expertise, they will get much more skilled in it than those who train in different things. Anyone who tries to be an all-rounder is going to wear themselves out. I often think that in Cantonese opera, the emphasis on the four skills and five techniques can be what makes or breaks a performer—they may not be able to master them all. Of course, I have seen performers who are able to do it. As a director, when I am working with an exceptionally gifted actor, I put even more thought into the performance. Or, if it takes ten actors to deliver the same dramatic effect, I put ten actors on stage. The performance may be just as delightful to watch. If the audience is open to the mix of different elements, and our performance turns out to be an excellent one, it means I have succeeded in what I set out to do. Nowadays, I do not think anyone has to be extraordinarily shrewd or versatile. Some people are geniuses. But if there were no genius today, would we have put everything on hold?

Chan: As we talked about it just now, it is essential to present the context for, or idea of, the sense of aesthetics that underlies a work. How do you make your actors or performers develop an awareness of performing in an interdisciplinary work, rather than in a conventional performance?

Yang: I think we were with our performers all the way through in this production. For starters, they were aware that they were performing an interdisciplinary creation, and they felt a little nervous. But it was a natural and comfortable process. The performing arts are interesting—when the process is too safe and unchallenging, the performers do not feel engaged, and they see it as a routine. If it takes too many risks, the performers feel insecure and confused. That is why I think we need to offer them a suitable vantage point [from which they can enter into the work]. First, you present to them something that they have not attempted before, but which they feel interested in and confident about. For dancers, space is the only thing that changes on stage. In this production, the stage was the biggest challenge for the dancers, since there were many constraints on the stage in this performance. The dancers had never performed at such close physical proximity to the audience before. For that reason, they were more focused, excited and mindful during their performance. I often think our dance works are too performance-oriented. It was precisely the

change that I wanted them to experience. As for the Cantonese opera performance, our two actors did a marvellous job. I did not have many exchanges with them, but they were very open-minded.

Ng: You need to pick the right subjects for an experiment. Compared to dancers, Chinese opera actors are more set in their ways. I use “evolution” as a metaphor for the responsibility of a director. If the weather was perpetually constant, the species on this planet would never have evolved. They evolved in order to adapt to changes. From a director’s point of view, we cannot create changes that are too drastic, or the actors will wither. If we create the right conditions for them to evolve, they will grow. In the face of challenges, actors will rise up to meet them instinctively, but we must also be mindful of their limits. Chinese opera actors tend to rely on guidance in certain things. They often say the director is like a rehearsal director—they expect step-by-step coaching from the director in everything, such as the wigwagging of the water sleeves, or the interpretation of the lyrics. I think the director should not take up the role of the movement instructor. They must have an overview of the entire production, and a mental picture of how the combination of different elements will turn out. It is not enough if you focus only on movement. This is a much-discussed topic in the world of Chinese opera.

As I mentioned just now, my role is to create opportunities for actors to evolve. For instance, if you pay attention to the Cantonese opera actors’ performances in the “Reunion of Sword and Hairpin”, you will see how each actor does not perform their movements when standing face to face with another actor like the dancers do. During the rehearsals, I suggested that they start by partnering with another actor, and then rehearse on their own. I wanted to see what kinds of effects it would create when they rehearsed the drama with another actor versus when they did it on their own. For instance, when Li Pui-yan was rehearsing her role as Huo Xiaoyu, she might use the door frame that was right next to her as an imaginary partner. When there were two actors rehearsing a scene together, Xiaoyu might sway her body towards Li Shilang as she sang the line: “Touching you gently”. When an actor was rehearsing alone, they could make use of the sets. I do not expect actors to perform “flashy” movements. Rather, I like to guide my actors to prepare well for the performance.

Here is another example. When I was directing *A Rose in the Tempest*, we had Ms Hu Zhifeng as movement instructor for the production. When Fan Li is escorting Xi Shi back to the royal palace, he sings about how Xi Shi, who is a legendary beauty, sacrifices herself for the country. As he is referring to her appearance, the actor would usually make gestures that complement the

description of her beauty, the way actors perform gestures that echo the lyrics in Cantonese opera performances. In Ms Hu's choreography, Fan Li pulls up his water sleeves and bows to Xi Shi. It is a deeply touching gesture. It hints at his love for her, and it is an expression of tremendous gratitude. I like to use this as an example to explain the heart-stirring shifts that I look for. They do not have to be dramatic or difficult movements.

Chan: If there is an opportunity to rerun this production, what are the areas that you think need to be developed or improved?

Yang: I think the choreography needs to be refined. I think the Cantonese opera part is spot on, but there is too much emphasis on dance. Although *Waiting Heart* is a dance work, I think we should not define what it is based on the weighting [given to each artistic discipline featured in the work]. As an element of storytelling, the movements are a little flashy, particularly towards the end. There needs to be some fine-tuning. Also, I think the dancers will bring a different vibe and feeling into the performance next time. It is something I look forward to if we get to rerun the show.

Ng: I second [Yuntao's] sentiments. There is a fairly high degree of completeness to this work. I am not boasting, but I can see a sense of aesthetics in this production. I do not think it requires drastic changes. But like I said just then, nothing is perfect. There are always things that you can do to enhance the sense of aesthetics in a work. Speaking of improvement or refinement, we should work at polishing the delicate details so as to reveal the story at a deeper level, but also in an accessible and aesthetic manner. I hope our work can resonate with audiences, who feel the joys and the sorrows as the story unfolds.

Chan: Just now we talked about not taking the audience into consideration [in producing a work]. Do you think this interdisciplinary performance led its audiences to cross artistic boundaries?

Ng: When I talk about not taking the audience into consideration, I mean we should not let the audience become a burden for us. For instance, you can look at our sets from close to the stage or from a distance. We want to convey to audiences that an up-close view and a distant view of the sets evoke very different experiences and feelings. I think it is amazing to watch a theatre performance at such close physical proximity.

Yang: I think that in a developed or civilised city, the needs of different people should be catered to. It is a sign of civilised society. At the level of artistic appreciation, I may not understand the work as a spectator, but I may discover a feeling of calm or a sense of aesthetics in it, and arrive at some kind of understanding from watching it. It speaks to a kind of emotional need. Why do so many people love to play video games? Because it is challenging. We use another means to respond to these kinds of human needs. In today's society, I think there is a lack of challenges for people in general. As a result, people shy away from things that they consider challenging. Many people think they do not understand the arts, so they will always pick an accessible and stimulating film over an art film when they go to the cinema. When did we start to seal ourselves off and lose our instinct to embrace challenges? [As artists], we are presenting something that is not repetitive. While we do not take the audience's point of view as our starting point, some audiences do like to try out things that they have not encountered before. We do not consider the audience, but my experimental theatre does cater to the audience's tastes. There are boundless possibilities in the theatre. It depends on what we do with them.

Ng: I believe the role of the theatre critic should develop in tandem with the theatre. Taking *Waiting Heart* as an example—we did not conduct an official survey, so my observations are based on what I sensed and heard of the audience's response. Some traditional audiences of Cantonese opera were receptive to the show. But in general—and this is not only in reference to *Waiting Heart*—why are some traditional audiences of Cantonese opera not open to these kinds of works? I agree with what Yuntao said. You must experiment, because it is what has to happen for audiences to grow.

The Cantonese opera industry is concerned that these experiments will mislead audiences into thinking they represent the tradition of the art form. Do they think I can subvert Cantonese opera and mislead audiences with my work? I am not that influential. There are many Cantonese opera productions that they consider authentic being put on stage. Why should they worry that my work will subvert what is presented in these shows, which make up 99.99 per cent of the Cantonese opera that we see? Be it analysis, preview, or review, theatre criticism offers a way for audiences to understand the theatre. When audiences encounter something that is not immediately accessible to them, theatre criticism can stimulate or guide their thinking. The same goes for house programmes. We put a lot of effort into producing the house programme for every performance, because it can help lead the audience into the world of the theatre.

In addition, education is an important issue. When we promote our shows at local schools, I often ask students one question: Has anyone been to the theatre? The answer is usually no. This is proof that there is a huge gap between conventional education and the theatre. Children do not have the opportunity to make their own choices, and they get to learn about the arts only when we offer them guidance. I hope that in a world that revolves around conventional education and texts, we can work together to create more choices in students' lives. When you look at many developed countries in the world, you can see that the arts have played a crucial role in the growing-up years of the leaders of society. If we look at it from a more materialistic point of view, we are trailing behind—how do we compete with other developed cities? People often say Hong Kong's elites do not really make the cut—they are mid-level leaders at best, because they lack genuine problem solving skills and creativity. A person without an imagination can never resolve truly challenging problems.

Of course, I do not only see the arts as something merely functional. But from a functional point of view, the appreciation of the performing arts or visual arts enhances a person's sense of aesthetics, which enables them to experience the beauty of life. The arts are essential, and the older generation has the responsibility to introduce the next generation to the arts in different ways. It is up to young people whether they want to take what is offered to them, but it is our job to present them with the opportunities. We have not accomplished this. Some performing arts maestros that I revere, such as Pak Suet-sin, Tong Tik-sang and Leung Sing-bor, sought exposure to and inspiration from various artistic genres in order to enrich themselves. But we have not created a nurturing space for our young people in which they get to see how expansive the world is. I think it is absolutely our responsibility to do so.

Chan: One last question: Given the theatre facilities in Hong Kong at present, do you think there is enough room for theatre makers to put their creativity into producing more interdisciplinary performances?

Yang: It is all so-so. It is just how it is. Our approach to art making is risky and unconventional. When we make alterations to the seating arrangement or some other special arrangements, many people ask us if we can revert to more regular arrangements. I do not blame them, but I wonder if everyone could take a step out of their comfort zone and try to understand our unconventional ways. I am aware they are adhering to the rules in their respective positions. But as artists, we need to be constantly taking risks. This conflict is something that fuels our creative drive.

I think the theatres in Hong Kong have excellent facilities, and they are very decent theatres. It just happens that we have different perceptions of performance. I am not laying blame on anyone, but I think we need to put a lot of thought into accommodating [the administrators'] expectations or solving different issues.

Ng: I think Yuntao is saying there are many rules in the theatres. For instance, we have to adhere to the regulations regarding the width of the escape routes, and that we are not permitted to remove the guard rails, which are rather tall. When these rules present restrictions to our shows, how do I resolve the issues? It takes some extra effort.

Yang: Regulations like those regarding escape routes have created many limitations for the development of the arts. I am not commenting on whether this is right or wrong. But in the arts industry, problems cannot be solved by everyone sticking to the rules. We have to step out of the box and have an overview of the situation in order to devise better solutions. If our administrators do not consider these questions but only play by the book, how do we carry on along this path? How should we think about these questions? Sometimes I see that many of us devote a lot of energy to these issues. Should we really be doing that? I do not think so. In many cases, it is not about who should be making compromises.

Ng: I have realised that when they think about these issues, arts administrators do not give enough thought to artistic considerations. Do they not understand where we are coming from, or do they just want to play safe? They rarely enter into the world of the arts to find out what is going on. Can we think about how to create flexibility within the rules?

Yang: I agree with you. The arts are in need of support and help, especially from arts administrators. They should be here to help disorganised people like us who do not know how to navigate everyday life.

Ng: People liken us to channels that keep skipping, because they cannot follow what is going on with us.

Yang: I understand that arts administrators are doing important work, but I hope they can cut us some slack. I think it is a question of measure and balance.

Ng: I think the Hong Kong Arts Development Council has been making steady progress in the past few years. They have shown improvements even in some minor areas. It is pretty remarkable. In terms of facilities, I think there are not enough venues for experimental works with a simpler set-up. For instance, the Studio Theatre of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre is a large-sized black box theatre. We do not need so many large-sized black box theatres, because the average theatre company cannot afford the venue hire charges. How can we do any experiments if we cannot even afford the venue hire charges? What we need is a larger number of black box theatres, not a black box theatre that is more like a large theatre.

When they were planning the construction of the West Kowloon Cultural District, I presented an opinion: There should be more than a few black box theatres, or it will be difficult for art groups to book the venues, and the venue hire charges will be rather costly. In fact, we only need a basic stage, and lighting and audio equipment. If [the institution] thinks it is still too expensive to operate a theatre with lighting equipment, they can refer to the theatres in Korea, where only a basic venue is available for hire. I can stage a small experiment, or perhaps we can use flashlights to create lighting effects. For instance, an actor and I can point the flashlights at each other. If these small-sized shows get the attention of potential sponsors, there may be opportunities for us to develop the works. I am not negating the value of large-sized black box theatres, but we do not need such large spaces. I hope there will be more theatres like the McAulay Studio at the Hong Kong Arts Centre being built. We can operate the control panel on our own, which will lower the venue hire charges. That is why we do not need large-sized black box theatres; instead we need many black boxes. We are waiting for the establishment of an experimental zone, where there are dozens of black boxes for us to perform in.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)



In celebration of the 101st anniversary of the birth of legendary Cantonese opera playwright Tong Tik-sang in 2018, Yang Yuntao and Rex Ng co-produced *Waiting Heart*, an interdisciplinary collaboration between dance and Cantonese opera — Photo: Ka Lam

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