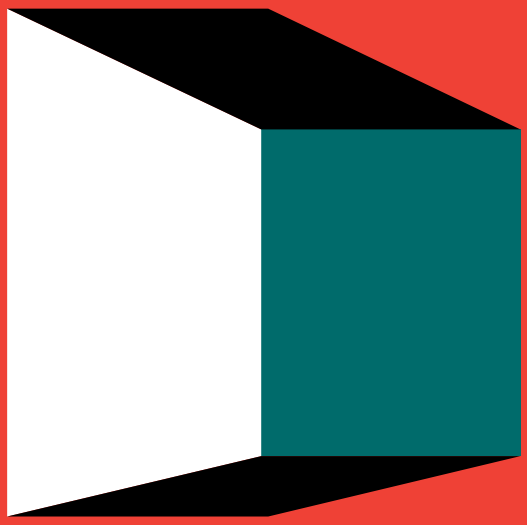
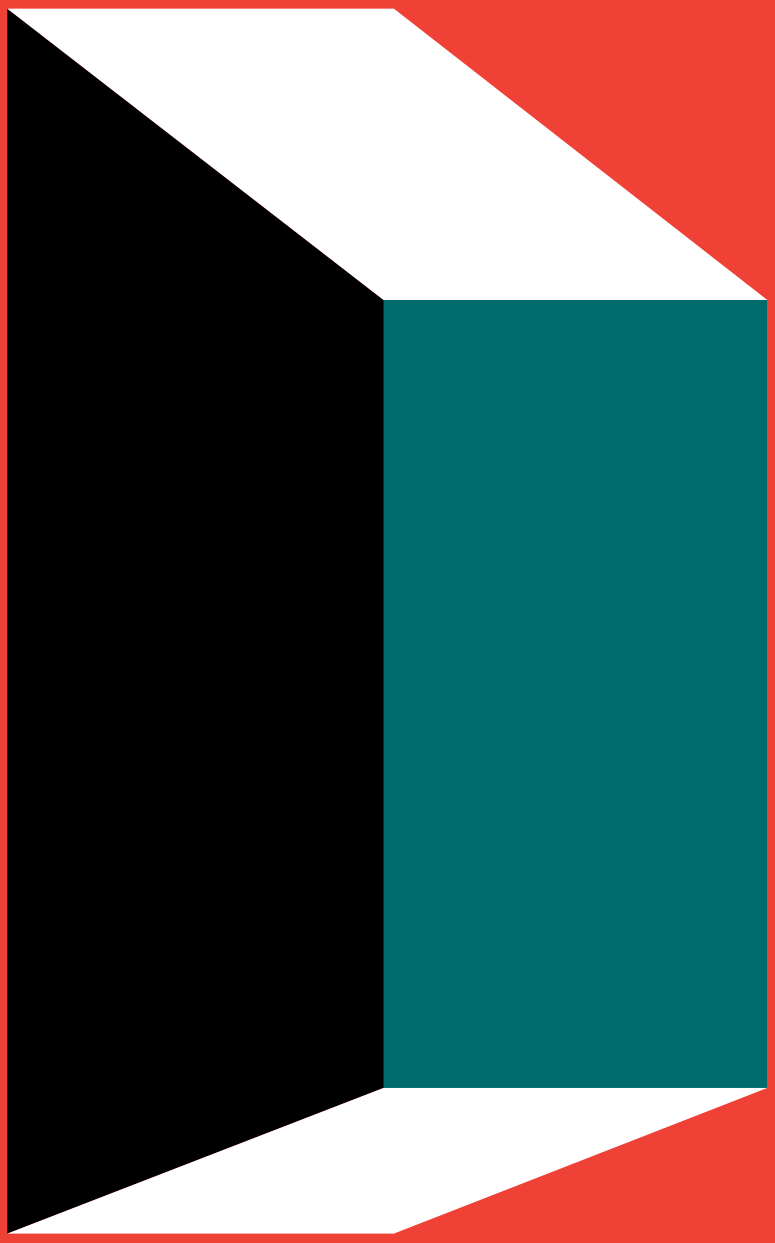
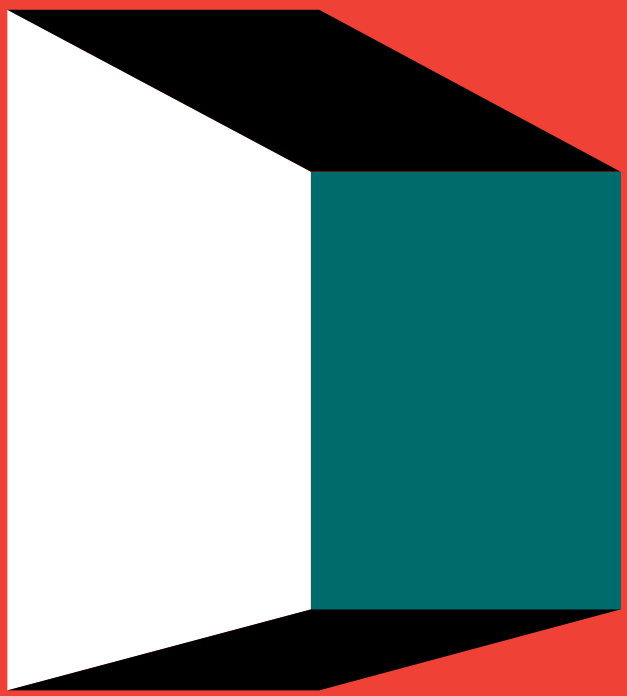
香港戲劇概述







Hong Kong Drama Overview

2017
2018

A Breakthrough in Disability Theatre in Hong Kong

On The Path Together

A Breakthrough in Disability Theatre in Hong Kong
On *The Path Together*

Text
Cheung Ping-kuen

The year 1986 was an important year in the arts—it marked the launch of the inaugural Hong Kong Festival of Arts with the Disabled, and the establishment of the Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong (ADAHK). More than three decades have passed since.

Disability arts have come a long way in this city. While they were once perceived as a kind of social welfare activity in the early years, over time they have received positive attention in mainstream arts circles. The ADAHK was recognised for its artistic achievement when it garnered the status of being financially supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC). The association went on to win accolades at the annual HKADC's Hong Kong Arts Development Awards, including a Bronze prize and a Gold prize in Award for Arts Education in 2009 and 2012 respectively, and a Bronze prize in the Award for Arts Promotion in 2012. There have also been many notable efforts from other organisations striving and thriving along this path. They include productions by the Hong Kong Theatre of the Deaf and the Theatre of the Silence, featuring artists with hearing impairments; and *Waiting for Ming Kwong* performed by actors with visual impairments. Other impressive productions have included *Concert in the Dark*, and the experiential exhibition *Dialogue in the Dark*, which opened in 2010. The Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (predecessor of the Food and Health Bureau) of the HKSAR Government and the ADAHK co-presented the International Festival of Inclusive Arts in 2006. The wheelchair dance at the 2007 Congress of the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association in Hong Kong received wide acclaim. Established in 2011, the GIA theatre (Glow in Art) has presented an array of theatrical productions featuring performers both with and without disabilities. The Nonsensemakers launched The Hand in Hand Capable Theatre, which has been active in staging inclusive performances in recent years. Its production, *The Rainbow Troops*, was one of the programmes of the 2017 Jockey Club Hand in Hand Capable Theatre IncluDrama Project. These developments reflect growing recognition of the arts as a means for overcoming barriers and achieving (or at least striving for) social inclusion. We seek to experience the differences between people from diverse perspectives and reflect on the meaning of "handicap" at a deeper level—the emotional handicap of those who discriminate against others may be the worst handicap of all. All this fosters our understanding of and respect for "the other", inspiring us to work together to build a better society.

Against this flourishing backdrop of disability arts, *The Path Together* by the ADAHK is an exciting addition to the scene. The play is directed by Emily Chan, who penned the script with Pak Li, with Terence Chang as advisor. Between its 2017 premiere and its 2019 rerun, the production demonstrated the maturing of disability arts performance, and its incredible theatrical aesthetics have set a high standard for disability arts/inclusive arts in Hong Kong.

The play has a fairly straightforward plot: Mandy (played by Gia Yu), an artist who has returned from overseas, accepts an invitation to exhibit alongside three artists with disabilities, Liu Tung-mui, Kevin Cheng and Lee Hin. Yet the group gets off to a rocky start. The three artists have chosen the wild boar as the theme of the artworks, but Mandy believes the animal has associations with being filthy. She insists on changing the theme to the pigeon—a classy motif that makes for elegant display—since she envisages the bird as a symbol of the three artists with disabilities spreading their wings to reach an international audience. However, Liu, Cheng and Lee see the wild boar as a powerful motif that lends itself to imaginative interpretation. The drama sheds light on the differences between Mandy and others' perceptions of art, and invites reflections on how art speaks to the heart. In the end, Mandy accepts the suggestion of the three artists with disabilities. The exhibition opens and proves a success.

More than its story, its presentation of a "disability arts" performance is the most outstanding aspect of this production, and it makes for an eye-opening showcase. Artfully conceived and executed, the staging allows for interaction with the audience, enriching the aesthetic dimension of the work. The mix of communication and artistic immersion gives a fuller expression to the theme of inclusion and power in this moving drama.

The three artists with disabilities live with different physical constraints. Musician Lee Hin, who has only 10% of his vision remaining, refrains from making large movements in the performance area. Photographer Kevin Cheng is an articulate speaker, and he steers his wheelchair with ease despite being unable to move his lower limbs. Painter Liu Tung-mui has cerebral palsy which affects her speech, and others push her in a wheelchair. The artists' characters are played by three actors—Lam Tsz-yuen, Kan Kiu and Boat Chan. Each character is performed by two performers: the actor who has been cast for the role, and the artist him/herself. This merging of reality and performance is strikingly effective. The two performers can appear on stage at the same time, and

The theatrical interpreters perform alongside the actors at the centre of the stage —
Photo: Henry Wong Photo courtesy: ADAHK

even converse with each other. The actor slips into his/her character like the artist's shadow or his/her inner world, bringing an enchanting fluidity to the play.

Another marvellous aspect of the production is the design of theatrical interpretation. In most performances, the interpreter takes up a position that is similar to the *kuroko*.[1] Stagehands in Chinese opera shows are one example. They assist with make-up and costume changes, and move props and scenery on stage. Puppeteers are another example. Dressed in black, they appear on stage but are treated as invisible by the audience. Many contemporary directors like Robert Wilson, Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Lepage and Julie Taymor have broken conventions and freed theatrical creation from this notion of "invisibility" in various innovative works. The role of the theatrical interpreter that has been created as part of "arts accessibility" is both similar to and different from the *kuroko*. Interpreters usually stand on the sides of the stage and perform simultaneous interpretation using sign language and theatrical elements (movements and facial expressions that are in keeping with the character's identity). They do not expect to be seen by the general audience (similar to the *kuroko*), but they want to be seen by the hearing-impaired audience (different to the *kuroko*). The general audience sees the interpreter as an unnecessary and obtrusive presence; the hearing-impaired audience feels the interpreter's position on the side of the stage makes it difficult for them to follow the interpretation and drama at the same time. This inherent dilemma is beautifully resolved in *The Path Together*. The key is to recognise the intrinsic beauty of interpretation and considers ways to instil it into the drama, making it a coherent and refined whole. It is the same tactic others have employed in contemporary theatre—an act to liberate theatrical creation.

That is why we see four theatrical interpreters, who are dressed in black, moving across the stage freely and interpreting for different characters. When the interpreter, the actor, and the artist with a disability are performing the same role simultaneously, there is the sense of an unspoken exchange between them that is completely organic, and which brings a distinctive quality to the play. The director also highlights the use of choreography in the duet between the interpreter and Mandy, which illuminates the character's inner world. All this accentuates the artistic features of the performance.

1 Gao Guiyu. 2018. "The 'kuroko' in contemporary theatre—a case study of theatrical work of Julie Taymor", *Drama Literature* (Drama Literature Magazine Division of the Julin Province Academy of Arts), issue 9, 2018, pp.73-80.

When I watched the premiere in 2017, there was theatrical interpretation in three out of five shows. The interpreters stood on a slightly elevated platform at the centre back of the performance area, where they were seen as a part of the performance rather than playing a supporting role. In the rerun two years later, the interpreters had stepped off the platform and blended seamlessly into the play, becoming an integral element of the performance—their role no longer "supplementary" but "complementary". This development is a sign of true inclusion in the work.

I also had the honour to see Liu Tung-mui in performance at the premiere. The premiere was staged at the Cultural Activities Hall at the Ngau Chi Wan Civic Centre, where the performance area is small and the actors perform in close proximity to the audience. In one of the scenes, as the lights dimmed and brightened again, Liu Tung-mui and her father appeared before the audience in place of the two actors playing their characters. This unexpected glimpse from real life was astounding as it was powerful! The rerun was presented at the HKAPA's Hong Kong Jockey Club Amphitheatre. Given the larger performance area at this theatre, the director had to make certain changes to the staging that enhanced the "spectatorial appeal" of the play. It was a pity that not all of the three artists with disabilities were able to appear in the performance. Nonetheless, the director gave a thoughtful explanation of this detail.

In the original version, Liu Tung-mui attended the exhibition with her father pushing her in a wheelchair, alongside the two other artists with disabilities. In the rerun, her father was joined only by Lee Hin and Kevin Cheng. As it was revealed in the play, Tung-mui was in hospital. And she was also "absent" in the play since Boat Chan, the actor who was playing her character, had to perform another role at that moment in the play. This detail demonstrates some of the subtle boundaries of "performing" a character. How do we perform a character? When should we perform it? When should we not perform it? This production offers a wonderfully apt staging of these important questions.

This reminds me of the stage history of *Children of a Lesser God*. Playwright Mark Medoff wrote this work specifically for the hearing-impaired actor Phyllis Frelich, who played the protagonist Sarah Norman in the production when it premiered in the US in 1980. The role was also played by actors with hearing impairments in subsequent renditions—Elizabeth Quinn and Linda Bove in theatre, and Marlee Matlin in the film adaptation for which she won the Academy Award for Best Actress in 1986. For its adaptations of the play in 1985 and 1996, the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre came under criticism for not casting an actor with a hearing impairment in the lead role. With the subsequent development of disability arts in Hong Kong, I believe there would be actors better suited to the role if the play were to be produced today. While we see three performers playing the same role in *The Path Together*, the artist with a disability and disability arts are at the heart of the work. When Boat Chan "performed" the role of Liu Tung-mui, it was a manifestation of performing arts; when she "did not perform" the role of Liu Tung-mui, it was an expression of respect. Beauty was at the core of the balance between the two representations. It is true that we do not yet have the kind of resources to produce works like *Can We Afford This?* by DV8 Physical Theatre or *Mabou Mines DollHouse* by Mabou Mines, two productions that toured to Hong Kong in 2000 and 2006 respectively. The former features legless dancer David Toole, while the latter stars dwarf performer Mark Povinelli. Both of them play essential roles that encapsulate the themes of the works: The former challenges the definition of physical disability, and the latter portrays how a "small" man can possess "big"

Two performers playing the same role: Lee Hin, the artist with a disability (left) and Lam Tsz-yuen, the actor playing Lee Hin in the drama — Photo: Henry Wong Photo courtesy: ADAHK

power. Within the parameters of its creative and production resources, this ADAHK production illustrates remarkable artistic direction and attitude.

Beyond acknowledgement and acceptance, the work highlights the necessity of, and difficulties in, learning how to deal with differences between people. Differences are the starting point and impetus for the creation of beauty. “Inclusion” is easier said than done, and it is a challenge for both creative artists and the audience. *The Path Together* is an invaluable achievement.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

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A veteran theatre practitioner, theatre educator, researcher and art critic, Cheung Ping-kuen obtained his Bachelor of Arts, Master of Philosophy, and Doctor of Philosophy from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has served in various public duties. He was elected by the community and appointed by the government as a member of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council between 1996 and 2007, during which he served as the Chairman of the Drama Committee. Currently retired, he devotes his time to working on a monograph on the history of Hong Kong theatre. He is the Chairman of the International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong).

香港戲劇概述 2017、2018
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