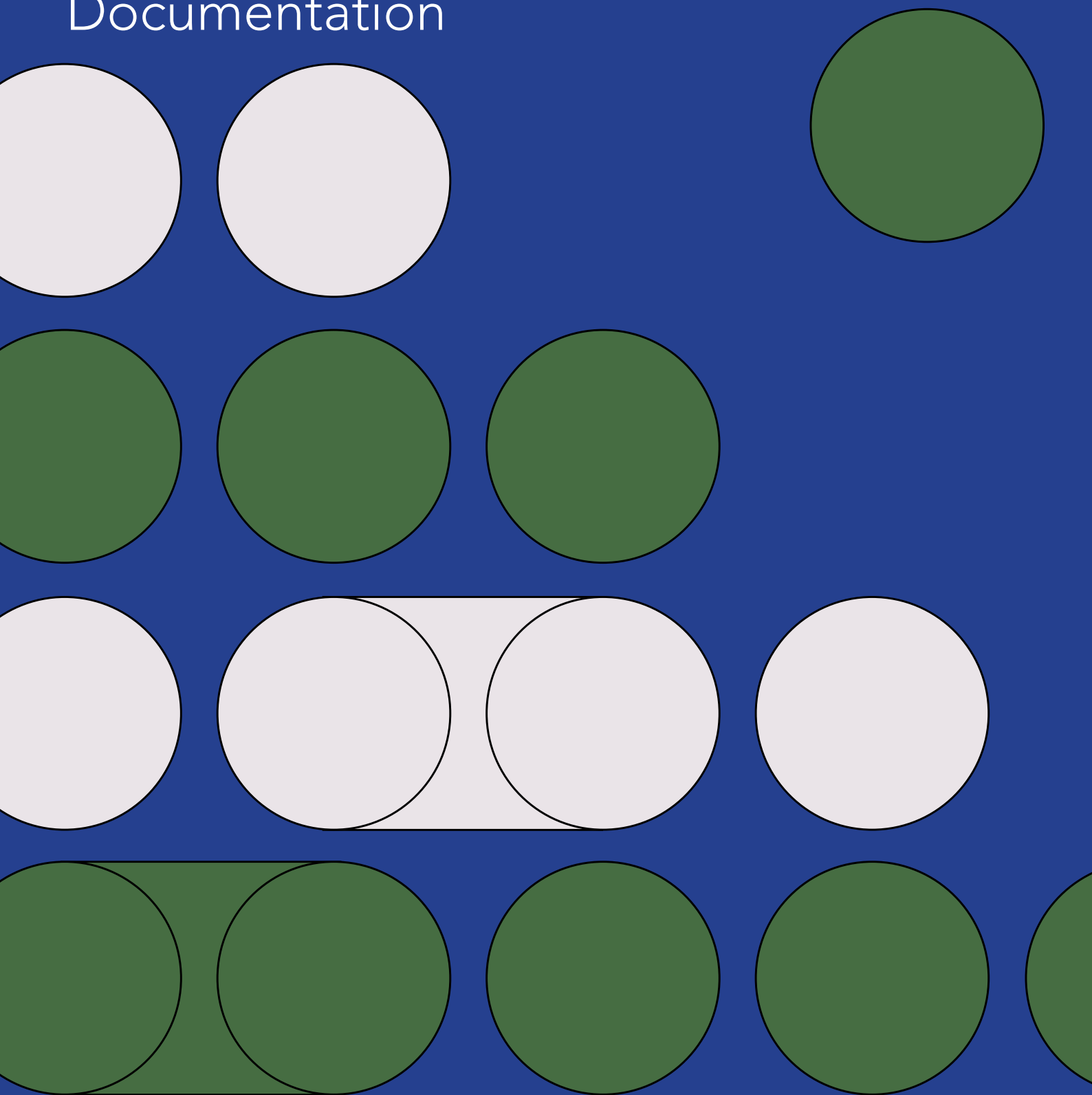


Archiving for Hong Kong Theatre

by Shine Kong Kei-wing

The Practice and Challenges of Performing Arts Documentation



Every performance takes place in the moment, but the production of a performance is a cumulative process. In addition to the preparations beforehand, the staging of a performance involves the experience of creators, theatre groups, or even the extensive cultural experience of the entire performing arts industry. Apart from memory, this experience can only be preserved by records. Unfortunately, the awareness of documenting performances among Hong Kong theatre workers is not yet widespread, nor is there a comprehensive central system which keeps records of local performances. Nonetheless, it turns out that many local theatre groups already have considerable experience in documenting performances. For this article, the editorial team of *Hong Kong Drama Overview 2019 & 2020* invited four seasoned theatre groups, namely Chung Ying Theatre Company, Zuni Icosahedron, On & On Theatre Workshop, and Theatre du Pif, to exchange ideas on archiving strategies, discuss the obstacles and challenges in their implementation, and explore the significance and development of documentation.

Chung Ying Theatre Company: Setting Up an Archive Department Dedicated to Record Keeping

In 2018, Chung Ying Theatre Company (Chung Ying) created the first-ever archive in the local theatre industry to chronicle its historical trajectory. The initial impetus came from “Reinvigorating a Vital Tradition”, an exchange programme supported by the Home Affairs Bureau’s Contestable Funding Pilot Scheme. Chung Ying invited British production teams and actors to collaborate, and also visited London twice to perform and conduct cultural exchange. In 2015 and 2016, the members of Chung Ying took the opportunity to visit the National Theatre and the British dance company Rambert to learn how performances were archived in the UK. At the time, Rambert wanted to revisit a production from its repertoire. Because the dance company had retained the relevant information from 30 years ago, it was able to contact the organisation which funded the performance back then and negotiate another collaboration. It even saved some of the materials related to the performance which

were helpful to production design and promotion. All these factors planted the seeds of the show's revival.

Artistic director of Chung Ying Dominic Cheung states that this experience is definitely worth learning from, and also feels that the group's failure to fully document its past performances has led to problems in production:

"Chung Ying will present a rerun of *Twelfth Night* in April 2022. Although the script by Shakespeare was used for the 1986 premiere, director Bernard Goss made some substantial revisions alongside translator and adapter Rupert Chan. The scene order was rearranged, while the actors also made further changes during rehearsals. On top of that, Ko Tin-lung took over as director in 1999. Consequently, there were multiple versions of this production. It was only when we were looking for the relevant information more than 30 years later that we discovered there was an obvious lack of clarity. The source was not specified in many of the scripts. Which year's version is the script we currently have? Is it the version that was performed, or is it Rupert Chan's adaptation? If the information is not organised properly, it will give you a headache when you need to use it. There is no way to see the work's development over time, and it is even harder to discern the approaches used in different eras and by different directors. This further confirms the importance of documenting performances."

The opportunity presented by the aforementioned exchange programme prompted Chung Ying to apply for funding from the Home Affairs Bureau to create an archive in 2017. Although the subsidy ended up being much less than the amount requested, Cheung believes it was something of great significance which had to be done:

“Even though we received funding, we took a trial-and-error approach in the documenting of performances, because the recording methods of various arts groups were mostly tailor-made. [These recording methods] were the outcomes of their own corroboration and exploration, so Chung Ying could only use them as references. Therefore, the first step was to look into how Chung Ying could start keeping records. Past information can only be organised to the extent possible, while it is hoped that future performances can be documented comprehensively. The most ideal scenario would be to adopt a uniform model for every play and to preserve the costume and set design of each production. We also hope to reorganise our poster and flyer archive into a more systematic and uniform setup. The idea is perfect on paper, but its implementation is fraught with difficulties. In addition to our main stage presentations, a lot of production materials pertaining to the Education and Outreach Department’s ‘Course Finales & Community Performances’ also need to be maintained. Archiving is an extensive and important task. The biggest issue is still human resources. Even though Chung Ying has an Archive Department, it only has a staff of two. Moreover, we have to spend time and money to hire part-time helpers. The information and system have to be constantly revised, and the task remains unfinished to this day.”

After the funding expired, Cheung persuaded the board of directors to continue the work of archiving performances, because it would be inexcusable if someone wanted to obtain information in the future and nothing had been chronicled. This undertaking did not stem from the grand ambition of contributing to Hong Kong theatre, but from respect for Chung Ying’s 40-odd years of history.

Zuni Icosahedron: An Inherited Awareness of Archiving

Although Zuni Icosahedron (Zuni) does not have a division dedicated to the documenting of its performances, PR and partnership development manager Luka Wong points out that colleagues from all departments are very aware of the importance of record keeping:

“Zuni has established a general system for archiving over the years. If a colleague wishes to go the extra mile or preserve certain things, then they will be responsible for particular archiving tasks. So, it is very organic. Nonetheless, the division of labour is quite clear. For example, the Marketing Department will keep the photographs and newspaper clippings of performances, the Production Department will save all the schedules and production-related materials, and there is also a colleague assigned to assist the director who is responsible for recording all the text, such as notes written by the director, scripts, and house programmes. Everything is ultimately put into the central system.”

This awareness of record keeping originated from Zuni’s founder, Danny Yung. Wong jokes that Yung himself is a central system. He was already keeping a lot of production-related information during Zuni’s early years, which he passed onto his colleagues for archiving. This top-down influence has led all colleagues to become aware of the importance of record keeping. When handovers occur, everyone has the relevant information to ensure a smooth transition. It also makes it easy to query the producer when doing research. When it comes to written records, the house programme plays an essential role in guaranteeing accuracy. If an annual report is to be made or if someone wants to conduct research in the future, the information belonging to the theatre group would be an important part of gate keeping. It is crucial that the information in the house programme is consistent with the final performance. Wong emphasises that Zuni keeps the schedule and script of every production:

“We do not just keep the final version. A colleague is especially put in charge of keeping track of script changes, because every single director will make revisions constantly. They will give the script a complete makeover from beginning to end, and even keep changing it during a work’s run. As for production-related matters that are not put in writing, a textual version listing each scene, as well as what happens when, is created. Everything that you see in the performance is documented.”



40 Years of Danny Yung's Experimental China: In Search of New China — Photo courtesy: Zuni Icosahedron

Apart from relying on house programmes and text to preserve history, Zuni also attaches great importance to videos. The theatre group has a comprehensive collection of video records. For example, its earliest works have been chronicled on media such as VHS and 8mm film. *40 Years of Danny Yung's Experimental China: In Search of New China*, which was staged in 2019, has been posted online for viewing. In addition to serving as a record, it also gives researchers an idea of how the production has evolved. Zuni's official YouTube channel has many past performances that people can watch. With the exception of works that are from the past decade and productions that have a chance of being rerun or shown in theatres, everything has been made public. However, should academics or universities wish to conduct research [on works that have not been made publicly available], the theatre group will provide them with videos. Regarding internal archiving, Wong points out that Zuni keeps a lot of rehearsal footage:

"Zuni's performances tend to be spontaneous. Images are used for improvisation in some performances, while at other times the text provides an overall theme which gives rise to various outcomes. It is quite hard to grasp when the actors make their entrances and exits, so in order for producers or researchers to dissect the production process, see the work in its original form, and observe the changes that have taken place from rehearsal to performance, you must turn to the videos for reference."

Theatre du Pif: External Documenting via Website Updates

Theatre du Pif, which has more than 30 years of history, puts great value on online records. In recent years, the theatre group has been actively updating every aspect of its website. This has a significant impact on how the production process is documented, especially in

terms of production mode. Manager Jamie Wu explains that for publicity purposes, the group's production records are arranged by year and classified as "performance" or "non-performance". Compared with the websites of other theatre groups, the biggest difference is that there is a list displaying productions by year, which enables people to know what the group has produced since its establishment. Each year's main stage production is also uploaded online, while clips of performance highlights ranging from four to nine minutes, as well as stills and even house programmes, are posted online.

Theatre du Pif only relies on the funding provided by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC), and does not receive additional financial support for archiving:

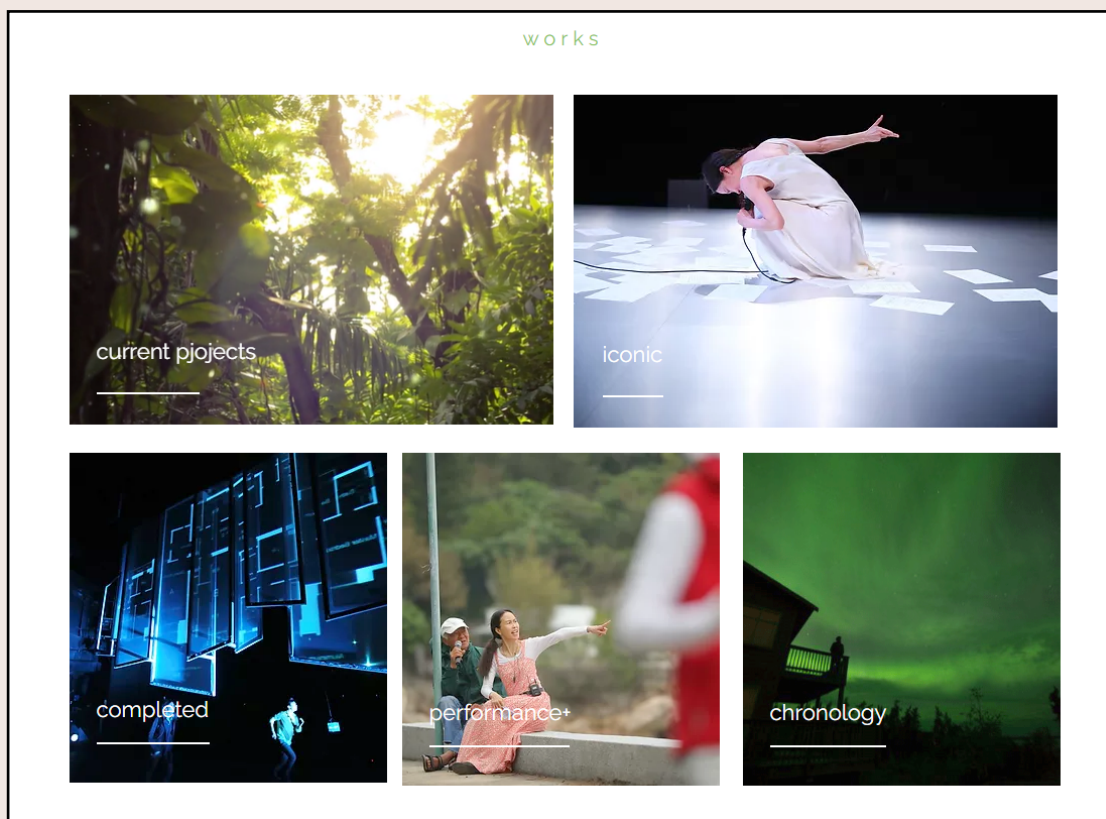
"For example, we would make an upward adjustment to the amount of funding requested for marketing for a particular year, which would allow us to update our website. The creation of the website was actually spurred by an audience survey. The results indicated that the information on our website was very outdated and did not support mobile phone browsing. Consequently, we discussed with a designer how to revamp it. The site needed to be in both Chinese and English, and many articles required proofreading. However, the lack of additional staff led to an increased workload. This bilingual requirement was actually linked to the market, and we also had in mind what we wanted to show our audience, so the design leant in this direction."

As for internal archiving, Theatre du Pif has been keeping records since it began producing shows:

"Our colleagues start by opening a shared folder, which is then split into production and administration. All production staff, including designers, will put everything related to

their work, such as reference materials and drafts, into the production folder. They will also separate the information into categories such as costuming, sound effects, and lighting. The stage manager will also sort out the stage instructions for each performance and prepare the final version of the prompt book for preservation.”

Theatre du Pif has very few records of the production process—it only makes audio recordings at each meeting and captures dress rehearsals on video. Although many of the group’s works are devised theatre pieces, artistic director Bonni Chan already has the construct in mind from an early stage. As a result, relatively few revisions are made from the first rehearsal to the performance, which means there are no major changes from the artistic standpoint.



Screen capture of Theatre du Pif's website

On & On Theatre Workshop: Recording Performances on Video

On & On Theatre Workshop (On & On), the recipient of a three-year grant, has a production file for each performance containing the script, designers' drawings, prompt book, and notes or materials arising from the research process. However, On & On's programme director Emily Cheng admits that there are no colleagues specifically tasked with keeping records, and that the group does not take a very systematic approach to archiving:

"We document every project, especially with videos and photos, so there is quite a lot of content, and it is mainly classified by year. As for production-related records, they are mostly organised by the person in charge of each production. The materials that are kept also vary, so the overall system is not ideal. We can be more meticulous with classification and screening."

Sometime between 2017 and 2018, On & On used the surplus from the Arts Capacity Development Funding Scheme (ACDFS) to organise its performance records. Images from past performances were transferred onto flash drives. Cheng is glad to have made this move: "Some of the early video formats were already out of date. We had to jump through many hoops in order to convert those videotapes into digital files. If we had done it later, it might have been even more difficult. Moreover, in the process, we found we only had compressed DVD videos of works that were performed in a particular year or two, and no original video files. It was not until later that we discovered the original files were stored in an idle hard drive. However, due to resource constraints, as well as inadequate staffing and time, that round of video material sorting was focused on performances. The group's other projects, such as seminars and staged readings, remained untouched."

Complete records are kept in the theatre group's archive, while some clips are posted online after being edited to enable the public to see past performances. Chinese subtitles are added to the edited clips. On & On's marketing manager Olivia Chan points out that the group's performances are mainly text-based, so spoken dialogue is especially important. Older clips need to be watched with subtitles due to their relatively poor sound quality.

During On & On's early days, in addition to updating its website frequently, the group also uploaded the information related to each show once its run was over, so that people could understand the production aspect. Before e-book platforms like ISSUU existed, On & On would discuss what information from the house programme—for example the names of the entire creative team, reviews, or interviews—should be put online. This screening was conducted on a case-by-case basis. In 2018, On & On took the opportunity of its 20th anniversary to launch a new website. At the same time, it held a series of activities under the "20&On In Full Blossom" programme. Among them, *Spring: 20th Anniversary Exhibition & Play-reading Festival* was a retrospective for which an exhibition of documents was held at the Cattle Depot. All of the theatre group's previous documents, photographs, and production-related memories or objects were brought out of the vaults for the occasion. In addition, there was a poster exhibition for which the promotional materials from the past two decades were reviewed, with the selected posters being digitised and printed for display. Later, On & On received funding to digitise all of its previous house programmes using ISSUU. After the content was sorted, it was uploaded to the new website, enabling the public to browse the house programmes from the past two decades. There is also a special page on the site that compiles, to the extent possible, media coverage and reviews pertaining to production-related matters or On & On itself. Apart from the website, On & On also has a YouTube channel containing highlights and excerpts of past performances. Complete performances, on the other hand, are not posted online.



"20&On In Full Blossom" Spring: 20th Anniversary Exhibition — Photo: hongnin.
Photo courtesy: On & On Theatre Workshop

The Difficulties and Compromises in Preserving Performance Materials

Regardless of the extent to which performance records can be digitised, the preservation of physical materials is also very important. This calls for a compromise, especially in Hong Kong, where there is extremely limited space. Chung Ying basically has no space to store stage sets at its premises, and can only determine whether to keep them based on their condition and the probability of reuse. Chung Ying only stores furniture props that are worth keeping. Dominic Cheung says that theatre is a very environmentally unfriendly industry. If there is no storage space, all performance materials are basically discarded after the run is over. On & On also keeps many of its props. If a production is expected to be rerun, the group has to

find a warehouse to store the related materials more systematically. Every piece of clothing is wrapped for basic protection and retrieved for the rerun. Otherwise, the items are put away randomly and screened from time to time. For example, custom-made garments have commemorative value, but are difficult to reuse, so a choice has to be made. In comparison, Theatre du Pif is more comprehensive in its preservation of production materials. It has a relatively complete collection of costumes and props stored in its warehouse, so the group's plans are never hindered due to lack of information on the production front. The storage system is the same even for works that are not expecting a rerun. Most of the items are kept until a decision has to be made when space runs out. Zuni has a place at the Cattle Depot to store costumes, props, and stage sets. Nonetheless, costumes have a tendency to turn yellow, making it impossible to keep them indefinitely. Luka Wong points out that Zuni is able to store quite a number of stage sets only because its two directors are minimalists. The group also uses a lot of arts technology. Although the installation process is complicated, the associated stage sets are lighter. However, if they become old, they too must be discarded.

It is not easy to preserve paper-based materials either. Dominic Cheung says that Chung Ying will keep at least a few physical posters and flyers to be showcased at exhibitions. Rupert Chan's manuscripts, for instance, have greater historical value in their physical form—the digitised image files simply do not measure up. The storage of physical items is rather troublesome—the indoor space needs to be dehumidified and kept at a constant temperature at all times, and it is necessary to buy protective materials to cover photographs and documents. Meanwhile, colleagues must also conduct inspections for insect infestation. It is a long-term effort, but a task that should be undertaken despite the difficulties. Emily Cheng jokes that the only advantage On & On has is that the Cattle Depot has a relatively high ceiling, and that air conditioners have been installed for temperature adjustment. As posters need to be stored in the cold for prolonged periods, high ceilings facilitate better

temperature regulation. Since its early days, On & On has dedicated time to preserving newspaper clippings, flyers and posters of each of its productions to the extent possible. Later, a lot of information could be found online and stored directly on the group's computer. The fact that it was not necessary to cut out articles by hand led to a reduction in the workload associated with the conservation of physical materials. The number of older house programmes was also decreased from 200 to 30 to free up space. Luka Wong, meanwhile, believes that it is impossible to keep a large number of physical items in the digital age—most of them should be digitised and shared. Zuni's set design drawings and costume sketches are digitised and uploaded to the central system for archiving. Zuni now prints fewer flyers, because they cannot be distributed at venues. Moreover, audiences access information differently in this day and age—they do not learn about performances from a leaflet, but from online sources.

Feedback and Social Significance Resulting from Documentation

What is considered sufficient when it comes to the preservation of archival materials? Where should one start? While On & On was rehearsing during a workshop in Taiwan, it learnt that theatre groups there kept written records. For example, a meeting or the first read-through would be documented in its entirety. This is rather interesting, but difficult to put into practice. During the rerun of *Waking Dreams in 1984*, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, prompting On & On to create a documentary about how the group adapted to the situation both on and off the stage. At the time, in-person performances were cancelled and then rescheduled. In the end, they took the form of live broadcasts. Each team member was interviewed for the documentary and asked about their thoughts on rehearsals, and how they modified the stage work for presentation on the screen (among other things), in hopes of

chronicling what happened and showing it to their audience, so that the audience could gain an understanding of the entire creative process and the team's state of mind throughout. Olivia Chan points out that apart from enabling the team to establish communication and synchronise with the audience, the documentary also serves as an excellent reference to revisit later, because it is already a form of oral history in itself. Documentation is very important to theatre research. Dominic Cheung wonders how much information will be there, should somebody wish to study Chan Ping-chiu's theatrical world in 20 or 30 years' time. It is possible that only superficial information will be available—the works that Chan Ping-chiu has produced, or what he said in the interview for the house programme. However, his thoughts during the production process and the reason behind his decisions might be lost. If a theatre group can document the first meeting of each production as well as the rehearsal process from the very beginning, it will be beneficial to theatre research.

Dominic Cheung laments about the loss of history. He recalls that the scripts of stage performances had to be censored before the 1980s. Zuni later initiated a protest, and, after a series of activities, the censorship system was successfully overthrown. This event was a crucial milestone in the development of the performing arts. But why did Zuni advocate this movement back then? What was going through Danny Yung's mind at the time? The answers to these questions only exist in memory. On the other hand, Chung Ying's records have been silently accumulating for a decade. However, some of them require memories to be made whole, and memories are often prone to inconsistencies and inaccuracies. After a few more decades, the previous generation may no longer remember certain events in order to tell the story. It is an impossible task for amateur troupes, but is there something theatre groups with two to three decades of history can do to help their younger peers? No matter the type of theatre group, if there is a resource for creating complete and accurate records, then information can be handed down from one generation to the next.



Chung Ying Archive — Photo courtesy: Chung Ying Theatre Company

Archiving is not only meaningful in that it chronicles the development of a theatre group, but also the progress of social technology. Recording techniques adapt as the times change to facilitate the continuation of conservation work. Jamie Wu gives the example of how photographers used to send the theatre group pictures on DVD, but these days, they simply provide a download link. Another example is that all of Theatre du Pif's performances are now recorded in 4K raw video, which results in very large files. Consequently, the group has to buy more and more hard drives. It took Theatre du Pif a year to transfer all of its VHS footage to the computer. Files had to be converted repeatedly and sorted thoroughly for archiving in order to make them easy to handle. Despite the absence of funding, the group still includes record-keeping costs, such as those associated with photography and filming, in the production budget. Archives serve as a foundation. Bonni Chan keeps the scripts she creates,

because she writes a lot of notes and musings in them. These records have a constant influence over the development of other creations. Although Theatre du Pif's repertoire seems very random, its works are actually interrelated. The group reviews its past productions or previous audience comments when planning a new performance, so as to gain insight into what aspects of the development direction need to be adjusted.

How to Go About Archiving Hong Kong Theatre

To further improve performing arts documentation, a concerted effort on various fronts is required. The most direct way is, of course, government funding. On & On's "Digitisation of Past Recorded Performances" project was carried out with the resources of the ACDFS. However, the documenting only applied to a small number of productions and cannot be implemented across the board. The form that the records take is also very important. For example, when discussions are concept heavy, it is more appropriate to compile written records for easy reference at any given time. Video can be used to document how the actors make their entrances and exits in a performance, and can also facilitate communication between people. On other occasions, means such as sound recordings and oral history may be more suitable. The reasons for archiving, as well as how records should be presented, very much depend on the style or creative characteristics of each arts group. Emily Cheng suggests all that matters is that the government allows theatre groups the flexibility to use these resources creatively and to freely decide how to communicate with their audience. In the long run, the government should provide independent funding and resources to each group for record keeping. At present, everyone can only strive individually to carry out some archiving work and establish a system to organise the content to the extent possible, so as to ensure sufficient information will be available in the event that there are cultural researchers interested in studying the Hong Kong theatre industry in the future.

If Hong Kong wishes to live up to the reputation of being a cultural metropolis, the government has to shoulder the responsibility of promoting local performing arts. Long-term public exhibitions are one such method. Chung Ying previously applied for funding in hopes of renting a venue in the community for public visits, and even exhibitions. Unfortunately, the plans were shelved due to insufficient resources. Only a cramped indoor space on the lower floors of a building is available to them, and although it is difficult to open it to the public, Dominic Cheung points out that anyone who wishes to watch the group's previous productions can make an appointment to view them at their office. This facilitates communication and enables them to connect with potential audiences. Asking people who are unfamiliar with the theatre to pay hundreds of dollars to see a show from the get-go is very difficult to say the least. Therefore, public exhibitions are essential for the promotion of local productions. Even if only a couple of people visit a day, being open to the public is the only way to create new possibilities. For example, if someone wants to learn more about ballet, they can visit Hong Kong Ballet's premises. Similarly, for members of the public interested in stage works, if there is a place for them to slowly gain an understanding of theatre production from scratch, followed by the different types of plays, regardless of whether they will ultimately attend a show or not, they would at least know what the theatre is about.

Between 2016 and 2017, the HKADC provided funding to theatre groups to make documentaries about their work to be shown at Tai Po Arts Centre. Theatre du Pif came up with the full-length feature *4.48 Psychosis*, complete with subtitles. Jamie Wu believes this is a platform that can reach peripheral audiences, and is a good thing for the overall development of Hong Kong theatre. Sadly, this programme seems to have been terminated after only a year. Nobody knows what became of it, and the industry itself might not have been aware of its existence at all. This experience gave rise to a question: Do we want to purely document a

performance? Or do we want to create something for public viewing? The resources required for each option are actually very different. To obtain quality records, one must first have a framework to facilitate the convenient storage of information. Many theatre groups have not yet established a clear structure. It is hoped that a framework will be created that will enable different companies to record together. However, this awareness is lacking in Hong Kong.

The preservation of manuscripts is a tricky task. In many cases, theatre groups do not have a permanent address. When office relocations take place frequently, materials and information often end up being discarded or lost. University libraries occasionally keep Zuni's annual reports. Both Dominic Cheung and Luka Wong express that these institutions can assume the role of cultural archives, integrating everything in their collections into a complete set of information for universities to study the history of Hong Kong theatre. It is also necessary for academia to conduct cultural research. Furthermore, it is easier to form partnerships with universities than apply for government funding schemes. This way, theatre groups would be spared complicated application procedures, and would not have to dedicate their already limited time and human resources to archiving. For a time, the Chinese University of Hong Kong actively liaised with theatre groups and offered to store an electronic version of their records at the university. The library at the University of Hong Kong also has a special exhibition featuring the materials belonging to theatre groups. However, they only collect items that are of interest to them. Although creating a cultural archive is a mammoth undertaking, the ideal situation would be to give the performance materials to the universities and have designated personnel process them systematically. This would be better than having each group carry out the task individually.

Lastly, cultural policies are still paramount. Without good regulatory policies, it will be difficult to accomplish anything. For example, with regard to the recent push to promote cultural

tourism, we must first identify the roots of Hong Kong culture. Every theatre group has different production processes, and we all come from different backgrounds. How can we use this opportunity to connect with theatre groups? If a performing arts database is to be created, information will not only be accessible to the public, but can also be passed down between theatre groups. This could give rise to a complementary relationship.

(Translated by Johnny Ko)

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He has appeared as an amateur actor in *Perform-aholic*, *Whales in Our Concrete City*, *Rewind, to remind*, *The Last Movement of City Oh!*, and *No Exit*. He wrote and performed in *Room of Solitudes*, *White Lie in Shadow*, and *Adieu au Pandora*. He also organises drama courses.

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