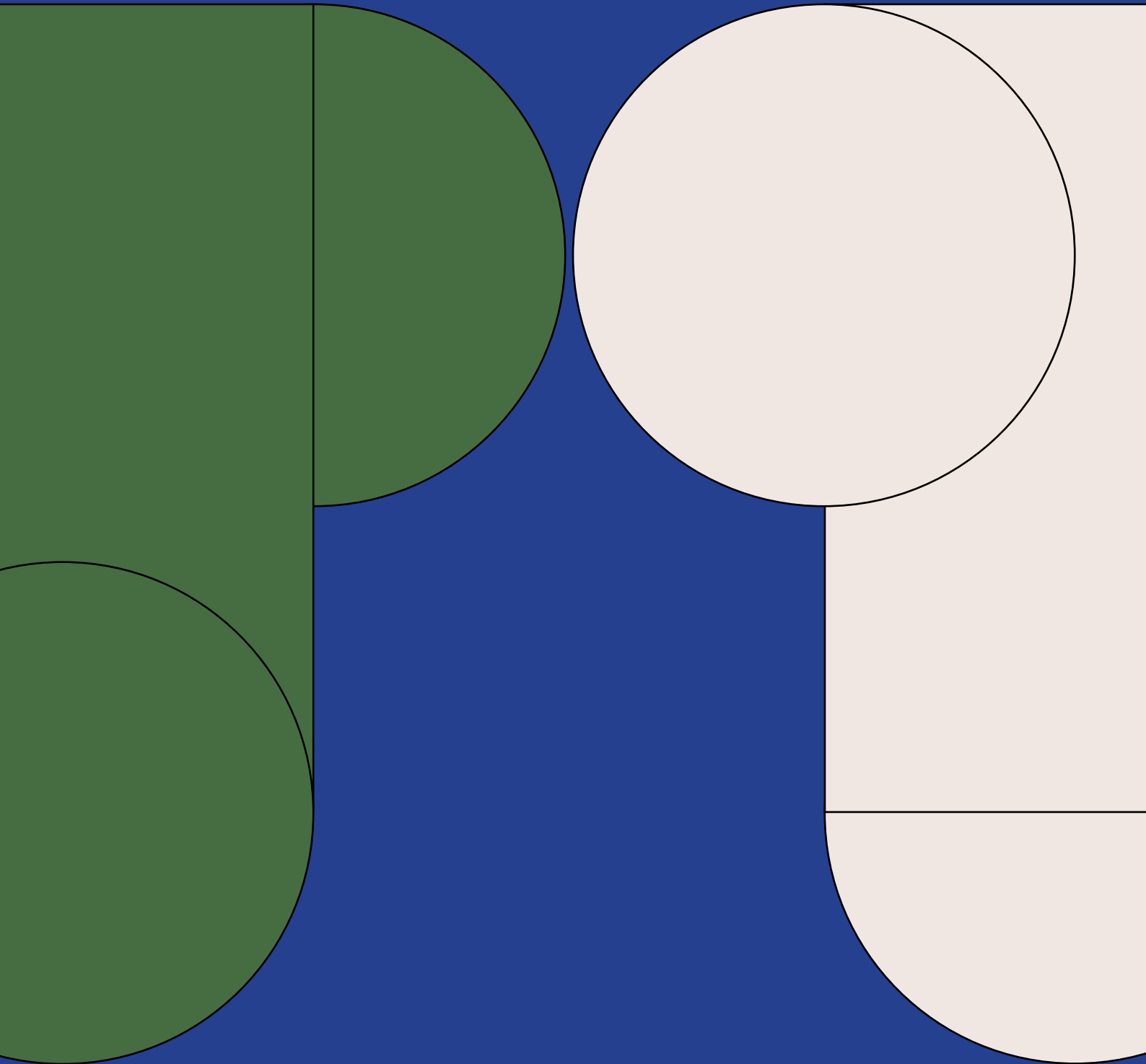


Stagecraft Reimagined

by Allan Tsui

Reflections and Challenges at the Prague Quadrennial



1. Theatre and Life

At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc around the world, leaving no sector or profession untouched. Most cross-border activities are restricted, while countries and cities are locked down. Within communities, social activities are restricted and most human interaction is online. Theatre has taken live rehearsals and live performances for granted “since time immemorial”, so the present situation constitutes an unprecedented impact on the way we work and live. Should we put on shows or not? Do we put them on online or should we reschedule? Should we postpone or cancel the show? Do we wait, or give up? My colleagues have been discussing this ad nauseum, as the theatre industry grapples with sudden and unpredictable social restrictions.

After months of hiatus in 2020, truths that were so self-evident in the past have had to adapt to the present. Many theatre makers have reluctantly pivoted to online discussions and online rehearsals, and they have temporarily deployed resources outside of their budgets to hire video teams for multi-camera filming, turning live performances into video broadcasts, or even streaming performances online. Elsewhere, new forms of productions such as “Zoom theatre” as pioneered in New York have emerged, forging new paths and creating breathing spaces for theatre in the pandemic.

The theatre is a microcosm of life, and this past year of global suffering must have a profound impact on the future of theatre—in terms of content, form, production and even concepts.

2. History and Design

As the world’s most iconic exhibition devoted to theatre aesthetics, the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space (PQ) has been a prominent arts festival that brings

together the world's theatre cultures and pushes spatial thinking since 1967. Within this arena encompassing phenomena and visions of performing arts from around the world, each country and region presents its own local perspective to the world. From a broader perspective, this quadrennial gathering is a global panorama of the arts. In order to inspire curatorial teams from around the world to create an innovative and stimulating showcase installation rooted in their own theatre culture, the PQ comes up with an imaginative curatorial theme for each edition, as a prompt for the curators to reflect on and respond to their own theatre development.

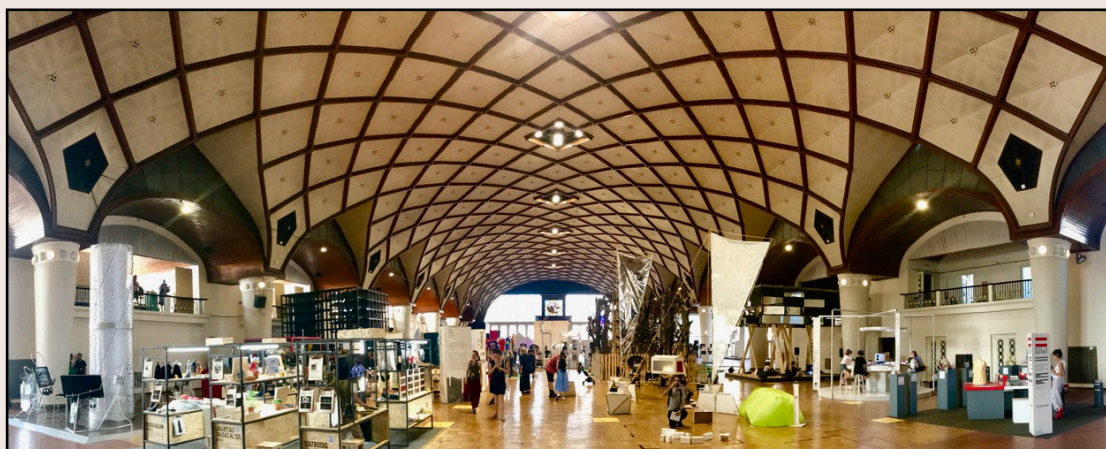
In retrospect, it is obvious that this cutting edge exhibition devoted to theatre aesthetics was not built in a day, and its vision and achievements have been shaped and baptised by half a century of history.

During the Cold War, the then Czechoslovakia was an Eastern European state with very few links to the Western European world, apart from international sporting and artistic events. Hence every occasion where it participated in an international event was a unique opportunity to show its strength and connect with the world. In 1959, Czech stage designer František Tröster returned from the São Paulo Art Biennale in Brazil with an award for his design of the Czechoslovakian section, based on the history of stage design and theatre architecture in Czechoslovakia. This honour highlighted the importance of theatre design in Eastern Europe. After years of deliberation, Czechoslovakia finally played host to the first PQ in 1967. However, the Iron Curtain so isolated Czechoslovakia from the free world that the PQ was very much a traditional showcase for theatre design from its first edition in 1967 to the 1991 edition, when Czechoslovakia was just emerging from the Iron Curtain. Theatre performances were theatre performances, and scenography exhibitions were scenography exhibitions, consisting of design models, photographs and descriptions of performances. Both curatorial concept and format were relatively conservative.

Since the 1995 edition, thanks to the free flow of ideas between Eastern and Western Europe and to increased creative freedom, the PQ curatorial team has been able to reflect on theatre ecology in the light of its own history and culture, and to put forward more ambitious ideas. After the exchange and exploration in the 1999, 2003, 2007 editions, and 20 years of ideological discourse following the full reform and opening up of the Czech Republic in 1989, the PQ officially proposed changing the title of the quadrennial exhibition from “Exhibition of Scenography and Theatre Architecture” to the more open-ended “Performance Design and Space” in 2011, boldly proclaiming to the world the myriad possibilities of bringing performance design directly into the living space.

The principles underlying the theme of each PQ edition are “to bring theatre design out of the theatre, to hold direct dialogue between performance and space, to mount exhibitions which are also performances, and to see performance everywhere”.

For instance, the theme of the 1999 edition was an open-ended question—“Theme”. In 2011, the theme was a poetic phrase—“At the still point of the turning world”. In 2015, influenced by the global political ecology, the PQ came up with a special “Art in Current Affairs” theme—“SharedSpace: Music Climate Politics”. In 2019, inspired perhaps by the relocation of the festival back to its historic venues, namely the Prague Exhibition Grounds and the Industrial Palace, the theme reflected the trinity of horses of the Golden Triga, its highest honour. This theme “Imagination. Transformation. Memory.” is analogous to the stage designer’s threefold approach to theatre.



PQ 2019 — Photo: Allan Tsui

3. PQ and Hong Kong

As members of the Hong Kong curatorial team, we have used the theme of each edition of PQ as a prompt to reflect on what we have done, what we have experienced, and what has been deposited in this place, inside and outside the theatre, over the past four years.

Since 1995, Hong Kong has been actively involved in the PQ through the Hong Kong Association of Theatre Technicians and Designers (HKATTS, pronounced [hey_cats]), the local representative of the International Organisation of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians (OISTAT), thereby bringing local productions to the international stage.

In 1995, seven local designers brought stage sets, costumes, lighting and sound designs for Hong Kong productions to Prague for a traditional showcase, marking the first time Hong Kong participated in a PQ professional group exhibition.

In 1999, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts took part in the PQ's International Student Design Exhibition with four in-house productions, presenting four students' works where Chinese operatic masks were an important element of the installation design.

In 2003, HKATTS selected four industry representatives to participate in a professional group exhibition using a concept suffused with Asian sensibility—"Form, Spirit, Meaning, Image"—to showcase local stage design.

In 2007, through the HKATTS's design competition, five winning designers conceived the tongue-in-cheek theme of "Economical + Beautiful + Fast = Sublime?!" where five pieces were staged in a shop-like pavilion in an attempt to reflect the reality of Hong Kong theatre through the appearance of a shopping hub.

In 2011, representatives of the Hong Kong professional team came up with the theme of "Extravagance and Minimalism", reflecting the polarisation of Hong Kong theatre at the time.

In 2015, the winning team of the HKATT's design competition created a Hong Kong Pavilion with the theme "Why Theatre Exists?", provoking the audience to reflect on the *raison d'être* of theatre. Four stage models were selected as the focus of the exhibition, and interactive tablet devices brought more than 20 Hong Kong stage productions to Prague.



The PQ Hong Kong Pavilion in 2007 — Photo: Allan Tsui

4. Space and Memory

The theme of the most recent 2019 edition is “Imagination. Transformation. Memory.”. How do we imagine? What do we transform? Which memories can be recovered?

Reflecting on Prague behind the Iron Curtain, it is possible that the lack of resources and the constraints of reality in Eastern Europe, coupled with creativity and imagination, led one of the greatest Czech stage design artists František Tröster to create a minimalist style that uses simple materials to stimulate the imagination of the audience. At the same time, Josef Svoboda, another Czech master who had a profound influence on the world of theatre design, developed the concept and form of live performance with video projection as early as the 1950s, and was a pioneer in the world of theatre media design. The minimalism, the

spatial composition and the practice of media design in Czech theatre has been shaped by its unique historical environment, and has developed a style distinct from that of Western European and Anglo-American theatre. Without the opportunity of an international art biennial to bring the minimalist and avant-garde designs of Eastern Europe to the Western stage, the productive tension between these two divergent artistic developments would not have been possible. The history of the Cold War in the last century bears witness to the interrelationship between social phenomena and theatre design.

Hong Kong has always been a city where “change is eternal”. According to historical records, the city has played an “eclectic, inclusive and ever-changing” role since the end of the Song Dynasty (13th century AD), when a large number of immigrants from the central plains of China came to settle in the south.

In a 1959 article published in *Life* magazine, the British-Chinese writer Han Suyin wrote: “Squeezed between giant antagonists crunching huge bones of contention, Hong Kong has achieved within its own narrow territories a co-existence which is baffling, infuriating, incomprehensible, and works splendidly—on borrowed time in a borrowed place.” Perhaps inspired by this text, Richard Hughes, an Australian journalist based in East Asia and Hong Kong, published a book entitled *Hong Kong: Borrowed Place-Borrowed Time* in 1968. Although the contents of the book are unattractive, the title is a much cited stroke of genius. Since then, “Borrowed Place-Borrowed Time” has become a popular saying about Hong Kong.

Upon further reflection, doesn’t theatre epitomise “borrowed place, borrowed time”? During a specific performance, a space is temporarily borrowed to allow a group of people who have never met before to experience together, for a short period of time, an illusion woven by theatre magic—a story in a virtual space, in response to a specific time, a specific place.

Although the performance before us is unreal, the emotions of the moment are real. The borrowed time passes quickly, and when the spell ends, the crowd disperses. Afterwards, everyone returns to their real worlds and continues to face their real stories.

Shakespeare famously said “All the world’s a stage”. Hong Kong is a rapidly changing set on the world stage. It is a challenge for the curatorial team to capture the imagination, preserve the memories and faithfully present this ever-changing set with limited resources.

When conceiving the PQ Hong Kong Pavilion in 2019, we proposed using “Hong Kong’s spatial memory” as the starting point. Let’s start from the “living space of Hong Kong” and imagine Hong Kong as space. From the outside, it is a kaleidoscopic treasure box; from the inside, it is an eclectic and efficient set of operations. Suppose we look at the city through an imaginary camera from a macro perspective, slowly narrowing the view from the city to the streets, then from the dense skyscrapers to the crowded windows, and finally, to the brick walls of the city, to the plants and even trees that barely cling on to the narrow gaps in the brick walls. Whether we look from a macro or micro perspective, we can see that the crowds, the dense high-rise buildings, the zigzag streets, and even the small flowers and plants growing between the narrow gaps in the brick walls are all part of a common phenomenon. Even though resources are limited, we have to squeeze together and survive in the narrow space as long as we can. The living space of Hong Kong is similar to the ecology of Hong Kong theatre—a crowded city, without very deep foundations, but all-embracing. Similarly, Hong Kong theatre is made up of many plays with short runs and scattered resources, which means creation has to “compromise” with time and space.

After several years of research and discussion, we came up with the following curatorial concept: “to return to the basics, to encompass all creativity, to present the entire theatre ecology, and to respond to our lives” as an answer to the theme of “Imagination.

Transformation. Memory.”. We looked back to the past four years of Hong Kong theatre design as well as forward to the future. In addition, we also used four types of space—“shared space”, “moveable space”, “flexible space” and “virtual space”—to showcase the use of theatre and everyday space in Hong Kong.

In line with PQ’s history of exploration, we also came up with a new idea. In an attempt to break away from the previous selection method, we adopted “All-In-One: Hong Kong Theatre Phenomenology” as the theme of the Hong Kong Pavilion. For the first time, we openly invited all kinds of theatre professionals to participate. After several rounds of introductory meetings, over 30 theatre artists including non-design practitioners were invited to participate in the exhibition, in order to stretch the imagination and highlight the creative spirit of the theatre production teams.



The PQ Hong Kong Pavilion in 2019 — Photo: Allan Tsui

For the exhibition installation, we started from the idea of a “brick wall” to come up with the central concept of a “moving wall”. We then transferred the physical “bricks” into an empty iron mesh space, so that all participating artists could transform their own imagination of the Hong Kong theatre into an installation that evokes associations and memories. After the participating artists had created their own “brick wall”, and a series of structural stability tests by the technical team, we succeeded in linking all the wire meshes together to form a “display wall” with dramatic tension. Among others, there was an interactive sound installation, a small robot with sensors, a virtual reality tablet, a foot sculpture in memory of a deceased dancer, a model powered by a miniature motor, and a model of an old Hong Kong building with a miniature display. Visitors from all over the world experienced this “multi-faceted” installation as they walked from the outside to the inside of the display wall of the Hong Kong Pavilion in Prague, taking in the diverse theatrical phenomena created by the unique historical background of Hong Kong.

Although this “mobile wall” cannot really “move”, a constant flow of visitors moved past it. During certain periods of the exhibition, the “inside of the wall” was transformed into a temporary theatre, with two artists invited by the curatorial team to perform live stories about Hong Kong’s memories through physical performance and light.

The exhibition space of this edition’s Hong Kong Pavilion not only contained memories of past Hong Kong theatrical productions, but also provided for simultaneous interactions with “ongoing” events in Hong Kong.

As the exhibition coincided with the amendment of the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance in Hong Kong, and in order to express the concern of artists to “protect creative freedom”, the Hong Kong Pavilion staged a show at the beginning of the exhibition where the opening speech was transformed into a physical performance in order to provoke the audience to

think. After the opening, some of the participating artists wanted to interact with visitors in a way that was even more directly connected with current events in Hong Kong, and the Hong Kong Pavilion was transformed into a live exhibition space that linked the Prague venue and Hong Kong in real time, providing an organic channel between the two places.

In the end, this theatrical phenomenon, the Hong Kong Pavilion, was shaped by chance into a set that changed more rapidly than expected in just ten days of the exhibition, and which also embodied the helplessness of “borrowed place, borrowed time”.



The PQ Hong Kong Pavilion in 2019 — Photo: Allan Tsui

5. Technology and the Arts: Concepts and Challenges

Recently, with the government's strategy of developing "arts and technology", there has been much discussion among local artists, theatre people and engineers from different technical disciplines as to how "arts and technology" can fruitfully interact. After years of experience in the Hong Kong stage design scene, and years of participation in international exhibitions, I believe that the development of "arts and technology" should focus not on "technology" but on "concepts"; not on what "technology" to buy at the moment, but on how to cultivate a creative atmosphere that values "research and development" with "reasonable time" and "ample space".

In the case of scenic design, it takes months to go from text to concept; from discussion, drawing, and model testing to production; from submission and final tweaks to performance. The distance between "design" and "production" caused by the unique environment of Hong Kong has to some extent hindered the further exploration and development of theatre aesthetics.

Hong Kong is known worldwide for its high property prices. This has created an economic ecology that has led to the relocation of large factories to the north. Several of Hong Kong's major stage set manufacturers have been relocating to Shenzhen since the late 1990s. The distance between the two cities has made it impossible for the design team to "research and develop" a design in a "reasonable time" and with "ample space".

By way of contrast, whenever the eminent British stage designer Es Devlin needs to check on the progress of her set design, she can turn up at London's Footprint Scenery any time to discuss design details and submission of the set with the set makers, and even make suggestions for improvements in the very early stages. To take another example, Taipei's

Mountain Timber Productions, a scenic production house run by a stage designer, has a holistic design and production concept that allows for “zero distance” between the concept and production of a stage design, and for the research and development process to take place in a reasonable amount of time and space.

Before we talk about how “art” can be “technologised”, we should first adjust these concepts so that “research and development”, “reasonable time” and “ample space” are taken for granted in every creative endeavour. We must first deal with the conceptual “software” above. When the objective conditions for production are realised, the technological “hardware” will naturally follow and the latest technologies—combined, multiplied, transformed or transplanted—will be incorporated naturally into the creative process. If the industry does not think in terms of “using time and space to cultivate art” and instead rushes to buy off-the-shelf technology that is already in use, the technology and equipment will have depreciated in value in a few years’ time, with creative teams still chasing progress within narrow time frames and creative spaces, thereby ensuring that “arts and technology” will be a one-off fad.

The Telling Orchestra, a performance by PQ Norway in 2011, is an electro-mechanical performance installation which exists in a purely mechanical as well as a live-action version. During the performance, the fully-automated mechanism works in a delicate and precise manner with automatic video projections, lighting changes and sound effects. The audience is unwittingly moved by the environment and atmosphere, and intoxicated by the power of this technological art. The production took three years from concept, design, programming, the manufacture of machinery, the creation of audio-visuals, to rehearsal and testing out. A moving piece of technological art, the focus is not on the pursuit of technology, but on the cultivation of time.

This year long pandemic has allowed us to slow down, think and reflect. While pondering the rapid rhythms of life in the past, have we also reflected on theatre, constructively transformed the memories of the past, and reflected on the essence and nature of Hong Kong theatre before the massive intervention of technology in art, in order to ensure that the future of creativity in this city can grow on a more solid foundation?

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(Translated by Amy Ng)

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is a Hong Kong stage designer and art director. For the past two decades, Allan Tsui has worked as a stage designer for over 200 productions in theatre, dance, opera and musicals, and has written and directed theatre productions. He has also written and directed experimental theatre productions. Tsui represented Hong Kong in the Prague Quadrennial in 1999, 2007 and 2019. He has co-curated and designed a number of local and overseas exhibitions, including the Hong Kong Stage Design Exhibition (2013/2014/2015/2018), the Chinese Theatre Festival Exhibition (2016), the Hong Kong Pavilion in the Prague Quadrennial (2007/2015/2019) and the Graduation Exhibition of the Design Institute (2016/2018). He has worked as a film art director and guest lecturer at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. He is currently an exhibition designer, stage set designer and costume designer, lecturer and course director of the Hong Kong Design Institute. He is also an Arts Advisor (Drama) at the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, and project consultant of the Hong Kong Association of Theatre Technicians and Scenographers.

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