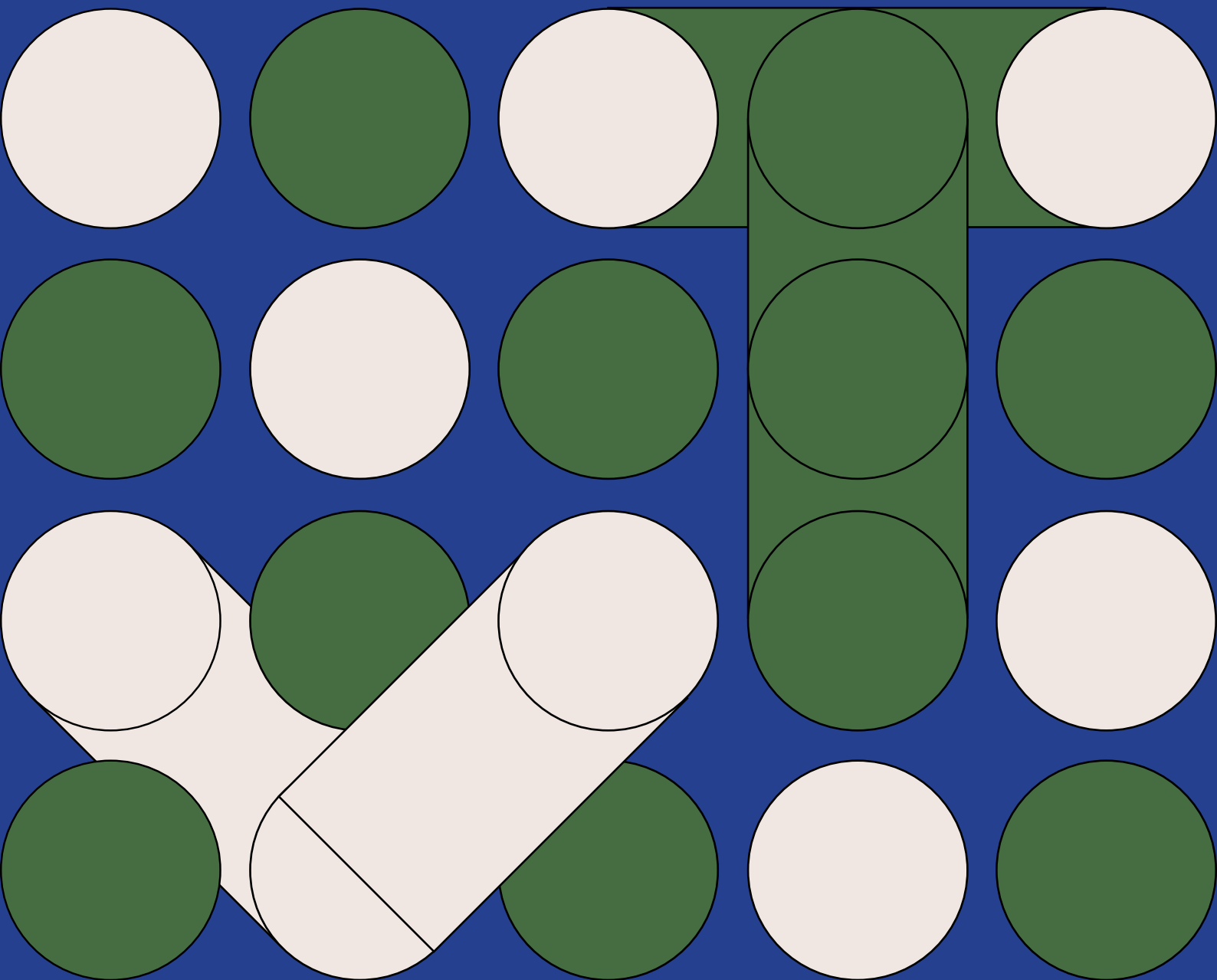


# New Venues and Theatre in 2019

by Pianda



In 2019, a number of newly completed performance venues came into operation, bringing new spaces and inspirations to Hong Kong's performing arts scene. Tai Kwun opened in May 2018, with JC Cube, which has fixed seating and a maximum capacity of 205, being its main theatre venue. In addition, F Hall Studio, which can accommodate 92 people and does not have fixed seating, as well as outdoor spaces such as the Parade Ground, Prison Yard, and Laundry Steps, can all be used for theatre performances.

Meanwhile, Freespace opened in June 2019, becoming another of West Kowloon Cultural District's (WKCD) performance venues after the inauguration of Xiqu Centre in January of the same year. It comprises The Box, The Room, The Studio, and Livehouse. The Box has a seating and standing capacity of 450 and 900 respectively, as well as a flexible stage and audience section that can be configured to cater to different performances. The Room and The Studio on the second floor are multi-purpose venues which can be used for rehearsals, workshops, seminars, and small-scale performances. Livehouse, located on the ground floor, is a bar and restaurant run by a commercial entity, with performances curated by the team at Freespace.

In Hong Kong, the majority of performance venues are managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). Will the new venues in Tai Kwun and WKCD, two institutions that are not overseen by the LCSD, bring innovation to Hong Kong theatre in terms of design and mode of utilisation? Eddy Zee, Head of Performing Arts at Tai Kwun, and Low Kee Hong, Head of Theatre, Performing Arts, of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, were interviewed for this article. Through examining the spatial characteristics, artistic trajectory, and future development of Freespace and Tai Kwun, both frequently utilised by the performing arts sector, we discuss how new venues can stimulate and influence local theatre.

## Catering to All Local Audiences

Both interviewees value the relationship between space and curation. Tai Kwun is a heritage building complex housing performance spaces that are not designated for specific use by the major types of performing arts. JC Cube serves as both a performance venue and cinema, with dance, music, and drama programmes all being staged there. Tai Kwun's grand opening in 2018 already saw its curatorial direction traverse disciplines such as drama, dance, and music. The programme included *Titus Andronicus 2.0*, a theatre production with an emphasis on live music and storytelling; *DIARY VI. APPLAUSE...*, which infuses choreography with rich theatrical elements; and the music programme *This Victoria Has No Secrets*, a mixed media performance. All three works were showcased at JC Cube.



Eddy Zee — Photo: Pianda

Eddy Zee notes that performances (including drama) at Tai Kwun have three developmental directions: the provision of an immersive audience experience; the connection between performances and viewers, and the Hong Kong element. The performance spaces at Tai Kwun are different from the established, formal venues under the LCSD's management. When curating a programme, Zee and his team begin by acquainting themselves with the cultural connotations and geographic characteristics of the building complex, evaluating its relationship with visitor needs. Tai Kwun's approach is to attract visitors of all ages and backgrounds, so its programmes cater to all local audiences. Before its opening, over a hundred local and overseas artists and art collectives were invited to visit Tai Kwun, so as to explore the possibilities in the interaction between creators and its spaces by gaining insight into the artists' thoughts about this venue.

## The Venue is Part of the Creative Process

Some theatre workers' first impression of JC Cube was that its lack of a backstage would cause inconvenience. Zee, however, thinks that this is also an opportunity for creators to conceive works from another angle. "JC Cube has about 200 seats. It is a small performance venue that is rarely found in Hong Kong, and is well suited to shows with one to four performers. Performances of this scale bring the audience closer and are also apt for touring," he remarks. In addition to JC Cube, the Laundry Steps, Parade Ground, and Prison Yard at Tai Kwun can all be used as theatre performance spaces. In January 2019, the cross-disciplinary programme *Fe + C... → Steel?* was staged at the Laundry Steps and Prison Yard. F Hall Studio and Duplex Studio, the latter of which is near Hollywood Road, have also played host to theatrical performances.



*Fe + C... → Steel?* (2019) at the Laundry Steps — Photo courtesy: Théâtre de la Feuille

Zee affirms that he and his team take into account the opinions of both artists and audiences. "The theatrical works presented at Tai Kwun tend to require audience participation, because the venue's hardware and overall style allow for a higher degree of spectator involvement. Therefore, immersive theatre is one of Tai Kwun's key development areas. *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* in 2019 is one of its iconic performances," he notes.

## The *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* Experience

In July 2019, *Please, Continue (Hamlet)*, *Tri Ka Tsai, Happily Ever After Nuclear Explosion*, and *The Day I Fell Into A Book* were staged at JC Cube for the Tai Kwun Theatre Season. From theme to delivery, every aspect of these productions made clever use of the venue's functions as well as Tai Kwun's ability to facilitate the audience imagination about theatre. *Tri Ka Tsai* combines Hong Kong's unique linguistic culture with music in a theatre setting without the presence of a backstage. Meanwhile, the family-oriented *The Day I Fell Into A Book* uses the same backdrop from start to finish, with the plot advancing through the verbal and aural cues given to the audience. This work blurs the boundaries of the stage and encourages interaction between the viewers and performers.

*Please, Continue (Hamlet)*, on the other hand, is a play modelled after a court trial. Zee states that he did not bring this production to Hong Kong because of the fact that Tai Kwun was the former Central Magistracy. "That was just a bonus. The social atmosphere at the time was what started it all—everyone was coming to cherish the Hong Kong judicial system more and more. The performance enabled the audience to become a jury and learn about the trial process (based on the case in the script). We especially solicited the help of the Hong Kong Bar Association. There were real lawyers participating in the show every night, which was something unprecedented. The feedback we received was very positive."



*Please, Continue (Hamlet)* (2019)— Photo courtesy: Tai Kwun – Centre for Heritage and Arts

## Developing Chemistry Between Creators and Performance Spaces

Apart from focusing on immersive interactive experiences, Zee also holds the relationship between the subject matter of a work and the audience in high regard. As he notes, “It is only when a work connects with the viewers that we can use the cliché, ‘We’re expanding our audience base.’ The theatre performances at Tai Kwun are first and foremost about learning, but I would not call it drama education. The best form of learning is to let the audience experience it for themselves. In other words, we value spectator involvement tremendously. When an arts group puts on an immersive theatre production, the historical context of this venue is already present. All the participants can sense it.” However, he also admits that it does take time to develop chemistry between artists and performance spaces. Therefore, Zee

also values the establishment of long-term relationships with artists. For example, *Happily Ever After Nuclear Explosion* finished its run at Tai Kwun in 2019, and Reframe Theatre will be staging a brand new work at the venue in 2021. In addition, it has been confirmed that the sequel to *Tri Ka Tsai* will be performed at Tai Kwun.

In mid-2019, Tai Kwun announced that it welcomed approximately 3.4 million visitors in its first year of operations. With such large visitor volumes, what puts Tai Kwun at an advantage as a theatre venue is its unrivalled architectural space and sense of history. The challenges lie in the need for curators to cater to the tastes of the public and creators to sometimes make compromises due to physical limitations. For example, Tai Kwun is not a public entertainment venue, so it is necessary to apply for a Temporary Places of Public Entertainment Licence ahead of every performance. In addition, outdoor performances must not cause noise nuisance. However, these are not the most difficult challenges in Zee's view. "The biggest problem is that we need more local arts groups and artists to use this space flexibly. They have to get used to this space and feel comfortable in it to conceive new work confidently," he explains.

On the subject of the future of Hong Kong theatre or performing arts, Zee is optimistic about the prospects of contemporary circus in Hong Kong. Contemporary circus combines performances such as juggling, drama, dance, and music, and is presented to the audience in all its elegant and kitschy glory. It is suited to the ambience inherent in Tai Kwun's historical architecture, and satisfies the preferences of different audiences more easily. The grand opening performance of *Dreamlike Horses* in 2018 already set a precedent for a fantastical experience that can only be enjoyed at Tai Kwun. Tai Kwun Circus Plays, which was held in December 2018 and December 2019 respectively, not only brought troupes from Europe and Asia together, but also actively provided space for the nurturing of local circus acts, paving the way for the sector's future development in Hong Kong.

## *A Dream Like a Dream's* Temporary Residence at WKCD

Tai Kwun has given rise to new possibilities for performing arts spaces within an existing complex of heritage buildings. WKCD across the harbour, on the other hand, is the exact opposite. It was tailor-made for the arts from the very beginning, with Xiqu Centre dedicated to its namesake art form and Freespace set up for experimental performances. Low Kee Hong points out that based on his observations, Freespace is currently the largest black box theatre in the Chinese-speaking regions. The black box theatre is characterised by greater flexibility, making it suitable for experimental performances. In addition, The Box's ample ceiling height enables acrobatic acts, which require an abundance of vertical space, to be staged there.

The first large-scale theatrical performance that was held at Freespace after its inauguration was *A Dream Like a Dream*, a collaboration with Hong Kong Repertory Theatre which opened in July. The play has a duration of eight hours and is divided into two performances, making the search for a suitable venue difficult. Hong Kong Repertory Theatre did not perform this work again since its world premiere at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre in 2002. The rerun of *A Dream Like a Dream* at The Box in Freespace makes use of the venue's flexibility. The auditorium is divided into two sections. On one side of the stage is the typical seating found in a traditional theatre setting, while an interactive audience space referred to as the "lotus pond" is embedded in the middle of the stage. The play adopts a four-sided runway-style stage design split into two levels. The revolving seats in the "lotus pond" facilitate the viewing of various parts of the stage.



*A Dream Like a Dream* (2019)

— Photo: Wing Hei Photography

Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Repertory Theatre

## A Pioneering Performance Complex

Unlike Tai Kwun, where all the performance spaces are utilised, WKCD is yet to see all its venues come into operation. In addition to Xiqu Centre and Freespace, WKCD is also home to the Lyric Theatre Complex (LTC), which is still under construction. Expected to be completed in 2023, it will house three theatres and the Resident Company Centre for dance companies and artists. The largest theatre in the complex can accommodate 1,450 spectators and will showcase works that have the potential for long runs.

Low says, “Works that are capable of achieving longevity must have a certain degree of maturity. This alludes to a long-term problem faced by Hong Kong and even Asian artists in general, who often have to complete a work in a short period of time—usually just six weeks at the most. After a work is premiered, they have to wait for a rerun to make revisions and delve deeper. The positioning of WKCD’s Freespace is that of an experimental space. I call it a ‘creative engine’ that spends most of its time on research and development, as well as exploring the possibilities of creation with artists. Because of Freespace’s immense

flexibility, the seating and performance areas can be arranged into numerous configurations. Consequently, there are greater possibilities in terms of an artist's conceptions and the actual work itself."

## The Dream Team Behind *The Great Pretender*

From the three theatrical works performed at WKCD in 2019, namely *The Great Pretender*, *A Dream Like a Dream*, and *Art School Musical*, it can be observed that Freespace, as a "creative engine", attempts to break Hong Kong culture's iron laws of speed and immediate returns in terms of both time allocation and space utilisation. Long before the completion of Freespace, Low had already invited Hong Kong Repertory Theatre to co-produce the original musical *The Great Pretender*. Written by Cheung Fei-fan and with Leon Ko and Chris Shum serving as the composer and lyricist respectively, this work starring Jordan Cheng and Lau Shau-ching was previewed three years after its initial conception, which was quite a show of extravagance, from such elements as human and material resources, to time.

*The Great Pretender* was originally slated to be previewed at Freespace. However, as the opening date of Freespace was postponed, the previews were ultimately held at Xiqu Centre from 23-26 May. Low says, "Xiqu Centre is mainly dedicated to Chinese opera, so the previews were scheduled over a time period in which the centre was not being used by this sector. Although *The Great Pretender* is not an opera, it was inspired by Ma Si-tsang's *The Judge Goes to Pieces*, which is a Cantonese opera adaptation of a Peking opera work. A venue's strategy does not have to be so rigid. While preserving the centre's core values, is it possible to have other relevant events happen which would in turn enrich the premises? This is what we have been thinking about all along."

Another acclaimed work, *A Dream Like a Dream*, was presented from July to September 2019. Even though the social movement had reached an intense phase at the time, it did not deter the audience's enthusiasm in seeing this classic. Low states, "*A Dream Like a Dream* managed to survive two and a half months at the theatre, which is an almost impossible feat nowadays. Our collaboration with Hong Kong Repertory Theatre gave rise to this possibility. When a theatre company stays in a space for such a long time, both the cast and crew will develop unique conceptions and imaginings of the setting." The opportunity of a residence enables both the theatre company and venue to grow together and pave the way for future works.



*The Great Pretender* (2019) — Photo: Carmen So      Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Repertory Theatre

## A Free Space in the Middle of a Park

In October 2019, a new version of *Art School Musical* by the Edward Lam Dance Theatre was staged at The Box immediately after *A Dream Like a Dream*. As early as two months before the play's opening, the company had already been holding screenings and workshops at The Room in Freespace to introduce the history of the company to the participants and to acquaint them with the development process of a theatre work. Low recalls an unforgettable experience from that time. "A participant in Edward Lam's theatre workshop originally only paid for one session, but I ended up seeing him at all of them. At the time, the social movement was at an intense phase. I had a chat with him later, and he said that his mindset changed when he came to Freespace. It gave him room to breathe."

The opening of Freespace coincided with the onset of a large-scale social movement in Hong Kong, which was then followed by the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020. The sudden turmoil actually highlighted WKCD's value as an urban oasis. Low believes that Freespace's location in the middle of a park is unrivalled by any other venue in any community in terms of its environment, further underscoring theatre's ability to soothe the soul.

## The Audience vs the Potential Audience

Low, a Singaporean who has been living in Hong Kong for seven years, has found that the performing arts audience in Hong Kong is quite a fixed group. Even though different theatre companies have different supporters, in his eyes, the ratio of these audiences to non-showgoers is 1:9. It turns out that plans to attract this remaining 90 per cent of potential audience members to WKCD had already been put in place when the construction of Freespace began.



Low Kee Hong — Photo courtesy: West Kowloon Cultural District Authority

The team at WKCD puts a lot of thought into both programme curation and space utilisation. First of all, Freespace is divided into four main spaces: The Box, The Room, and The Studio are a trinity of suites tailor-made for performances. The height and width of The Room correspond to that of The Box, so that even if The Box is in use, an artist can still carry out various experiments in The Room. Meanwhile, The Studio can be used for recording or hosting small workshops in preparation for performances at The Box. The underground Livehouse is currently operated by Lau Bak Freespace Livehouse, with concerts curated by the WKCD team frequently held in the evenings. “One of the functions of the concert is to appeal to those who have just finished watching a show at The Box, so that they will stay behind, listen to some music, have a beer, and share their thoughts on the performance at The Box,” Low remarks. This is an attempt to use the space to change the audience’s habit of rushing in

and out of a venue without much interaction, thereby making performance arts appreciation a mainstream lifestyle.

Under Low's "1:9" assumption, the programmes conceived by him and his team have to meet various needs. While prioritising the retainment of the ten per cent of veteran theatregoers, they must also aim to attract the remaining 90 per cent of potential audience members. The collaboration with Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, *A Dream Like a Dream*, proved to be a production which catered to the tastes of loyal patrons and generated interest among the general public at the same time. The play ran for more than two months and still managed to fare quite well at the box office, indicating the likelihood that it drew in different demographics. Meanwhile, *The Great Pretender*, a work developed by Freespace to be presented over a long run at the LTC when it opens in 2023, garnered mixed reviews from its previews in 2019. The production team spent close to two years revising it. If everything goes the way they hope, the original musical *The Great Pretender* will be a long-running WKCD production that can attract new and established audiences alike.

Low positions Freespace as a "creative engine" for creators. For visitors and audiences, he regards Freespace, and by extension WKCD, as a "cultural kitchen". "This is a cultural kitchen. Whether you are an experienced theatregoer or a first-timer, regardless of your background, there is a place for you here," he says.

## Musicals are Best Suited to Long Runs

Some veterans in the industry have long been optimistic about the prospects of musical theatre in Hong Kong, and have encouraged the city to nurture talent in this area. Low also holds a similar view. Consequently, musical theatre will be a focus of development at WKCD. "The local musical scene has 40 years of history, with many troupes having performed one production at least once. Actors' Family is dedicated to presenting musicals. However, the

environment for creating musical theatre in Hong Kong needs to be improved. In the UK and US, it takes seven years to create a musical, and previews are held for at least two months before the musical's long run officially begins. This approach does not exist in Asia. Can we start exploring this possibility with WKCD? Although we cannot match the Broadway system overnight, we have to start trying," he says.

"The development of musical theatre hinges on long-running productions, be it for audiences in Hong Kong and the Greater Bay Area, or that of foreign tourists. We must try long runs, that is, on the scale of 20 to 30 or 40 shows. Only then will audiences who regard going to the theatre as a lifestyle have a chance to see it," Low contends.

## Conclusion: A Complement to Traditional Venues Such as Those Operated by the LCSD

Most of the venues under the management of the LCSD are now established. The department itself, as well as arts groups, artists, and even veteran show-goers more or less have in mind how many performances are held at each venue every year, which venues have venue partners, how many works are performed by the venue partners each year, and which annual arts festivals or programmes will use these venues.

As two new performance venues and programme curation bodies, WKCD's Freespace and Tai Kwun have the potential to bring new possibilities to the performing arts community in Hong Kong in terms of venue use and programming. With the directors of both establishments valuing the attraction of new audiences, it is hoped that these venues will complement the LCSD's already developed performing arts system.

## Immersive Experiences that Make Good Use of the Venue's Indoor and Outdoor Spaces

The new venues have conjured up new possibilities for arts workers. Tai Kwun is a conserved heritage building cluster neighbouring Lan Kwai Fong and SoHo, and stands in stark contrast to the Hong Kong City Hall located in the same district, which exudes an air of bureaucracy. It is an ideal place to nurture high-calibre works that cater to both niche audiences and the masses, and is especially suited to small- and medium-scale cross-cultural and cross-genre performances. Meanwhile, WKCD's setting in a corner of the Kowloon Peninsula, together with its low-density buildings and ample green space, offers a rare urban respite. If paired with the right programming, visitors can stay there for an entire day. Freespace Happening and Freespace Jazz Fest are both successful examples. Hong Kong audiences have the preconception that appreciating the performing arts is associated with paying a hefty sum and sitting absolutely still. The sense of leisure generated by Freespace may facilitate the first step in breaking down this assumption.



From the perspective of artistic creation, the performance venues at Tai Kwun and Freespace have capacities ranging from 200 to 400 spectators, which puts less pressure on ticket sales and should, therefore, allow creators to make bolder attempts. WKCD is already developing immersive theatre experiences, and I very much look forward to artists doing the same in the indoor and outdoor spaces at Freespace, so as to make good use of WKCD's waterfront promenade facing Victoria Harbour and its 23 hectares of parkland—the prospects of creating iconic performances in Hong Kong are promising here. It is also hoped that while Tai Kwun develops its immersive theatre and circus programmes, it will also support more alternative types of individual creation, medium-scale performances by arts groups, or small- and medium-scale arts festivals which are more mainstream, so that small and medium-sized arts collectives or individual creators will have more opportunities to perform. It could even create a marathon-style event featuring cross-disciplinary performances the likes of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

## The Future Depends on the Venue's Artistic Policy

The artistic policy of a venue affects the creative outcome. The venue design and use of JC Cube and Freespace encourage cross-disciplinary performances. A look at recent trends reveals that it is now common for a performance to combine multiple art forms. In the future, if WKCD and Tai Kwun can enhance the interaction between their venues, or join hands in co-commissioning works to support the creation and performance of arts projects during their various phases at different venues, this will facilitate more opportunities for productions to grow and also stimulate creators to attempt works that are different in terms of genre, delivery method, and direction.

We can expect works that can adapt to both formal and informal venues to be the future trend. As plays that do not need to be staged in theatres and concerts that do not need to take place in concert halls become more commonplace, the creation of cross-disciplinary

performances will become more popular—it is important for us to take things forward by expanding the audience for the performing arts, attracting more non-traditional spectators, and making the performing arts a part of the Hong Kong lifestyle in the long run.

(Translated by Johnny Ko)

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is a cultural worker. The longer she spends in this world, the more certain she is that people are the best scenery. Although inseparable from the Internet, she tries her best to present her writings in print media.

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