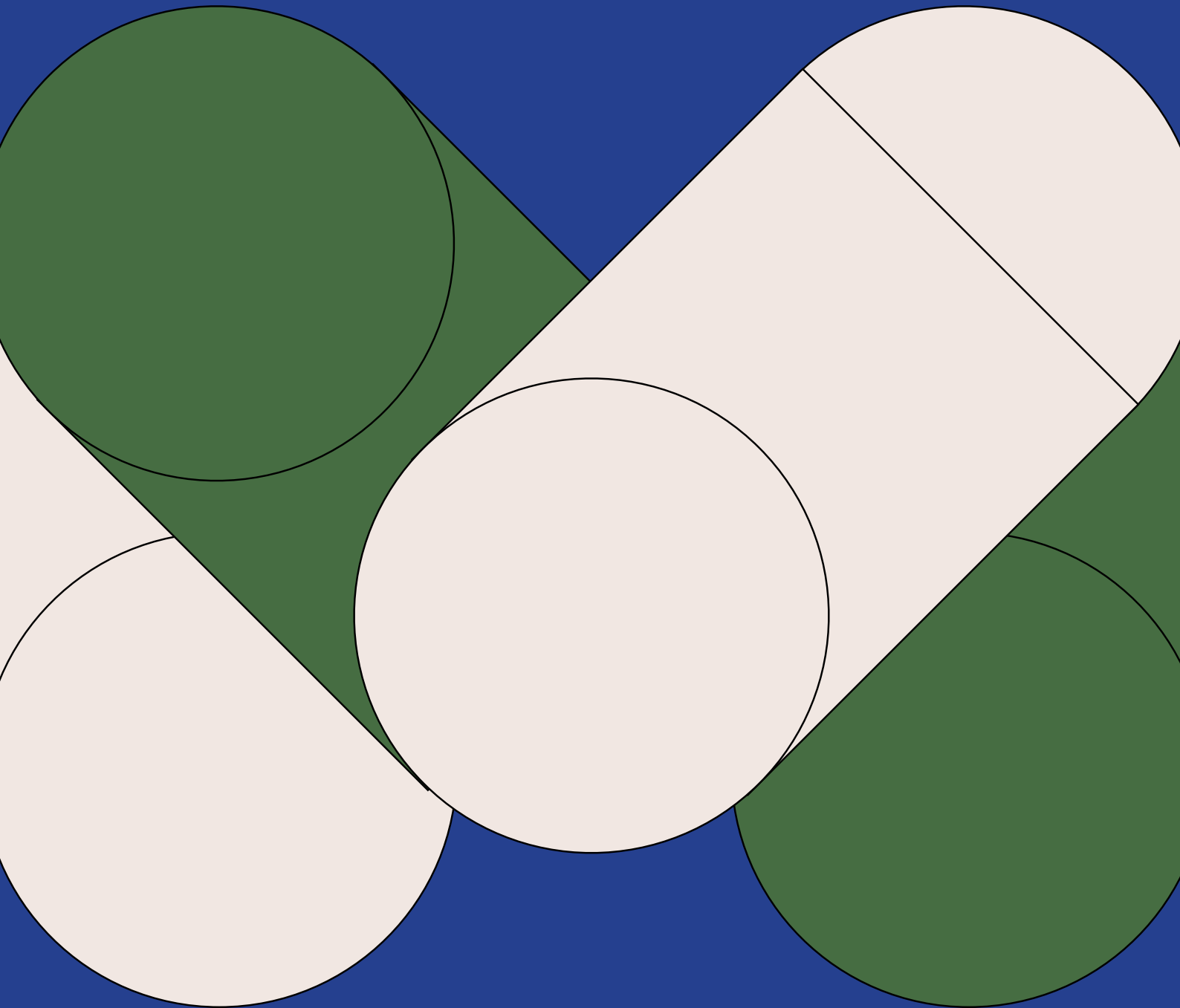


A Retrospective on Four Musicals from 2019 and 2020 in Reflection of New Modes of Development in Hong Kong's Original Musical Theatre

by William W.Y. Chan



The years between the early 1990s and the millennium marked the golden era of Hong Kong's original musical theatre. From *I Have a Date with Spring*, *1941 Girl*, *Snow.Wolf.Lake*, to *The Border Town*, these productions did not only achieve critical acclaim and box office success in Hong Kong, but they toured to the mainland and overseas. Of all Asian musical theatres today, the musical theatre of Seoul, Korea, is the most vibrant as it has rapidly flourished over the past two decades. In Hong Kong, successful musicals that left a mark have been few and far between since *The Passage Beyond*, which premiered in 2009. Meanwhile, the musical theatre of Seoul has long been industrialised, as the works are licensed overseas and produced in different language versions.

Regardless, the making of original musical theatre has never stopped in Hong Kong. In recent years, some musical theatre makers have worked to shake up its development. While many stage performances were disrupted by the social movement and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 and 2020, there were four distinctive local musicals made during this time, and their developments progressed in different directions. These works include: *2097: A Tale of Two Countries Cities*, *A Tale of the Southern Sky*, *The Great Pretender*, and *Our Journal of Springtime*. Although not all of these four musicals have premiered in the theatre, their production processes reflect various possibilities for the future development of original musicals in Hong Kong.

2097

Starting from a Preview with Zero Budget

The theatre run of *2097: A Tale of Two Countries Cities* (2097) was slated for June 2020, and it was postponed due to the pandemic. As the pandemic situations in Hong Kong and Korea continue to fluctuate, there is currently no plan for its theatre run. However, this musical written by Yat Yau, Artistic Director of Class 7A Drama Group, and scored by composer Stoa Lau, has opened the door to exchange in musical theatre between Hong Kong and Korea.

It was also the first programme to be funded simultaneously by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) and the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC), the two major funding organisations for the arts in Hong Kong.

In its inception, the work was a play titled *2097: A Fairy Tale of Two Cities*. There was no plan to turn it into a musical, and its theme was not centred around the pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong and Korea. It premiered in *Texts Experimenting VI* at The McAulay Studio, Hong Kong Arts Centre, in April 2018. *Texts Experimenting* was a small-scale preview series that the drama group presented without any additional project grant, and *2097* was one of the four works on the programme of *Texts Experimenting VI*. Yat Yau recalls that as he was developing his idea for the script, he simply hoped to work with a Korean actor—it would be an opening for him to draw on the similarities between Hong Kong and Korea or other elements of mutual inspiration as the starting points for his work. He had in mind to create a play that would echo the social atmospheres in the two regions at the time, in the hope of fostering exchange between the theatres of Hong Kong and Korea.

Things took an opportune turn when Yat Yau shared his creative concept with Korean musical actor Shin Hae-ji, who played the title role in a local production of *Miss Saigon* in the US. As she was fascinated with his idea, Shin offered to travel to Hong Kong to perform in the play without remuneration, provided that the drama group would cover her flights and hotel accommodation. As Shin is a brilliant singer, Yat Yau saw the chance to spotlight her talent by including original songs in the play. When he approached Stoa Lau about the prospect, Lau was happy to compose songs for the preview as a labour of love. As a result, original songs comprised about half of the 30-minute preview of *2097*.

The preview had a cast of two actors and a rehearsal period of less than one week. After arriving in Hong Kong on Monday, Shin did her first performance on Friday. Only about

three-quarters of the script was completed, and the drama ended on a “to be continued...” note. On the one hand, it pointed to an ongoing story. On the other hand, it alluded to real-life situations that were still evolving. In this sense, the preview version was an autonomous snippet. After seeing the preview, almost every audience member expressed the desire to see a complete full-length version.



2097: A ~~Fairy~~ Tale of Two Cities (2018) — Photo courtesy: Class 7A Drama Group

Unprecedented Simultaneous Funding from the LCSD and HKADC

As Yat Yau notes, he had submitted a grant application to the HKADC before the preview, as he planned to produce a full-length version of 2097 if his application was successful. While his application was approved by the HKADC, the grant amount was insufficient. Subsequently, he approached the LCSD and submitted a recording of the preview to them. The recording

demonstrated the theme of the work and the brilliance of the Korean actor, and the LCSD agreed to provide funding for the production. However, the subsidy amount from either institution was not going to be sufficient for staging the production, since it would involve bringing an overseas artist to Hong Kong. Therefore, Yat Yau made the bold move of querying the two organisations about the possibility of combined funding.

Over the years, the HKADC has always encouraged its grant recipients to look for other funding opportunities. On the other hand, the LCSD had a different policy in the past—in the cases of programmes presented by the LCSD, the producers were not permitted to accept funding from other sources. At a later point in time, however, the LCSD changed its role from presenter to sponsor with regard to most programmes, which in turn led to box office pressure for the arts groups. Therefore, the LCSD no longer objected to arts groups looking for additional funding, but encouraged them to seek other sponsors. Meanwhile, the HKADC took over the administrative management of the LCSD's programme subsidies to arts groups. As Yat Yau recalls, the industry was concerned whether this new arrangement might create more constraints for artists. However, this change in funding model turned out to be an excellent opportunity for *2097*. As there had been no precedent [for combined funding from the LCSD and HKADC], the two funding bodies were initially uncertain about how to administer the funding allocation. After a series of negotiations, they agreed on covering different categories of the production's expenses. The continued development of *2097* was made possible by this unprecedented offer of simultaneous funding from the two organisations.

While the issues of funding and budget were resolved at this stage, the LCSD recognised that there would be insufficient time for the work's development if the 7A Class Drama Group was to premiere it according to the proposed schedule. In view of this, the LCSD suggested funding the production in two phases. In the past, there had been considerable criticisms

of the requirements set out by funding institutions. In many cases, funded arts groups were required to complete the development and performance of a work within eight months. This created an unhealthy ecology for the industry. In light of this, many arts groups hoped that the LCSD would consider giving them more than a year to work on a production. Fortunately, the LCSD manager took the initiative of addressing the issue, and suggested the drama group preview the work at the Cattle Depot before moving forward with a theatre run. The Cattle Depot version could be a play reading with songs, even if the song list was not yet complete. This preview was presented at No.12 Cattle Depot in March 2019. As it turned out, this second preview was not only expanded from the first with a few newly added songs, but it was a fully developed work at 70 minutes in length.



2097: *A Fairy Tale of Two Cities* (2019) — Photo courtesy: Class 7A Drama Group

Through continual development and two previews, *2097* evolved from a play featuring songs, into a performance that was more akin to a musical. Yat Yau believes the musical possesses unique dramatic effects that are not always possible to achieve in conventional drama, as some content is more succinctly expressed in songs than only through dialogue or other modes of delivery. Take the martyrdom scene in *2097* as an example—the leader of the student activist group (played by the Korean actor), who represents other fellow students who remain at the City Hall overnight, is ready to sacrifice her life when the army storms the premises at dawn. The scene is only evocative when rendered with a poetic touch and a sense of distance. If it were narrated in dialogue, it would not elicit the same kind of emotional impact. In addition, there is a language barrier between the Korean actor and the Hong Kong actor in real life; however, they can sing together on stage, which casts a new light on the performance. When the two actors are singing at the same time, it obscures the linguistic context of the drama and opens up different possibilities for interpretation. It lends greater flexibility to the representation of historical references that are situated in different times and places.

Unfortunately, the theatre run of *2097* at the Hong Kong City Hall Theatre was cancelled due to the pandemic. However, Yat Yau says that throughout the script development, he grasped how to draw on the differences between musical theatre and drama, and it has encouraged him to attempt more diverse approaches to storytelling in his work. He believes there will be further development to *2097* beyond the three versions that have been staged. In addition, he seeks to probe deeper into musical theatre and create other works that revolve around Hong Kong and Korea.

A Tale of the Southern Sky From a Musical Reading to a Stage Production

A Tale of the Southern Sky (*A Tale*), another musical scored by Stoa Lau, went through a creative and development process that was much more circuitous than that of *2097*. As playwright Cheung Fei-fan notes, the conception of *A Tale* began with Bee Wan, who suggested that Cheung and Lau collaborate on writing an original musical. As Cheung recalls, he started out with a pure sense of conviction—he wanted to make an epic musical about Hong Kong. He also notes that it is impossible to create a musical of excellent quality in the span of several months. Therefore, Cheung and Lau teamed up as early as in 2013, and they met at Lau's studio from time to time to brainstorm and compose the work. Cheung describes it as a painful experience—the two artists struggled to find time outside of their work to devote their energy to the musical, despite having no plan for production or performance. As he puts it, it was a process of burning oneself out.



With the support from the Actors' Family, the creators had the chance to collaborate with Hong Kong Repertory Theatre at the end of 2017, when they presented seven sessions of musical reading at the HKRep Black Box. Bee Wan, who offered insights to the work's development in the early phase, was the director of the reading. He led members of the creative team and the cast, most of whom were on board on a semi-voluntary basis, to perform the epic drama in a minimalist rendering in the black box theatre. The musical reading led to a collaboration with the Hong Kong Dance Company (HKDC). With the support from the HKDC, *A Tale* premiered in the theatre during the brief reopening of local theatres in June 2020.

Cheung mentions that before the musical reading was confirmed, he had applied to the HKADC for a project grant for organising the first phase of reading workshops for *A Tale*. However, his application was unsuccessful. Cheung suspects the peer assessors in charge were unsupportive of his application because they did not understand what a workshop production is. In fact, it was only after the musical reading by the Actors' Family took place that the industry realised it should be standard practice to preview a workshop production. The preview is one way for a work to move forward. Apart from being an opportunity for the creators to refine their work, it allows the audience and potential investors to see the promise of the production, which facilitates its development into an official performance. In particular, in the cases of costly musical theatre productions, the creators may preview a streamlined version featuring a few songs on some small-scale platforms, as a way to evaluate its potential for further development. Cheung believes it may take some time for this concept to take hold in the industry. In the long run, however, if foundations are established to support theatre makers to preview works-in-progress, it will have a positive impact on the creative ecology. That is precisely what Hong Kong's theatre needs.

As Cheung puts it, there is a unique and even bewitching charm to *A Tale*, for which everyone involved was willing to go the extra mile. Since the theatre run was presented by the HKDC,

the performers who took part in the musical reading, with the exception of Angus Chan, were not cast in the new version. Regardless, the musical production was well received, with some audience members attending more than one performance. While some of the personnel on board were first-time collaborators of Cheung's, they devoted a great deal of energy to bringing the show to fruition. For instance, set and costume designer Moon Yip was involved in the work from the musical reading to the theatre run. Cheung was also grateful to the RTHK director who was tasked with filming the theatre performance of *A Tale*. Committed to producing a brilliant record of the show, the film director attended all the rehearsals so as to gain deeper insights into the performance.

Founding a Company to Facilitate Commercial Marketing and Distribution

While the creators of *A Tale* started out without any idea about a possible theatre run, they developed real confidence in the work after the musical reading was confirmed. When there were concrete prospects for a theatre premiere, Cheung Fei-fan, Stoa Lau and Bee Wan founded One Harbour Limited so that they could jointly own and manage the intellectual property of *A Tale*.

While this kind of venture is extremely common in the film industry, it is a rare move in musical theatre in Hong Kong. The Spring-time Group, which was founded in the 1990s, might be the only previous example. Cheung believes that in general, musical theatre productions have greater longevity than conventional stage plays. In fact, he thinks the longevity of musicals should be extended, since they tend to involve a longer creative and development process than conventional stage plays. Naturally, musical theatre makers also hope to reap the fruits of their labour over a longer period of time. To this end, Cheung and his collaborators decided to establish a company to handle all matters related to *A Tale*. He refers to *Defending the Caveman*, a well-known work of Icelandic theatre, as an example—the incomes generated from the intellectual property licensing of the play have helped sustain

the operation of Theater Mogul for over 20 years. One Harbour Limited has made plans to publish the script book and original soundtrack of *A Tale* in 2021. The company is also in talks with different parties about potential collaborations.

In Cheung's view, Hong Kong's musical theatre cannot be sustained by local audiences alone. If Hong Kong's musical theatre is to be industrialised, creators and producers must keep mainland and overseas markets in mind. As he points out, the mainland market is massive. For instance, after the video recording of *A Tale* was broadcasted on the RTHK, copies of the recording were promptly uploaded to the mainland video sharing website *bilibili* by netizens. There was even a screening of the musical in the mainland where a copy of this recording was played. Meanwhile, there are some highly educated audiences among mainland netizens. While there is currently no plan to stage *A Tale* in the mainland, the musical has inspired many conversations on the internet and social media. It is proof that there is strong appeal and market potential to original Cantonese-language musicals in the mainland.



A Tale of the Southern Sky (2020) — Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Dance Company

In view of the uncertain political atmosphere in recent times, it may be difficult to rerun *A Tale* in Hong Kong in the foreseeable future. However, Cheung believes there will be opportunities to present *A Tale* to audiences again. As a full-time artist, he is committed to creating new works and looking for production possibilities.

The Great Pretender Exceptionally Generous Resources for Creative Development

The development of *The Great Pretender*, also written by Cheung Fei-fan, is yet another remarkable story. The creative concept of *The Great Pretender* came from Leon Ko and Chris Shum, who wanted to write a courtroom drama inspired by the Cantonese opera *The Judge Goes to Pieces*, although they had yet to think up the plot. In 2015, Shum discussed with Cheung the possibility of turning the creative idea into a stage work, on the grounds that it would not emulate the slapstick comedy in Stephen Chow's film version. Cheung invented the character Fong Tong Geng, who is the antithesis of Justice Sung. From there, he conceived a story about redemption and wrote a two-page synopsis.

About two years later, the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) approached the artists with a proposal for collaboration, and it commissioned Ko, Cheung and Shum to take part in the making of *The Great Pretender*. From that point onwards, musical composition and script development proceeded in tandem. From chalking out the scene breakdown and the plot, brainstorming the song list, to exploring how to tell a story through music, the three principal creators together composed the script, the music and the lyrics, from 2016 to 2018. In the later stages of the work's development, Low Kee Hong, Head of Theatre, Performing Arts, West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, joined the production as dramaturge and worked with director Fong Chun-kit on refining the musical.

In its inception, *The Great Pretender* was to be presented by WKCD's Freespace. However, Freespace did not have its own production team, and it would not have been cost-effective to hire a team of theatre professionals to produce the work. To this end, Freespace decided to collaborate with an established Hong Kong theatre company, and it invited Hong Kong Repertory Theatre to join the production. As Cheung remarks, the biggest advantage of the work being a WKCD commission was that it provided ample room for creative development. The WKCD team did not impose any constraints on the work, but offered their opinions at the appropriate moments. In addition, the WKCD possesses substantial resources. It allowed the creators to invite different actors to take part in the walkthrough and perform the first preview. This was followed by a second preview at the Grand Theatre at Xiqu Centre. The work was subsequently revised based on the feedback collected. In Hong Kong, it is a rare privilege for artists to be afforded so much room and time to create a work.



A Rewarding Collaboration with Leon Ko

As Cheung recalls, he tried his hand at musical theatre when he wrote the script for *The Passage Beyond*. It was also a collaboration with Leon Ko and Chris Shum, two celebrated makers of Cantonese-language musicals. The development of a musical rarely begins with scriptwriting, since the majority of dialogue is delivered in songs. After conceiving a story idea, the writers discuss the flow of the story with the composer. With a plot outline in mind, the team maps out the characters' actions and decides on the musical style that underlies the work.

The development of *The Great Pretender* followed a similar formula, which began with the synopsis and scene breakdown. From this material, Ko envisaged the musical style for the work and started composing songs. Based on Cheung's script, Shum penned lyrics to the songs, at times putting some of the lines from the script into the lyrics. In Cheung's words, the best approach to writing a musical is to create a unison of music and text. Throughout the creative process, they often pondered: Why must this story be told in a musical? Why make a musical if the story could be told in a stage play? In the case of *The Great Pretender*, the creators agreed the musical would lend the most effective expression to its narrative logic, since it is a story within a story that is told through narration and singing at a teahouse. It is reminiscent of the narrative singing in Pansori, the traditional Korean genre of musical storytelling.

In the past, there was no established framework for the composition of musical theatre in Hong Kong. Many people thought the musical was simply a show combining spoken dialogue and songs. Even Chung Chi-wing, a pioneer of Hong Kong's musical theatre, found his way through trial and error. After gaining exposure to musical theatres from around the world, Chung contemplated how to compose Cantonese-language musicals, comparing similarities and differences between various creative approaches. As a result, most Hong Kong musicals in the past tended to feature predominantly lyrical numbers or ensemble songs that were

closer to pop songs in form, and there was a lack of ballads in these productions. However, one of the strengths of musical theatre is the possibility to tell a whole story in a single song. As Cheung mentions, there is an over ten-minute long ballad in *The Passage Beyond* that narrates a complex situation. It was a breakthrough in Hong Kong's musical theatre at the time, and it opened his eyes to the unique narrative possibilities in musical theatre.

Cheung believes Hong Kong can be home to an array of outstanding and original works of musical theatre. It just so happens that local musical theatre makers did not have the right timing and missed out on many opportunities in the past. He believes *The Passage Beyond* could have achieved greater success if its development had not been impeded by various factors. Today, it is impossible to rerun the musical due to copyright restrictions. In Cheung's view, if it had been possible to commoditise *The Passage Beyond*, the musical could have become a bigger hit than *Snow.Wolf.Lake* and introduced local musical theatre to wider audiences.



Our Journal of Springtime An Experiment in Staging a Long-Running Musical

Compared to Yat Yau and Cheung Fei-fan, Tom Chan has taken a vastly different direction as a musical theatre maker. Since he established Bomb Theatre in 2014, he has been determined to develop local musical theatre productions on a self-financed basis. Chan has always been interested in the operational models and business structures in the musical theatre industry. During his studies in the UK, he worked on topics related to musical theatre for both his bachelor's and master's theses. Since his return to Hong Kong, he has sought to explore how to commercialise musical theatre and broaden its audience base, and how to expand the possibilities for long-running musical theatre shows.

One way of broadening the audience base for musical theatre is to cast TV and film artists and internet celebrities, as is the case with some of Boom Theatre's previous productions. Chan emphasises, however, that he hopes audiences are not coming to the theatre just to see the performances of certain artists. In addition, this strategy only works to bring in audiences in the initial phase, while critical acclaim is crucial to sustaining a long theatre run.

The 2018 preview of *Our Journal of Springtime* did not feature any well-known actors, and many of the cast members had limited experience in theatre performance. As Chan pinpoints, the first preview was not intended to promote the work to the public; rather it was an opportunity for him to review the libretto and consider possible revisions. The preview was presented at Bomb Theatre's own theatre (which has a maximum seating capacity of over 60), with an initial run of 12 performances. As most of the cast members were amateur actors, they did not attract a full house at first. However, the show gained momentum after three performances, and the rest of the run was sold out. It was extended to 16 performances, before four more performances were added in the final week. This is proof that audience acclaim can attract a sizeable paying audience to a theatre show.



Our Journal of Springtime (2019) — Photo courtesy: Bomb Theatre

In the second half of July 2019, *Our Journal of Springtime* had a run of ten performances at the Jockey Club Auditorium, Hong Kong Polytechnic University. As Chan recalls, it was rather ambitious of him to bring the musical to a theatre with over 1,000 seats. While the preview was attended by an audience of 1,200, it would be extremely difficult to increase the audience counts almost tenfold for the theatre run. It became necessary to feature better known performers in the play. Well-known theatre actors Aaron Chan and Emily Kwan, and internet celebrities Yanki Din and Toi Siu-kiu, were invited to join the cast. While Bomb Theatre had planned a run of 30 performances, only ten performances were staged because of the social movement at the time. Although the show recorded a box-office turnout of over 60 per cent, it was not a true test of the musical's potential as a long-running show.

In 2020, Bomb Theatre reran *Our Journal of Springtime* in its own theatre. Chan's original plan was to present 60 performances, and all the cast members had signed contracts to perform the entire run. Unfortunately, the run was suspended after 27 performances due to the onset of the third wave of the pandemic in Hong Kong. Although there were well-known performers in the cast, their names were not listed on the poster. As Chan explains, this strategy was modelled on the marketing practice of long-running shows overseas. It was also inspired by the practice in experimental theatre in Korea, where brand building for a production, rather than the actors, is spotlighted in the marketing campaign. Many of the audience members who attended this rerun had not seen the earlier versions, but they were distant acquaintances of the audience members of the previous runs. By the time the show was cut short after 27 performances, a total of 44 performances had sold out. If it had not been for the pandemic, the musical would have continued its long run in the theatre.

Learning about Audience Preferences through Previews

To Chan's mind, the musical theatres of other regions are more established both in terms of creative development and production, and one of the main reasons for that is the artists' devotion to refining their works. In contrast, many musical theatre productions in Hong Kong were completed in a rush in the past. From conception to the last curtain call, the entire process might last only several months to one year. In most overseas countries, musical theatre makers devote up to several years to developing a musical. The work is then previewed for the creators to collect audience feedback.

In most of his productions, Chan takes up all the principal roles, including the producer, director, playwright, composer and lyricist. One advantage of his approach is that it lends a more consistent style to the work. On the other hand, it would inspire more creative exchanges if the roles were taken up by five different artists. Chan believes this makes it imperative for him

to gather feedback on his work through previews. As he sees it, every artist has their distinctive perception, but they can also be blindsided by their own views. Therefore, he often invites veteran artists and fellow practitioners to take part in group readings of his work. During the preview, when the creators can listen to the comments and criticisms from a paying audience, it can help them to develop works that are more accessible to a mass audience.

Chan's first preview of a work-in-progress was *Fly Bao to the Moon* in 2015. At the time, the production mode of previewing a work before the official theatre run did not yet exist in the local theatre, since there was a lack of production resources that would support the practice. However, if the practice of previewing works-in-progress becomes the norm, it would be beneficial to the entire industry. In Chan's view, musical theatre makers should spend more time researching audience preferences so as to develop a better grasp of audience mindsets, since the genre should be commercialised to cater to the public. In the cases of popular musicals overseas, non-theatre-goers comprise approximately 80% of the audiences. This kind of extensive audience reach is made possible by careful planning at both the creative and commercial levels. Prior to the premiere, the producers offer different versions of selected songs from the musical, which are promoted on various media channels. In terms of production, there is a strong emphasis on attractive visual effects and rousing drama, which may include grand song-and-dance scenes and lavish scenography. All these aspects are meticulously calculated.

In the foreseeable future, Chan aims to focus on musical theatre productions for small theatres. After presenting a month-long run of *Fly Bao to the Moon* at Sunbeam Theatre, which has a seating capacity of over 1,000, he realised there might not be a sizeable enough audience to sustain long runs of large-scale musicals in Hong Kong at this point. Further, there are many implicit fair use rules in non-official venues which are reserved for regular tenants. Without a large-scale venue of his own, it would be difficult for Chan to present a



Our Journal of Springtime (2020) — Photo courtesy: Bomb Theatre

long run of a grand production. If he creates smaller-scale musicals that are intended for nightly performances in a theatre with over a hundred seats, he believes there will be a higher chance of staging them as long-running shows.

Conclusion: Looking Ahead to the Future of Hong Kong's Musical Theatre

The four musicals discussed above unfolded along different paths in terms of creative development and production processes. All of them were impacted by the social movement and the pandemic in 2019 and 2020, and the performances were disrupted to varying extents. In the case of each production, however, the creators' experiences in financing and planning provide valuable insights for other musical theatre makers and producers in the future. In particular, we see that the practice of previewing works-in-progress (workshop productions) is receiving greater attention in the industry. While it gives musical theatre makers more

opportunities to gather feedback on their works, this production mode is also garnering greater support from funding bodies and investors. For instance, the original Cantonese-language musical *Yat-sen*, a Hong Kong Arts Festival commission set to premiere in 2022, was presented to audiences in a workshop preview in March 2021. It points to a growing acceptance of this approach to theatre making.

The positionings of the four musicals also reflect an eclectic creative ecology in the local musical theatre in recent years. The works encompass a variety of artistic styles and production scales: *A Tale of the Southern Sky* is a heart-stirring epic; *The Great Pretender* is an intriguing Chinese courtroom drama; *2097: A Tale of Two Countries* is a medium-scale musical and cross-regional collaboration; and *Our Journal of Springtime* was a long-running musical staged in both small and large theatres. In addition, these works were presented and sponsored by different parties, as they range from productions supported by official organisations to performances funded by their creators. For those who set out to promote Hong Kong's musical theatre and its development into mainstream entertainment on a par with Seoul's musical theatre, there is certainly a long road ahead, but it is a possible prospect and worthy goal to pursue.

As for talent development, the one-year full-time Musical Theatre Programme offered by the Extension and Continuing Education for Life (EXCEL)—the continuing education arm of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA)—is the only training programme in musical theatre available in Hong Kong at present. However, the HKAPA's School of Drama will launch Acting for Musical Theatre as a new major area in 2022/23. It is expected to nurture a new generation of young performers who are trained in singing, dance, and acting in musical theatre, providing new talent for the industry. In addition, Chan reveals that he is planning a musical theatre training programme in collaboration with veteran media creative Lawrence Cheng. Its objective is to provide extensive training that facilitates non-professional

actors' development into professional performers of musical theatre. In addition to singing, dance and acting skills, the programme will focus on cultivating the mindset for performing long theatre runs.

As Chan pinpoints, even most HKAPA graduates have limited training or experience in performing in long-running shows, since there has been an absence of lengthy runs in Hong Kong's theatre. Further training is needed for an actor to develop the skills needed for performing in a long theatre run—for instance, how to remain emotionally engaged with the work after a few hundred performances, or how to stay energised after performing on stage for several days in a row. In particular, Chan notes that it is unrealistic to try to recruit full-time actors who can devote themselves to one production considering Hong Kong's economic environment and work models at this time. Many actors who have taken part in Chan's productions have regular jobs outside of the theatre. However, they are willing to spend a considerable amount of time rehearsing, and performing in the evening, as long as they are offered a fair remuneration. Chan anticipates a huge demand for talent as the local theatre continues to bloom. To this end, the industry should nurture promising young actors who strive to reach the standards of professional performers. In addition, there should be rotations between two or three casts in a long-running show, which makes it less taxing on the performers' mental capacity and energy when they take part in a long theatre run.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

William W.Y. Chan

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國際演藝評論家協會(香港分會)



香港藝術發展局
Hong Kong Arts Development Council

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