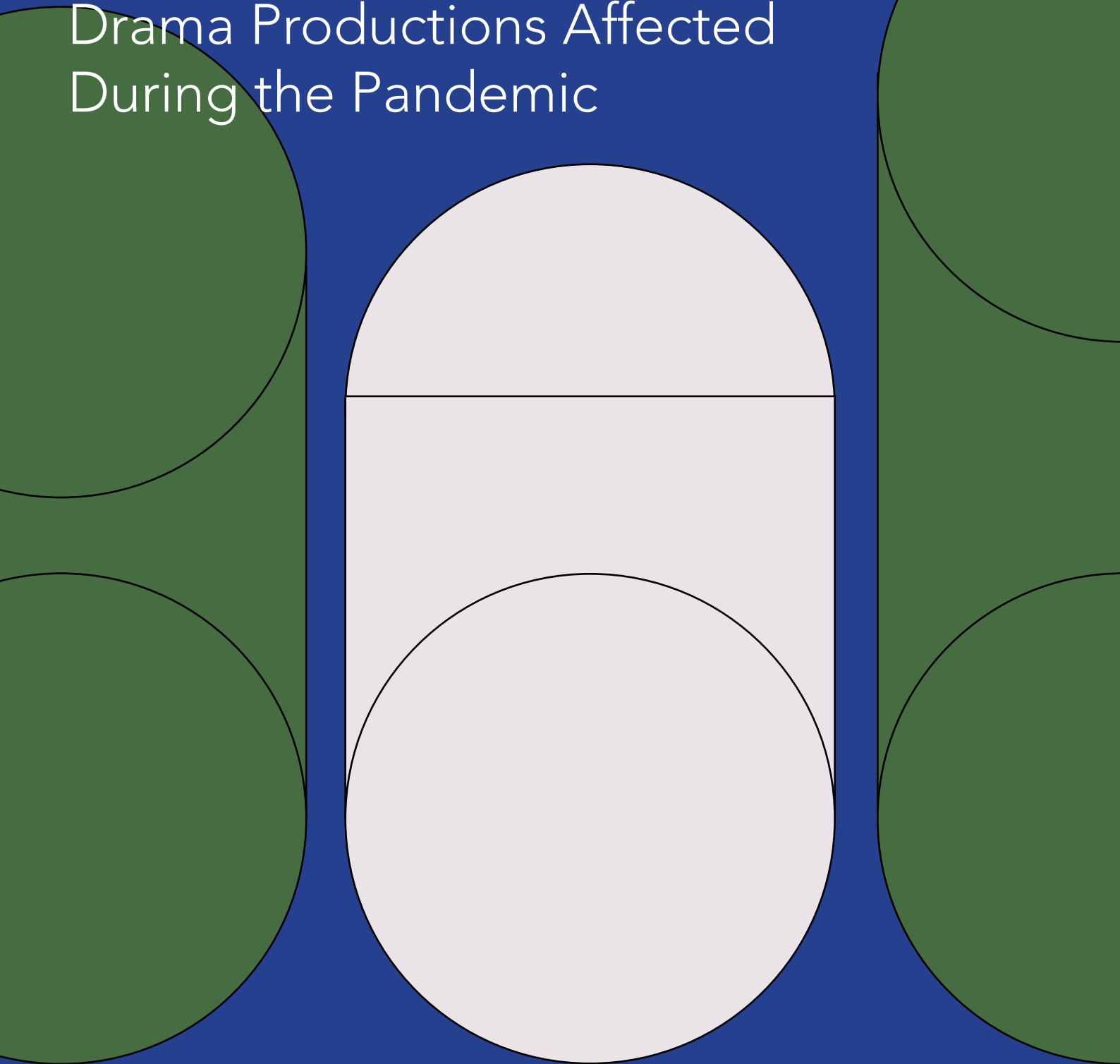


Embracing the Unknown in the  
Year of the Pandemic

by Miu Law

# Production Statistics and Case Interviews for Local Drama Productions Affected During the Pandemic



During the year of the pandemic, local performance venues were closed for an extended period of time. A series of restrictions were enforced at the venues even after their reopening, which had a direct impact on the performing arts sector. In an attempt to present an overview of the large number of Hong Kong drama productions that were cancelled or affected, the International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong) teamed up with the Alliance of Theatre Professionals of Hong Kong to conduct a statistical research project. A data collection survey was posted online, while the researchers contacted individual organisations and groups to gather further information. The goal was to compile information regarding three types of drama productions that were affected between 28 January 2020 and 28 February 2021 (excluding dance theatre, opera, circus, and juggling performances):

1. Productions that were to be staged at major performance venues in Hong Kong. Major performance venues refer to indoor and outdoor performance spaces managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), indoor and outdoor performance spaces at educational institutions, and indoor and outdoor performance spaces operated by independent/private organisations and arts groups;
2. Programmes under the Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme;
3. School touring programmes.

As of 31 March 2021, a total of 48 organisations responded:

Type of drama productions affected	Stage performances	The Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme	School touring programmes	Other community performances
Number of productions (performances)	117 (1026)	7 (75)	19 (742)	1 (50)

For stage performances, the majority of productions (83.5 per cent) were “not staged as scheduled”. A small number of productions (2.6 per cent) were “staged as scheduled, but did not complete the planned number of performances”. The remaining productions (13.9 per cent) were “staged as scheduled, with live audiences”, although the number of seats to be occupied at the venue varied. For 60 per cent of these productions, the number of seats to be occupied was limited to 50 per cent of the venue’s seating capacity; for 26.7 per cent of these productions, the number of seats to be occupied was limited to 75 per cent of the venue’s seating capacity.

Of the productions that were “not staged as scheduled” or “staged as scheduled, but did not complete the planned number of performances”, 42.9 per cent were postponed, while 31.7 per cent were cancelled. Most of the remaining productions were adapted into livestream or pre-recorded performances. Of the postponed productions, 35.4 per cent had not yet been staged by the time the surveys were collected, while 20.3 per cent were successfully staged. Of the remaining productions, 22.8 per cent were adapted into livestream or pre-recorded performances, while 21.5 per cent were eventually cancelled.

As for the monetary amount involved, 20.4 per cent of the productions suffered a loss of more than HK\$400,000; 16.7 per cent suffered a loss of HK\$200,000–\$400,000; 21.4 per cent suffered a loss of HK\$100,000–HK\$200,000, and 41.8 per cent suffered a loss of less than HK\$100,000.

Regarding school touring programmes and the Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme programmes, 84.6 per cent of the productions surveyed were school touring programmes, while the remaining productions were the Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme programmes. Of these productions, 12.5 per cent were cancelled; 12.5 per cent were postponed; 25 per cent had their entire runs or some of the performances adapted into livestream performances, and 50 per cent were adapted into pre-recorded performances.

As for the monetary amount involved, 15.4 per cent of these productions suffered a loss of more than HK\$400,000; 3.8 per cent suffered a loss of HK\$200,000–HK\$400,000; 3.8 per cent suffered a loss of HK\$100,000–HK\$200,000, and 76.9 per cent suffered a loss of less than HK\$100,000.

As well as quantitative data research, qualitative case interviews were also employed. In conducting case interviews with organisations with various industry positionings that operate under different funding models, we sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how they were affected during the pandemic, and the administrative work and publicity efforts that they undertook in response to their respective situations. The following are case interviews with Théâtre de la Feuille, On & On Theatre Workshop, the Tai Kwun performing arts team, and iStage.

## Case Interview: Théâtre de la Feuille

Théâtre de la Feuille is an independent theatre group founded in 2010. In 2020, they collaborated with the Cultural Presentations Section of the LCSD for the first time to present *The Lost Adults* for the 'Cheers!' Series. A total of six performances at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre were scheduled for 31 December 2020 to 3 January 2021, but the theatre run was postponed less than two weeks before the premiere. *The Lost Adults* was a popular programme as the six performances were sold out in ten days after ticket sales opened. In addition, it was a large-scale work involving a substantial production budget, since it featured an unconventional set design with wirework. These factors posed various issues that the group had to consider in discussing programme postponement with the presenter.



## Last-Minute Postponement

On 30 November 2020, the government announced it was further tightening social distancing measures under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap.599F). Places of public entertainment for live performance could only be open without live audiences, effective for a period of 14 days on 2-15 December.<sup>1</sup>

According to Lei Yuen-hung, producer of Théâtre de la Feuille, in the case that the restrictions on performance venues were extended to the performance dates of *The Lost Adults*, the group would prefer postponing the programme to broadcasting a pre-recorded performance online, a presentation mode that most theatre groups opted for at the time. For starters, the performance was not suited to the pre-recorded format. Filming would require considerable resources since wirework was part of the set design. In early December, the group discussed the possibility of programme cancellation or postponement with the LCSD. The LCSD stated that they were waiting for government announcements regarding arrangements after 15 December, and they encouraged the group to consider pre-recording the performance. "We were really hoping for the programme to be cancelled because there were too many uncertainties," Lei says.

The uncertainties lingered until the LCSD announced on 9 December that in order to comply with the further tightening of social distancing measures by the government, the LCSD's leisure and cultural venues/facilities would be closed until further notice.<sup>2</sup> On 18 December,

1 Hong Kong SAR Government. "Government further tightens social distancing measures", Press Releases, 1 December 2020. <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202012/01/P2020120100061.htm>

2 Hong Kong SAR Government. "Latest arrangements for LCSD public services", Press Releases, 9 December 2020. <https://www.lcsd.gov.hk/clpss/tc/webApp/NewsDetails.do?id=15199>

Théâtre de la Feuille announced that the programme would be postponed to May 2021, and the performance venue would remain unchanged.<sup>3</sup>

## The Theatre Group's Response and Box Office Pressure

As Lei recalls, there was already talk in the performing arts sector in mid-November that the LCSD was about to close its performance venues. At the time, the group was about to pay the deposit for set production. "Our production costs were very high, and the wirework was also costly. We had a really tight budget, and our show would only break even if we had a full house... As our production costs were higher than the subsidy from the LCSD, we had to cover most of the expenses," Lei explains. "If [the number of seats to be occupied] was capped at 50 per cent or 75 per cent [of the venue's seating capacity], we would be running



*The Lost Adults* (2021) — Photo: Carmen So Photo courtesy: Théâtre de la Feuille

<sup>3</sup> Théâtre de la Feuille. "The Lost Adults – we will find our way to the stage", Facebook post, 18 December 2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/theatre.feuille/photos/a.253158894867896/1547357362114703>

a deficit in any case, so we were prepared for it... We were just hoping to minimise loss.” In view of the circumstances, the group tried to minimise production expenses. “Our designers and actors were being flexible... The set was usually confirmed one month before the show’s opening, but the set maker was being really flexible about it... By the time programme cancellation was confirmed, the set production had not started yet.”

After programme postponement was announced, the group was faced with new financial pressure because of ticketing arrangements. Ticket sales for *The Lost Adults* were processed through the URBIX. The group offered two options for audiences: They could exchange their tickets for tickets to the May performances, or they could request a full refund. “When we had to issue refunds to audience members, we had not collected the box office receipts. We were one of the few theatre groups who had to postpone sold-out shows, and we had some lengthy negotiations with the URBIX,” Lei says. In the end, the group had to cover the refunds for audience members before they collected the box office receipts at a later time.

There was another noteworthy twist to the situation. Although the LCSD encouraged audience members to keep their tickets and exchange them for tickets to the May performances, there was a limit on the number of consignment tickets for the show at the URBIX.<sup>4</sup> When the group requested tickets to the 2021 performances for ticket holders to the December shows, they learnt that the number of tickets they needed exceeded the number of consignment tickets available. “We asked the LCSD if there was any way we could hold [the additional tickets that we needed]. The LCSD said no. But we had promised them

4 According to the Terms of Conditions of Hire of the LCSD’s performance venues, if a hirer organising paid-admission events chooses to use URBIX for sale of tickets, the total number of consignment tickets to be issued in any price category of the ticket price scale for a particular performance shall not exceed a prescribed proportion of that performance. This prescribed proportion was originally set at a maximum of 49 per cent. Legislative Council Panel on Home Affairs. “Sale of Tickets for Events Held at Venues of the Leisure Cultural Services Department”, 26 November 2018.  
<https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr18-19/english/panels/ha/papers/ha20181126cb2-292-5-e.pdf>

to the audiences!” Lei says. On the day when ticket sales opened, Lei had to go to a ticket counter and purchase a large number of tickets, while worrying that they would not be enough.

## Covering Additional Expenses with a Leap of Faith

In regards to programme postponement, Lei says that rehearsals incurred the most additional costs. Although the group had rehearsed about 90 per cent of the performance by December, they had to give careful consideration to safety issues as wirework was part of the set design. “We could not just go ahead with the wirework on stage after rehearsing the remaining ten per cent of the show. That would be dangerous. In the end, I think our rehearsal time doubled.” Administrative expenses also contributed significantly to the increased costs. As Lei explains, with the additional administrative work and communications such as issuing refunds, ticket exchange, and ticket reissuing, her workload as the producer practically doubled or more than doubled.

In view of the additional production costs due to programme postponement, the LCSD agreed to increasing the subsidy amount for the production. However, the LCSD and the group were preoccupied with examining possible alternatives from the start of December, such as programme cancellation or postponement and producing a pre-recorded performance. The two parties only had the opportunity to discuss financial arrangements and details of the production budget in early 2021. Although the financial prospects for the show remained uncertain at the time, the group had to cover essential expenses such as remunerations for the cast. As Lei puts it, “We took a leap of faith.”

Apart from additional expenses incurred by programme postponement, the show was also affected by restrictions on the distance between the stage and the audience in performance venues that were later enforced. Although the number of seats to be occupied had been increased to 75 per cent of the venue's seating capacity in May 2021, it was impossible for the group to make all the seats available for the audience. Despite the increased subsidy from the LCSD, the production ran a six-digit deficit in the end.

## Case Interview: On & On Theatre Workshop

Founded in 1998, On & On Theatre Workshop (On & On) is a recipient of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) three-year grant, and it is one of the few theatre groups that operates independent performance venues in Hong Kong. Two of the group's productions, *The Phenomenon of Man: Revolver 2021* (*The Phenomenon*) and *Waking Dreams in 1984* (Rerun) (*Waking Dreams*), were affected during the pandemic in 2020. After the initial postponement, *The Phenomenon* was staged during the brief reopening of performance venues. *Waking Dreams* was presented as livestream performances. Given the different production scales and the circumstances surrounding the two programmes, the group also adopted different approaches in terms of administration and publicity.

## Reopening of Venues a Key Factor

*The Phenomenon* was originally scheduled for a run of six performances at the HKRep Black Box on 2-7 June 2020. One week before the premiere, the LCSD announced on 26 May that it would reopen all its performance venues. However, the venues would only be open for hirers' rehearsal use and performances or activities without live audiences before 15 June.<sup>5</sup> After discussing the situation with Hong Kong Repertory Theatre (HKRep), On & On announced

on 28 May that the programme would be postponed to the second half of June since “the performance venue would not be open to live audiences”.<sup>6</sup> Shortly after, On & On secured a theatre run for the show at The Box, Freespace, the Art Park at the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD). After the LCSD announced that it would open its venues for performances or activities with live audiences from 19 June<sup>7</sup>, *The Phenomenon* had a run of four performances on 27-29 June.

On & On’s marketing manager Olivia Chan remarks that the group and the venue provider were most puzzled about whether the HKRep Black Box was categorised as a “performance venue under the LCSD”. As Chan explains, “All the venues were closed, but our understanding was that HKRep would be allowed to open its venue... That was the information we were given throughout our communications with HKRep.” Marble Leung, executive director of HKRep, also mentioned On & On’s search for another venue for *The Phenomenon* in a media interview.<sup>8</sup> He hoped the government could standardise the guidelines for reopening for all performance venues in Hong Kong (including the LCSD venues and venues that operate under the Places of Public Entertainment License). “The inconsistencies in implementation are really confusing. What are the differences between these venues?” Leung said at the time.

6 On & On Theatre Workshop. “*The Phenomenon of Man: Revolver 2021* show postponement announcement (Updated 28/5)”, Facebook post, 28 November 2020.  
<https://www.facebook.com/onandonhk/posts/1437472563102814>

7 Hong Kong SAR Government. “Latest arrangements for LCSD public services”, Press Releases, 17 June 2020. <https://www.lcsd.gov.hk/clpss/tc/webApp/NewsDetails.do?id=14878>

8 “Performances on hold as LCSD closes its performance venues again – Hong Kong Repertory Theatre says it is facing a HKD\$1 million loss”, *Stand News*, 15 July 2020.  
<https://www.thestandnews.com/art/康文署再封館演出急煞停-香港話劇團稱損失過百萬>  
(The website ceased operation in December 2021)

## Challenges in Communications and Support from the Ticketing System

*The Phenomenon* opened three weeks after On & On announced the new performance dates and venue on 5 June. In the span of one month, the group had to handle programme postponement, venue change (to a venue with a higher seating capacity), new publicity efforts, and performances. Chan says the biggest challenge was communications. “We had to deliver a large amount of information regarding ticket exchange and refunds to the audiences in a short time.” The ticketing for *The Phenomenon* was initially processed through the URB TIX. After the change of venue to the WKCD, ticket sales were processed through the art-mate and WKCD ticketing platforms. According to the URB TIX’s terms, ticket holders were responsible for contacting the theatre group regarding refund or ticket exchange after it was announced that the programme had been postponed. “If I could get in touch with everyone who bought a ticket, I could offer them several options: ticket exchange, receiving souvenirs in exchange for unused tickets, or donating the costs of the tickets to the group... [We could work things out] as long as they contacted us.” Many audience members opted for exchanging their tickets for tickets to the rescheduled performances in the second half of June. This was processed by Chan in the form of consignment tickets via the art-mate platform. The four performances were sold out, and they recorded larger audience turnouts than the audience numbers for the original performances [at HKRep Black Box].

Compared to *The Phenomenon*, *Waking Dreams* posed an even greater challenge for the group in terms of communications. The original plan was to present a total of ten performances in two rounds: the first round at the Studio Theatre, the Hong Kong Cultural Centre on 18-20 December 2020, and the second round at The Box on 8-10, 13 and 14

January 2021. The programme was extremely popular and sold out quickly. A large number of audience members were involved. Ticket sales for the first round of performances were processed via the art-mate ticketing platform. Audience members had to submit their contact information, while they placed their orders using electronic payment. It helped to reduce administrative costs for the group. "If the show was cancelled, refunds would be issued. There would be no administrative work for us, since art-mate would issue refunds directly [to the credit card accounts]," Chan says.

## Collected Data as the Basis for Strategic Decisions

When the LCSD announced on 9 December to close all its performance venues until further notice, the group also announced that they would put the first round of performances on hold. They contacted the ticket holders via email and sent them an "audience preference survey". Ticket holders were asked to rank in order of preference four possible options: exchanging their tickets for tickets to an additional performance during the second round; exchanging their tickets for access to a livestream or pre-recorded performance staged at the WKCD; donating the costs of the tickets to the group, and requesting a full refund. Due to the WKCD's ticketing system and customer services guidelines, it was not possible for the group to conduct the audience preference survey for the second round of performances. As a result, the data collected was incomplete. However, the data collected from the first round was valuable for the group, since it served as the basis for them to make further decisions. As Chan explains, "After reviewing the responses from audience members who were going to the performances at the Cultural Centre, we had an idea about the percentage of audience members [who would request a refund] and the deficit we would be running. Actually, we were buying time to collect data."



As the group saw only a slim chance of staging in-person performances at The Box, Chan says they made preparations for adapting the work for the livestream format. “I needed to find out how many audience members would be willing to watch the performance online. When our producer decided to negotiate with the WKCD about moving the performance online, we already had the data in our hands. According to the data, half of the audience members would be willing to make the switch, so we expected similar numbers for the performances at The Box.”



*Waking Dreams in 1984 (Rerun)* (2021) livestreaming in progress — Photo: Franco Yau  
Photo courtesy: On & On Theatre Workshop

Taking the data into consideration, On & On continued with their preparations in the hope that they would be able to stage two in-person performances during the last week. Four days before the show's opening, the government had not yet reopened its performance venues. The group officially announced that the show would be adapted into livestream performances. The principal creators and actors made a short video explaining the details, which was posted to the group's social media platforms. With the momentum that had been created by the group's various efforts and the resulting audience anticipation, the video was widely circulated and reposted more than two hundred times.<sup>9</sup> Chan says, "The video reached close to 40,000 views... The way it went viral, it was [the kind of publicity] that money cannot buy." Finally, On & On presented three livestream performances at The Box. The number of ticketed audience members was in line with the group's estimate.

## Case Interview: Tai Kwun Performing Arts

An arts museum converted from a cluster of heritage buildings, Tai Kwun opened to the public in May 2018, the fruits of the Central Police Station Revitalisation Project, a partnership between the Hong Kong Jockey Club (HKJC) and the Hong Kong SAR Government. The Tai Kwun performing arts team planned to launch the Tai Kwun Performing Arts Season: SPOTLIGHT in September 2020, which would have featured various cross-disciplinary performances from Hong Kong and overseas. Due to the pandemic, the performing arts season was postponed to April-May 2021 even before promotions began.

Eddy Zee, Head of Performing Arts at Tai Kwun, says that his team values the process of building trust and programme planning with the artists. "Throughout the performing arts season, we did not cancel any programme... The programmes were postponed. We did not want the artists to suffer any loss... In our collaborations, none of the artists lost their

artists' fees. Instead, they were offered an additional budget for producing online works."

At the peak of the pandemic, the HKJC provided additional resources to support the performing arts sector. As in-person performances were put on hold, the performing arts team collaborated with local artists on creating On Stage Online, a series of free-of-charge performances on online platforms. The programmes spanned a variety of art forms and formats, including dance, drama, music and online interaction.

## Curating an Online Performance Series

Frieda Ng, Producer of Performing Arts at Tai Kwun, shares her observations of the artists' responses to the pandemic and the trends in online programmes. While the artists focused on documenting the rehearsal process in the early days, over time they sought to expand their presentation modes. In light of this, the performing arts team curated On Stage Online, a series that went beyond documentation of the creative process. "There was the story that was presented on stage. What we saw online was the side story, which was a new work in itself," Zee adds.

On Stage Online included online works that were produced as extension programmes of the Tai Kwun Performing Arts Season: SPOTLIGHT, as well as works in progress sponsored by the HKJC. From September 2020 to mid-2021, two to four programmes were released online every month. As Zee says, "There were almost 20 programmes in the line-up of On Stage Online. They achieved over 400,000 views." Apart from the artists' creativity, Zee believes programme design was key to the works achieving an extensive audience reach. "Most of the videos were 15 minutes long. It was an important element of the programmes. It would not work if the videos were too long." Tai Kwun's principle about video duration was in line with its strategy of keeping in-person performances at the venue to approximately one hour in length. "We took our cue from the Fringe model, and kept the performances to an

appropriate length... We talked to the artists about it. We agreed [the videos] should not be too long, since we were not making films." In Ng's view, the programmes' popularity could also be attributed to their portrayals of life during the pandemic, which appealed to new audiences. "The content was really down-to-earth. It helped the programmes to reach broader audiences other than the usual arts lovers."



*A Poem in Jail (in progress) – Happy Together Till the Next Century Comes (2020), a programme of On Stage Online — Photo: YC Kwan Photo courtesy: Reframe Theatre and Felixism Creation*

## Venues Under the Temporary Places of Public Entertainment License

Tai Kwun is a performance venue that operates under the Temporary Places of Public Entertainment License, and it has to comply with different restrictions compared to those enforced at LCSD venues. Zee refers to one of the differences as an example. “During performance at a LCSD venue, the performers did not have to wear surgical masks. At our venue, the performers had to wear surgical masks during performance. There were also different arrangements for screening, which left us really confused. Why were [these rules] enforced at one type of venue, but not at another?” Therefore, for the On Stage Online programmes, the performers are seen wearing masks in videos of performances filmed at Tai Kwun, even if there were no live audiences during the performances.

In addition, the Temporary Places of Public Entertainment License is usually granted the day before the performance. Even in pre-pandemic days, the nature of the license created many uncertainties. As Zee says, “We did not have full control. If there was anything that the Fire Services Department or the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department did not approve of, we had to stop the whole thing.” While it was essential to stay flexible during the pandemic, the Temporary Places of Public Entertainment License posed many challenges for the curatorial team who had to go the extra mile to resolve various issues. As Ng notes, the team had to spend more time communicating with the artists. Some of the artists understood the restrictions and worked around them, while other artists were less receptive to changes.

As Zee puts it, Tai Kwun is a “somewhat alternative” venue. Since its opening, Tai Kwun has dealt with conflicts in various areas, such as art forms, collaborations with artists, business tenants, the surroundings, and regulations. While the pandemic brought on various obstacles, the team gained new insights about making changes and adjustments. “Although it made



things more complicated, the outcome was interesting. It prompted me to come up with different solutions along the way.”

## Case Interview: iStage

Founded in 2007, iStage is a recipient of the HKADC one-year grant. Since 2015, iStage has been a Venue Partner of Sheung Wan Civic Centre. Apart from stage performances, the theatre group also presents school performances on a frequent basis. “Since 2014, [the group] has toured several hundred performances to local schools and in the community”.<sup>10</sup> The group maintains an approximately 50:50 ratio for its theatre performances and school performances. During the 2019/2020 academic year, the group had four school touring programmes in progress, with an average of 80 performances scheduled for each programme. The presenters included the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG), the Council for Sustainable Development (CSD), the Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health (HKCSH), and the Beat Drug Fund (BDF).

On 25 January 2020, the Education Bureau announced that all schools would extend their Chinese New Year holidays to 16 February, and classes would be resumed on 17 February.<sup>11</sup> However, the date of class resumption was delayed several times. Finally, the Education Bureau announced on 5 May that local schools would resume their classes by phases in May and June.<sup>12</sup> During this period, the group was unable to stage in-person performances in local schools. For each of their four programmes, less than half of the performances had been completed at that point. Over the years, the group and the presenters had an

10 iStage. “Introduction”. <https://www.istage.hk/intro/>

11 Hong Kong SAR Government. “SED opening remarks at press conference on measures against novel coronavirus infection”, Press Releases, 25 January 2020.  
<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202001/25/P2020012500499.htm>

12 Hong Kong SAR Government. “SED opening remarks at press conference on measures against novel coronavirus infection”, Press Releases, 5 May 2020.  
<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202005/05/P2020050500602.htm>

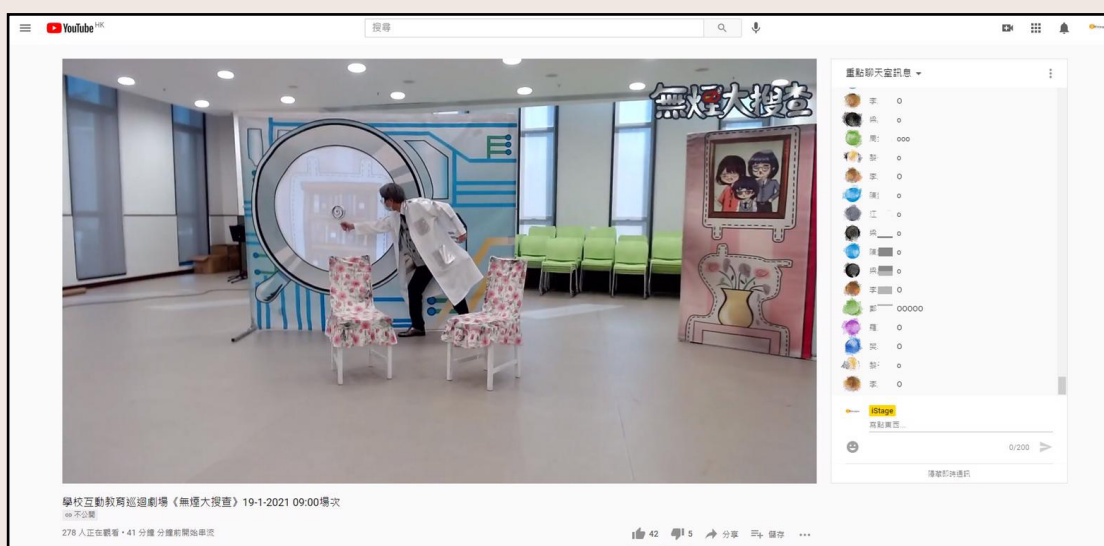
agreement regarding funding allocation based on the number of completed school touring performances. The group would have come under serious financial pressure if they had been unable to complete the number of performances that had been agreed on. Therefore, the group started presenting livestream performances for local schools at the end of March.

## A Path Full of Hurdles

Elton Lau and Mathew Cheung, the group's artistic director and creative producer respectively, believe iStage was the first theatre group in Hong Kong to livestream school touring programmes. As there were no precedents, the group had to brainstorm and experiment with different possibilities. Despite uncertain financial prospects, they purchased new video recording equipment to conduct a series of trial runs in order to make the necessary adjustments. The team tried to utilise the characteristics of the livestream format, such as using multiple video cameras at the live performance to capture different shots, using software to display subtitles and illustrations simultaneously, and using more advanced audio recording technologies.

The next hurdle to overcome was how to convince the presenters to accept the change of performance mode. As Cheung says, "Interaction with students is the most important aspect of school tours. It may be inviting them to join us on stage, or us joining them off stage, or asking questions. The key is to get the messages across to them." Lau and Cheung made use of the live chat of YouTube live as a way to preserve the element of interaction in the programmes. Lau says, "Some of the presenters who were more progressive, such as the HKFYG, were receptive as they knew many schools were switching to Zoom classes." The HKFYG was the first presenter who agreed to the switch to livestream performance. However, some of the presenters rejected the proposal even after they had been offered lengthy

explanations and several rounds of demonstrations. For instance, the CSD did not believe livestream performance could offer the same degree of interaction as in-person performance. Of all the school touring programmes, the CSD programme was the only one that was postponed to the next academic year. In Lau's words, "It was the worst case scenario. We had to stage close to 50 performances in the following year. Of the six actors in the cast, four of them were not available [for the rescheduled performances]... We could only compensate the two other actors for their losses [when we had the rescheduled performances]."



iStage makes use of the live chat of YouTube live to interact with students — Photo courtesy: iStage



After the plans for livestream touring performances were confirmed, there were many practical issues to tackle. The foremost issue was scheduling conflicts: When there was more than one school that selected the same performance date and time, how could the group resolve the problem of livestream venue? As Cheung says, “We had only one rehearsal room. Where else would we go? We would have to hire a venue, but all the government venues were closed. We had to keep asking around.” According to both Lau and Cheung, they were able to overcome these difficulties thanks to generous support from their industry peers, some of whom offered their own venues for the group to use for free. “We were trying to catch up on the number of touring performances we had to complete. We did not want to call off any performances, so we went ahead with every one of them even if we had to cover the venue hire charges.” Apart from performance venues, the group also had to shoulder the expenses for equipment hire when they needed to use the same equipment for more than one performance.

## Reflections on Contracts for Touring Programmes

Both Lau and Cheung believe the pandemic situation has shed light on a problematic clause in the contracts for school touring programmes. As Cheung puts it, “We came across this issue every year. For instance, in the case of a typhoon or a black rainstorm signal being hoisted in the morning, the show would be cancelled and [the presenter] would not pay us the remuneration. We had to stomach the loss every time.” Neither the group nor the entire performing arts sector opposed the clause, since programme cancellation due to adverse weather only happened occasionally. With class suspension during the pandemic, a large number of rehearsed drama programmes were cancelled. The theatre groups did not receive any compensation, which put them in a state of financial crisis.

The correlation between the number of completed performances and remuneration reflected the presenters' perceptions of the positioning of theatre groups. In the case of the CSD programme, the staff in charge insisted that when there were no in-person performances, "there was no manpower involved, and we were unable to pay the remuneration". As Lau explains, "[Some presenters] thought of arts groups as workers, who would get paid if they showed up for work. They did not take into account the rehearsals we had to do prior to a performance. In fact, the making of the work and rehearsals were processes to which we devoted the most manpower. It was not just the performance. This issue escalated during the pandemic, and it brought to light how unfair the situation was."

Apart from the one programme that was postponed to the next academic year, the group completed two school touring programmes by livestreaming the remaining performances. They also completed another school touring programme by presenting an edited version of the pre-recorded performance. However, they still ran a deficit because of the additional expenses. It was also impossible to calculate the time cost involved in revising the programmes and doing test runs of livestreams.

## Looking Ahead

The four interviewees and the performing arts industry went through challenging times in the year of the pandemic. Taking into account their own positionings and production needs, the theatre groups devised different strategies in response to a variety of situations, while they embarked on many experiments. What are some of the experiences that the groups took away from these new attempts, while they look ahead to the future?

## Strengthened Exchanges between Producers

Lei Yuen-hung from Théâtre de la Feuille believes that large-scale arts groups or organisations will make changes to the contracts or agreements that they enter into even after the pandemic is over. For instance, they may include clauses regarding programme postponement or cancellation due to the pandemic. Lei says these revised clauses may not apply to Théâtre de la Feuille. “We are a small and independent group. A lot of what we do comes down to mutual trust and flexibility, and it is not put down in black and white.” Therefore, the group has not made significant changes to its operation and administration since the pandemic has eased. However, Lei says she has had more exchanges with other local producers. “Producers usually work independently. [Last year] we often had to exchange information, so there were a lot more communications. It is a good thing in the long run... I believe in building connections and cooperation between producers.”

Eddy Zee and Frieda Ng from the Tai Kwun performing arts team also have similar views. From a broader curatorial perspective, however, they noticed that presenters tended to feature similar artists in their programmes during the pandemic, which might be attributed to the impossibility of bringing overseas productions to the city. Zee thinks there should be more coordination between producers. “This involved communication between presenters. Why did everyone pick the same artists?” Ng adds, “When I saw the same artists in different works or at different venues... [I wondered] if they really had the time to juggle so many projects?... It also made the audience stop and think before booking their tickets.” As Zee says, Tai Kwun will carry on its direction and put the spotlight on local artists. As for bringing overseas works into Hong Kong, the team will focus on how to incorporate local elements and performers into the programmes.

## Unusual Insights for Future Paths

After the year-long and intensive communications surrounding *The Phenomenon* and *Waking Dreams*, Olivia Chan thinks that On & On's audiences have become more forthcoming on online platforms. "In the past, the audiences would share [the posts about our productions]. This time, they actually left comments. The old audiences would even tell the new audiences that 'there is something really special about On & On's shows...'" The increase in new audiences could be seen from the survey responses. Close to one-fifth of the audiences who watched the livestream performances completed the survey, which was a rather high response rate. "They mentioned [in the survey] that they were really excited to be a part of the show even if they were not in Hong Kong, or if they did not manage to get a ticket before." This echoes On & On's aspirations: Apart from presenting avant-garde works, the group hopes to open a door into the theatre for broader audiences.

On & On made an effort to tend to audience emotions through the use of a survey, while using the collected data as the basis for revising its strategy. While the group developed a command of many new technologies, Chan thinks the use of technologies was an expedient during the pandemic. In the long run, she does not see online performances as a future path for On & On. Firstly, it is not in line with the group's artistic direction. Secondly, the audiences are likely to have ever higher expectations [about online performances], and the group does not have sufficient resources to keep up with their expectations.

As for iStage, they made considerable efforts to convince the presenters that livestream performances could be on par with in-person performances in terms of quality. However, they were faced with a fundamental question: How could they make the presenters understand that while livestream performances were feasible, they could not replace in-person

performances? Mathew Cheung was aware that one of the presenters considered providing the resources for one shoot and using the pre-recorded performance for future screenings. The presenters and the group have come to an agreement regarding the new academic year: In addition to in-person performances, the group will provide an online performance version in case of unexpected circumstances. Although it is an affirmation of the feasibility of online performances, iStage has to shoulder the costs for video equipment and venue hire, which puts the group in a disadvantageous position. As for the issue of unfair clauses in the contract, Elton Lau says that the performing arts sector and the Hong Kong Theatre Arts Practitioners Union will have to work together to tackle the issue.

I would like to conclude this article with Eddy Zee's words about the future: "The situation in Hong Kong has changed entirely. How should we move forward with what we do? The only thing I know is that the tried and true does not work. We need to think of other possibilities. But what are those possibilities? Sorry, I do not have any ideas yet."

As we enter an uncharted territory, let us embrace the unknown rather than rush into any answers. A wealth of possibilities await for the performing arts sector to explore in the post-pandemic world.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

## Miu Law

is a Hongkonger, an independent creator, a cross-disciplinary arts curator, and a freelance writer, translator and editor. A graduate of the Department of Translation at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, she co-founded HerStory Polygon in 2011. She is currently a creative partner of On & On Theatre Workshop.