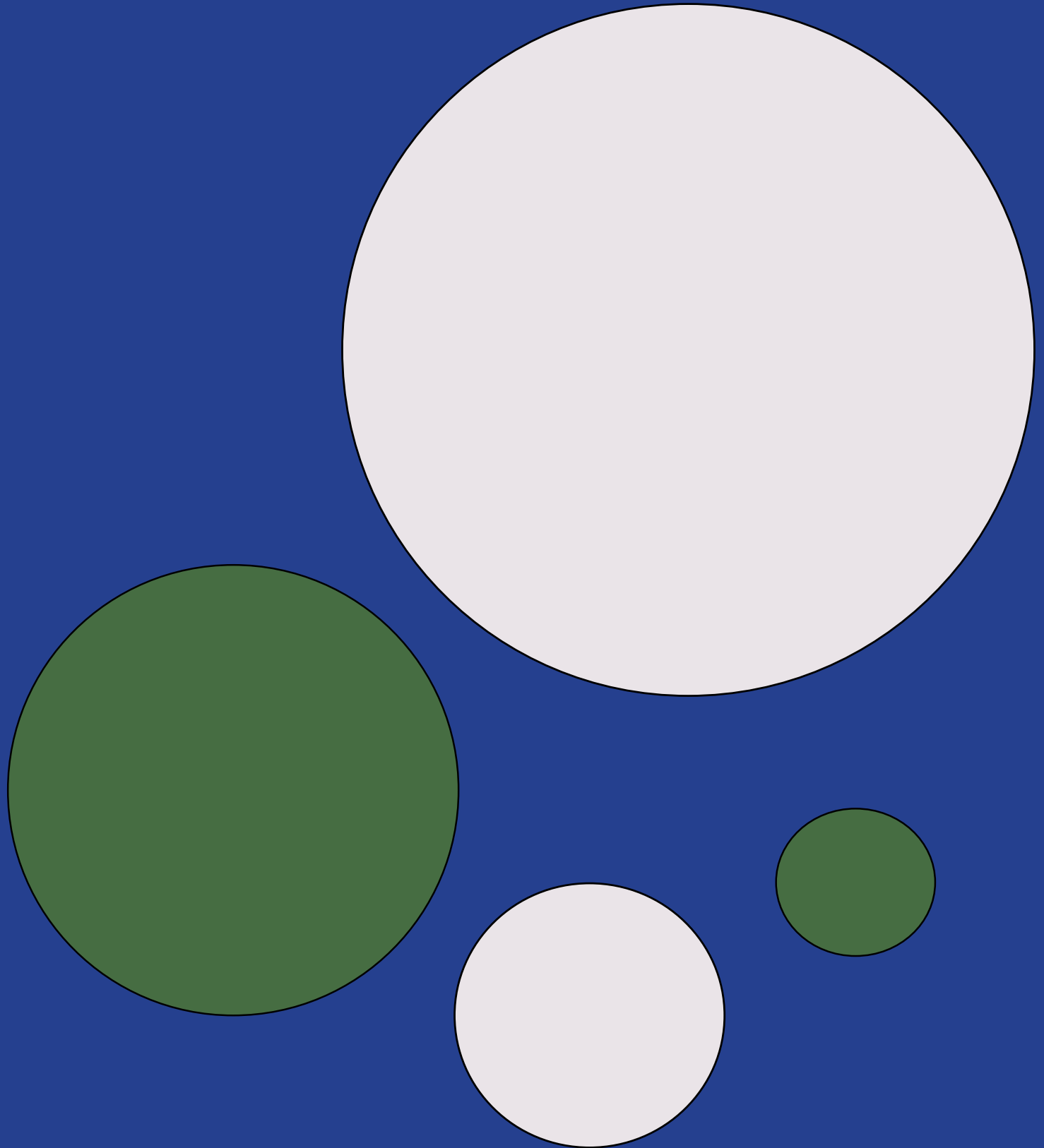


Imagining a Post-Pandemic Theatre

by Zoe Lai Sim-fong



At the time of writing, we have lived with the pandemic gloom for more than one year. While the number of COVID-19 infections in Hong Kong remains low compared to other regions, social distancing measures and restrictions on group gatherings are strictly enforced in the city. Although local theatres reopened after an extended closure, the number of seats to be occupied was limited to 50 per cent of the venue's seating capacity during the early phase of reopening, with a view to limiting group gatherings and the number of possible infections. There is an eerie similarity between the theatre and the virus: They both thrive on group gatherings. Connections (infections) are born from the interaction between people, and group gatherings must be minimised as an epidemic preventive measure. In this light, the theatre and its practitioners were destined to make sacrifices. It was not the first pandemic-imposed theatre closure in world history: Legend has it that William Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* while in quarantine, when theatres were shut down during the plague in England in the 17th century. Meanwhile, numerous actors, musicians, and technicians were forced to switch professions or take their tours to rural areas. In the 21st century, countless artists, designers, administrators and backstage workers have also been driven to search for new paths during the pandemic. For this article, I interviewed four artists: Michelle Li, Ivor Houlker, Lawrence Lau, and Sung Boon-ho. Taking their insights as starting points, I will reflect on my own experiences as a spectator during the pandemic, and imagine the theatre's development in the post-pandemic era.

The Theatre's Existence

As was the case with many other industries, moving online was the most direct means for the theatre to reach its audiences. In addition to streaming recordings of past performances, adapting theatre works into pre-recorded performances for online presentation was a popular mode during the early days of the pandemic. The majority of programmes under the Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme, sponsored by the Leisure and Cultural Services

Department (LCSD), were produced as pre-recorded performances. They included *Our Land* by Little Breath Creative Workshop, and *Happy Together* by Theatre Ronin. Among the programmes of HKartsFestival@TaiKwun, *Making Space*, *Our Atlas*, and *carry on* were adapted into short films for screenings. The aforementioned productions are selected examples. For further information about the number of affected productions, please refer to another feature article in this overview, “Embracing the Unknown in the Year of the Pandemic—Production Statistics and Case Interviews for Local Drama Productions Affected During the Pandemic”. With the change of presentation mode, did the creators employ video as a means of documentation? Or did they seek to adapt their works for a different format? In 2020, Lawrence Lau took part in a staged reading, which was produced as a pre-recorded performance due to the pandemic. He had a discussion with the creative team at the time. “To me,” he says, “the intention of making a work was important. If it was just an act of documentation, there was no need to go through too much hassle. If it was an experiment in the video format, it would be a different story.” The team decided on the latter, and they experimented with different filming techniques and visuals throughout the rehearsals. To Lau, it was an interesting experience.

The switch to video format inspired a discussion on the nature of the theatre: How could we preserve theatricality in a video recording? Some artists attempted to preserve the audience’s sense of being present in the theatre with livestreaming. In March 2020, Chung Ying Theatre Company presented *Pa Pa Magician* as a livestream staged reading after the in-person performance was cancelled. In June, PROJECT ROUNDABOUT organised the livestream staged reading series, “See You Soon”. In October, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre (HKRep) livestreamed the performance of *Principle*. In order to enrich the livestream presentation, eight video cameras were used to film the live performance. A team of video editors were employed to work on the selection of shots from different angles and simultaneous display of

subtitles. The technical set-up was on par with that of live TV programmes. The efforts from these artists and theatre groups were certainly admirable. If there had been no pandemic, we might not have seen so many diverse and transmedia attempts in Hong Kong's theatre. However, I cannot help but wonder: What is the distinction between the presentation modes of these productions and that of TV talent shows? If it was possible to preserve the audience's sense of being present with livestreaming, the theatre would have met its demise after the birth of TV. Like online broadcasts of pre-recorded performances, livestreaming was largely an expedient during the pandemic. These attempts in video format appeared to be temporary solutions rather than long-term directions. As many artists and administrators have noted, the presentation of pre-recorded performances in place of in-person performances was a way for them to fulfil the requirements by funding bodies, or they would have been ineligible to receive the full subsidy amounts. Be it pre-recorded performances or livestream performances, these productions centred on video as their artistic language. If the artists do not have a real understanding of what the theatre is, why they use it as their creative medium, or why it should exist as part of the new normal in the post-pandemic era, it would be even more important to discuss how to draw on our experiences in these transmedia experiments to further the theatre's development in the future. After their immersion in video making, the artists have developed a firmer grasp of video recording equipment, editing, mise-en-scene, composition and the use of software. As theatres have gradually reopened, we are likely to see a growing number of artists employ video in their theatre works.

Challenges and Opportunities in Online Showcases

Apart from performances, working, learning or even leisure activities can now happen online. Mass audiences are more receptive to watching performances online than before the pandemic. The mix of online and offline modes has become an irreversible trend. In the case of HKRep's *Principle*, the livestream performance had the same audience turnout as four

in-person performances. With viewers from Singapore, the US, Canada and Australia, the online showcase had a greater impact than the in-person performance in terms of audience reach and size. However, the technical demands of the livestream inevitably lead to increased production costs. The availability of livestreaming also cuts into the number of people who watch the performance in the theatre. In other words, the instantaneity of the livestream does not help extend the lifespan of a production.

The advantages of online streaming include extensive geographical coverage, flexible viewing times, and an unlimited number of streams during the viewing period. In contrast, due to the limited availability of performance venues, most Hong Kong theatre productions have short theatre runs of five performances. Will online streaming become a new platform and business model that extends the longevity of productions? Will it help the local theatre tap into a wider range of resources and audiences, and eventually draw new audiences to in-person performances? Local arts groups from dance companies and theatre troupes to music organisations posted news about their streaming performances to their respective social media channels, which resulted in information being scattered across various platforms. The groups also had limited resources for publicity, which made it difficult for them to promote the shows to a wider public.

Marquee TV, a performing arts streaming platform overseas, offers viewers unlimited access to different kinds of performing arts shows from around the world on a monthly subscription. Hong Kong performing arts makers have to raise the standards of their productions in order to compete with international arts groups. While this may not be achievable at present because of the funding models in Hong Kong, it is a possible prospect for the nine major performing arts companies to pursue. In recent times, we have also seen the launches of similar streaming platforms in Hong Kong. The growth of e-commerce has accelerated in the days of the pandemic, while the government has introduced support schemes for digital



Principle (2020) livestreaming in progress — Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Repertory Theatre

transformation for small and medium-sized enterprises. Can local arts groups utilise resources from other fields to expand their own online platforms?

Artists and administrators are faced with new challenges as they work to adapt their productions for both online and offline showcases. In-person performance and video are two distinct formats, and the blended mode does not work for every production. When filming is involved, the design of scenography, lighting and stage effects needs to be more refined, and the designers have to consider how the effects look on stage and on screen. The producer has to pay royalties for the use of music for two performance versions, unless it is original work commissioned for the production. The same applies to the use of the script. In some cases, the playwright may oppose the production being broadcast online. Before the filming, the director needs to have in-depth discussions with the cinematographer and the video editor about camera angles and shot selection so as to facilitate post-production. These

issues significantly increase the costs of digitalisation of in-person performances for online broadcasts. The UK's National Theatre Live, for instance, only selects commercially successful productions for worldwide broadcasts. The cast and the content of the work must have a strong box office appeal in order for the theatre group to recover the production costs. Hong Kong theatre makers may consider adopting the blended mode for large-scale productions so as to expand their audiences locally and overseas.

New Forms of Online Theatre

During the pandemic, independent and small-scale arts groups searched for alternatives in online theatre. Unlike online streaming of theatre performances, online theatre utilises existing platforms such as websites and virtual conference software as performance platforms. Online theatre involves instant interaction and a higher degree of audience participation, and it may include elements of roleplaying. There may be actors performing in the work, while part of the performance may be happening in a physical venue (although it is not always the case). While there is a narrative structure, the story may unfold in a non-linear way, leaving more room for audience members to engage with the work. Like conventional theatre shows, there are start times and end times for online theatre performances. During the pandemic, I watched many local and overseas online theatre works. Local theatre educator Estella Wong led a group of graduates from the Master of Fine Arts in Drama (Drama & Theatre Education) programme at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) in creating *See You Zoom*. In a real-time performance on Zoom, audience members learnt about the lives of the characters, and shared their thoughts about how the characters should resolve certain problems. While the work was mainly visually-oriented, it made constant use of Zoom's functions such as the chat box, breakout rooms, and switches between different video cameras. The performance took place in the homes of different actors. As the focus shifted between different actors and homes, the audience members watched the performance on computer screens in their own homes. This kind of setting is notably different from a conventional theatre space.

Rooftop Productions is one of the few local theatre groups that have developed and used their own communications platforms. With their work projects on hold during the pandemic, Michelle Li and Ivor Houlker studied programming and read extensively about theories of online theatre. They also carried out the experiment, *Presence*, at Freespace at the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD). They teamed up with fellow artist Kenny Wong to create remote control cars. A video camera, a speaker and a microphone were installed in each car. Audience members could log in to a web portal anytime and anywhere, and control the cars via the portal. The remote control car took the place of the body of the audience member, who drove it around the theatre and interacted with the actors and other audience members/remote control cars. In this online theatre work, the audience members were present in the performance in how they were situated in the virtual space in a game-like setting.

The creative format of an online theatre work is largely influenced by the design, user experience interface, and the functions of the platform. Houlker believes the choice of a fitting platform can accentuate the work. How do we evoke for the audience the sense of being present, which is the heart of the theatre? Li believes it is grounded in interactivity: "It is about creating a structure that allows the audience to take the lead and engage with the work. The games are strategies for the audience to explore what is happening, which in turn extends their attention span." However, this kind of online interaction is vastly different from the strategies employed in the theatre. Houlker thinks it may not be directly applicable to online theatre, which should be considered a distinct format. However, Li and Houlker observe that there is only a handful of local artists who are versed in programming, which hinders the development of arts technology in Hong Kong. "It is useful to have some basic programming skills. There are some courses that cover programming and the use of various types of software at the School of Creative Media, the City University of Hong Kong. At present, there are no such courses at the School of Theatre and Entertainment Arts at the HKAPA," Houlker says. How to enhance industry practitioners' knowledge of technology, and



Remote control cars in *Presence* (2021) — Photo courtesy: Rooftop Productions

how to attract graduates in engineering or computer science majors to join the arts industry, will be key directions for industry development in the long run.

The New Vision Arts Festival launched the online performing arts platform, “ReNew Vision”, featuring a new image and format. It introduced a line-up of five programmes with only one in-person performance. The other four programmes spanned different formats and genres, including an interactive website, music microfilm, sonic art, and virtual reality. Also in 2020, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council launched the Arts Go Digital Platform Scheme, a special grant scheme that supports a total of 58 small-scale and ten large-scale arts projects featuring the use of contemporary technology. Among these projects are productions by local theatre artists. At the time of writing, most of the Arts Go Digital works have not been released. Like online broadcasts of performance recordings, online theatre has a potentially extensive reach. It remains to be seen whether this presentation mode will open up a new path for Hong Kong’s theatre.

The Mixed Working Model

Compared to the blended mode of online and offline performances, the mixed working model has a more profound impact on artists, beyond what is immediately apparent. As the pandemic continues, borders remain closed and many international flights are suspended. Be it arts groups that rely on international tours, or independent artists and producers who seek to take part in artist residencies and performing arts markets, many must cope with changes to their working models in the next few years. International exchange is instrumental to an artist's creative and professional development. While many artists continue to pursue exchange opportunities in the current circumstances, the modes of exchange may become increasingly dependent on digital technology in the future. The artists' works may also focus more on concepts, template, and workshop design rather than showcasing the artists' skills.

In addition, the production process may be divided into parts that are realised in different locations. In 2020, Lawrence Lau planned to take part in two arts festivals in New York and Canada respectively, where he would present collaborative works with overseas artists. In the end, the works were showcased in his absence at the festivals. For another collaboration, this time with an Indian artist, Lau designed the music for a production which was presented as an online theatre work. Lau was able to continue showcasing his works overseas and collaborating with international artists since his music could be digitalised and transferred online. Another example is French choreographer Jérôme Bel, who presented *Gala* in Hong Kong in 2019. With his commitment to carbon footprint reduction, Bel has refused to travel by air since 2018, even though he continues to tour overseas and receive invitations from international presenters. He has made significant changes to his working model; for overseas performances he uses Skype to rehearse and perform with locally recruited artists and dancers. Bel develops a template and a workflow for each production, while local producers look for suitable collaborators according to his guidelines. These practices reflect some

of the changes artists have made to their working/collaboration models and presentation modes, which are driven by the digitalisation of parts of the production, the decentralisation of workflow, template design for each production, and parts of the production process being materialised by collaborators. The rise of 5G technology has made more affordable and faster data transmission available to the public. This may facilitate more self-initiated online artist residences and cross-border collaborations. These changes have also raised certain questions: If a work is materialised by multiple creators who bring their own artistic touches to the production, who owns the rights to the work? And as for artists whose craft cannot be digitalised, such as actors and dancers, how should they reconsider their paths in the post-pandemic era?

The Moving Theatre

Compared to arts makers, actors occupy a rather passive position. For actors, opportunities to perform are often created by producers, directors, and playwrights who look for resources and bring the productions to fruition. Unlike musicians, scenographers and lighting designers whose work centres around technical expertise, actors deliver their craft through their physical expressions that cannot be exactly digitalised and transferred overseas. The shutdown of performance venues and suspension of performances had a tremendous impact on actors. Like many other actors and dancers, Sung Boon-ho saw most of his work projects put on hold during the pandemic except a small number of projects that involved video production. These projects included *An Invitation: On Empty Stage*, a work conceived by Edward Lam and co-produced by Edward Lam Dance Theatre and Freespace of the WKCD. With his back to the camera, Sung delivered a monologue he had composed, in front of an empty auditorium. Freespace was one of the venues that remained open to artists during the pandemic, while all performance venues managed by the LCSD were closed. During the pandemic, Sung spent time roaming the streets to watch street music performances. When performances were no longer confined to official venues, they came to life in the streets at unexpected

moments. This creative expression may be the best example for contemporary theatre to follow. The exploration of new spaces for work and performance became a key concern for Sung. While he understood the closure of performance venues was intended to minimise group gatherings, he believed they could also function as workspaces. Why could the artists not use these venues for their art making? Why must they stay closed when other offices in the public and private sectors were open? “Were there no possibilities,” he asks, “for hosting other events than performances in these venues? For instance, when the Hong Kong Cultural Centre was closed, could [the government] turn it into a creative space for artists to try out some interesting experiments?”

If the performing arts will be able to exist both online and offline in the future, theatre works can take place anywhere, such as in our homes, in the streets, or in the cafes. In terms of function, the venues should not be limited to staging performances. They can serve as co-working spaces for artists to produce performances, which are presented online and accessible to audiences from any region. In the long run, the venues must make significant upgrades to their equipment and facilities, such as faster internet connection, more computers and tablets, and lighting and audio software and hardware. Similarly, the theatre is not the only venue in which a production happens. With the extensive use of home technology products such as computer and recording equipment, as well as the popularity of various kinds of software, actors and dancers can now work as arts makers in their own homes, or in other places such as cafes and small offices, and showcase their creations online and offline. In this sense, the theatre is set to move beyond boundaries in the future.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

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graduated with a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Practice at the University of Exeter in the UK, where she received training in the psycho-physical approach to acting under master Phillip Zarrilli. She also received a Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She currently works as an independent dramaturg in theatre and contemporary dance. Recent works include *Remote Hong Kong* at Tai Kwun and *100% Hong Kong* at West Kowloon Cultural District by Rimini Protokoll, and *Testimony* by Rooftop Productions. Other works include *Stay/Away* by Hook Dance Theatre x Artistree. Her curated public education project for Tai Kwun, *Edible Performance*, won the Good Design Award 2020 in Japan.

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