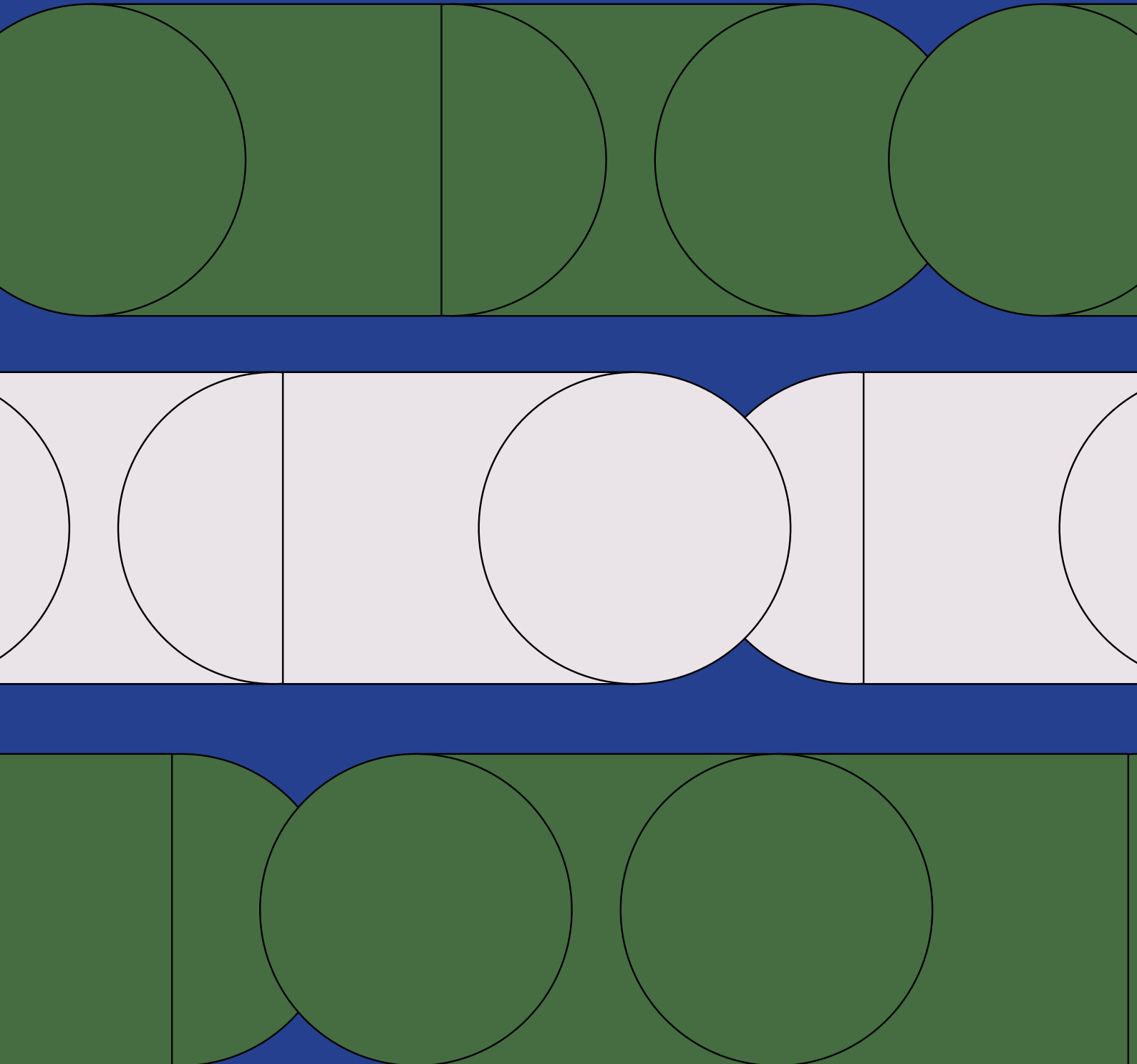


Searching for New Paths
in Times of Pandemic

by Kiki Ng

An Overview of Applied Theatre Practices



In 2019 and 2020, the social movement and the pandemic had a fundamental impact on theatre practices that focused on participation, experience, and art as a method/tool. Meanwhile, many theatre practitioners who had specific objectives for their work, such as education, issue advocacy, community connectivity, and empowerment, adopted more diverse and proactive approaches in their practices as compared to conventional theatre making. For this article, I interviewed three freelance practitioners, Kenny Poon, Sit Hoi-fai, and Franky Yau Ka-hei, and two organisations, Theatre in the Dark and the Oxfam Interactive Education Centre, both of which use applied theatre as a means to promote different visions. This article attempts to shed light on the state of applied theatre in Hong Kong in 2020—how practitioners and organisations responded to their respective situations, the choices and discoveries that they made, and their reflections on their own professionalism and ideals during a challenging year.

The Contention Outside the Classroom

Interviewee: Kenny Poon (Freelance applied theatre practitioner)

Speaking of the challenges faced by theatre educators during the pandemic, we cannot overlook the situation of freelance practitioners, who are often put in a passive position or even exploited on the job. For Kenny Poon, the thorniest project he was involved in was a two-year programme where drama was used as a tool to teach creative writing. Due to the lack of flexibility and foresight in coordination between the participating schools, the organiser, and the funding body, Poon encountered various difficulties even before he met his students. As he explains, “During the first year of the programme, classes in all schools were suspended in Hong Kong. I proposed an alternative plan—I would produce video tutorials on how to adapt existing lesson plans for online classes, and the teachers were free to implement the lesson plans as they saw fit. The organiser accepted my proposal on certain conditions that I found unreasonable, and I received the agreed remuneration. In the second year, half-day classes were resumed in secondary schools. Many of the participating schools

postponed the writing classes or withdrew from the programme, since their students had to catch up on learning the schools' curriculums. According to clauses in the contract, the participating schools were not liable for any losses if they withdrew from the programme. There was no compensation for the instructor for the cost of time spent." Poon goes on to recall the most frustrating incident that happened during the programme. When he first proposed switching to online classes, he was met with a rebuff from the organiser: "Do online classes work? Isn't experience crucial to drama classes?" In Poon's view, it was a clear case of double standards—the participating schools were offered plenty of flexibility, while the instructor was expected to deliver the same high-quality teaching despite practical constraints. He considers the situation incredibly unfair.

Do online classes work? Poon believes they are slightly less effective than face-to-face classes, but they are feasible. "There are two important elements to drama education," he says. "Firstly, there has to be a dramatic context for students to gain a deeper grasp of the characters, which in turn opens up other possibilities. Secondly, students engage in peer learning as a way to stimulate each other's creativity. In an online class, we can make changes to the presentation of the dramatic context, such as using drawing, photography and gestures, instead of using physical and vocal expression. It leaves room for students to imagine, create, and learn from one another." Poon adds that the participating parties should not judge the professionalism of an instructor based on whether the lessons can be adapted for the online format. "Professionalism is the sum of the time and effort that someone has invested into honing their expertise and achieving excellence in a particular field. Every area of expertise is unique, and there are different limitations for different areas of expertise. It does not mean [an instructor] is not flexible or professional, if they are unable to adapt their teaching plans for online classes right away." As he sees it, the participating parties should adjust their own expectations, and take into consideration factors such as time, number of

participants, and the platform that is used for programme delivery. They should not expect excellent results if their expectations are not supported by practical conditions.

While the pandemic brought to light the passive position of many freelancers, it also prompted Poon to reflect on his work and revisit certain projects that he had had in mind for a long time. “This is probably a habit, or a kind of inertia, that many freelancers share. We are used to others taking care of things, while we only do the work that we enjoy doing.” Poon resolves to take control over his work in the days to come, and he is trying to crowdfund his own projects. He hopes to create works that embody his vision and respond to society’s needs, and which can be further developed over time.



Kenny Poon conducting an online class — Photo: Instagram@bessxfoto

Back to the First Lesson

Interviewee: Sit Hoi-fai (Freelance applied theatre practitioner)

While living in uncertainty during the pandemic, local freelance theatre educators have encountered many different experiences and made many discoveries. There is a common theme to their stories—when the norm is broken, the heart of the matter will shine through the crack. For Kenny Poon, it was an opportunity to reexamine some of the ideas he had put aside for a long time. For Sit Hoi-fai, it was a call to revisit the insights he took away from the first lesson he attended at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (now the Education University of Hong Kong). As Sit says, “When the tried and true no longer works, it is a reminder that every lesson is an experiment. A teacher can put their experience and knowledge into the experiment, but there is no guarantee for success.” During the year of pandemic, Sit experimented with making various adjustments to his teaching strategy and mindset. He attempted to transpose the strengths of theatre in education (providing stimulus to students’ motivation to learn, the use of alternative learning methods, and elements of whole person education) to online platforms, and to ensure that key learning objectives were achieved.

One of the strengths of theatre in education is the presentation of a real-life context, which enhances students’ desire for learning. In the era of distance learning, the use of context design can inspire a stronger sense of initiative in students and keep them engaged in learning on a virtual platform. For instance, during a lecture on Hong Kong’s past and present, the instructor may use an imaginary context, in place of texts and photos, while they elaborate on the topic. Students may be assigned different roles and tasks as they explore the history of a particular district. In times of pandemic, context design can still be an effective teaching tool when used in a different format. Instead of taking the class on a field trip, the instructor can livestream their visit to a district and talk about its history and culture, while the students watch the broadcast online. This involves student participation to a degree. Another

strength of theatre in education is that learning efficiency can be enhanced with the video presentation of class content. It can help make certain subjects more accessible to students, such as oblique classical Chinese texts and Eastern aesthetics. For instance, in a discussion on Eastern arts, students may perform head and eye movements as a way to interpret certain principles of Eastern aesthetics, such as “pull back before moving forward” and “drawing circular lines”, in front of their video cameras. While these movements focus on parts of the body (versus whole body movements that students practise in a face-to-face class), they are still an effective means for students to grasp difficult concepts.

Apart from being a teaching tool and a means to enhance learning efficiency in cultural subjects, theatre in education is an important medium for the implementation of whole person education. For instance, through the study and performance of a drama script, students gain a deeper understanding of themselves and others. The creative process can help students to unleash their creativity, while they develop their communication and problem-solving skills through working with others. These abovementioned skills are also covered in one of the study areas of Applied Learning in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary School Education curriculum. As the pandemic raged on in 2020, Sit made further adjustments to the focus and structure of his teaching strategy, in addition to the use of software for online interaction and setting progressive learning targets for his students. He employed the flipped classroom¹ so as to offset some of the shortcomings of the online lesson format. While the change of strategy was not smooth sailing, it yielded some unexpected rewards. As Sit explains, “There used to be 23 students in the same class.

1 The flipped classroom is a student-centred instructional strategy that originated in the US in 2007. In terms of lesson planning, the teacher prepares learning materials for students to study prior to the lesson. In the classroom, the teacher and students can discuss more sophisticated and complicated concepts and engage in collaborative learning. In Sit’s practice, he allowed students to study the materials or even complete certain experiments on their own. The students had in-depth discussions during the lesson, which also offered them a greater degree of flexibility and autonomy. See “Flipped Classroom”, EdDataX, Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong: <https://eddatax.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/?cat=63>

As the instructor, I could only watch each group perform for ten minutes, and offer them some feedback on preparing for their rehearsal. In the online class, students were divided into groups of two. From gathering materials, planning the synopsis, to writing and revising the script, students were learning in a small class throughout the approximately six-hour lesson. They also received specific suggestions and guidance. In addition, the online lesson format allowed for instant recording. In terms of storytelling and dramatic structure, the works from this class were stronger than those from previous years.” While Sit adjusted his teaching strategy in an effort to adapt to the “new normal”, he was also committed to maintaining his professionalism. For instance, after a series of negotiations, he rejected the organiser’s proposal to use online assessments to evaluate students’ ability to integrate knowledge and their levels of professionalism. Each student (in a group of two) had a two-hour meeting with the instructor during which they performed the script that they had rehearsed. The pair of students also discussed and responded to instructions and tasks given by the instructor on the spot, which allowed them to demonstrate their professionalism.



Sit Hoi-fai conducting an online class — Photo courtesy: Sit Hoi-fai

In Sit's view, the experiments in the 2019/2020 academic year were opportunities for everyone to "restart", and they fostered a sense of empathy between teachers and students. "In the past, when students were unable to meet certain standards or expectations, the teachers tended to lay the blame on the students, and they put rather high expectations on their students. The situation in 2020 was challenging for both teachers and students. The teachers were better able to understand the students' limits and adjust their own expectations. There was a stronger sense of empathy between them. I saw some subtle shifts in their relationships." As a theatre instructor, Sit gained new insights into the ways in which his students learnt and expressed themselves, and he became more receptive to them. "I used to not understand how a student could deliver a performance that was very dramatic and authentic at the same time. Then I realised that we were at different places in terms of life experiences and what spurred our creativity. It was a moment when I had to stretch myself—Could we accept that there were different ways to interpret reality in different situations?" Looking ahead to the future, Sit believes there are definite advantages to the use of blended learning, and it will be difficult to go back to certain practices from the past even after the pandemic is over. Therefore, when theatre educators return to the classroom, they must exemplify the strengths of in-person theatre with their work—the physical experience, the face-to-face communication and interaction, the flow of energy, and the ways we are impacted by one another's life stories.

Practices and Discoveries in Forum Theatre

Interviewee: Franky Yau Ka-hei (Freelance applied theatre practitioner)

During the pandemic, Franky Yau Ka-hei recruited a group of women who were non-professional performers to co-create and perform in the forum theatre work, *Women Say*. It was her hope to maximise the effects of empowerment through the process of creation, rehearsals and performance. The ever-changing circumstances posed many obstacles to the women's quest to make their voices heard. As Yau had to make constant adjustments to the

production, the process also opened her eyes to a wider range of possibilities in the practice of forum theatre.

The project began in August 2020, when the majority of activities in the community were cancelled. The first phase of Yau's project, which involved face-to-face training, was carried out at Yau's studio, since the organiser and the participants were willing to move forward with the plan. In retrospect, Yau is thankful about how things turned out—the focus of the first phase was to guide the participants to improve their listening skills, and develop their initiative and creativity in physical movement and emotional expression. It also aimed to foster a sense of cohesion within the group. Yau believes this process of self-transformation and community building could only be achieved through face-to-face interaction. As the pandemic escalated in November, some of the participants were no longer able to take part in face-to-face activities because of pressure from their families. Therefore, the creative process and rehearsals were moved online. For content creation and character building, Yau made use of drawing, writing, and some theatre strategies such as thought tracking and hot seating to guide the participants to understand and conceive the characters' emotional journeys. As the pandemic eased in December, they returned to the rehearsal room to integrate and rehearse the work. While the two-month rehearsal period was condensed into one month, the team finally staged an in-person performance in mid-January 2021.

The first performance was well received, which gave the team a confidence boost. The pandemic situation, however, prompted another change of strategy—the show had to be presented online. The drama performance was pre-recorded, while the intervention was livestreamed. The female performers, who played facilitators, guided audience members to express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about possibilities for change in group discussions. A number of spect-actors were selected to interact with the facilitators in front of the camera. "During the pandemic, forum theatre makers came up with different strategies

to adapt to the situation. Some shows were livestreamed. That would have been a stressful move for our team of non-professional female performers (some of whom were in their 60s). Therefore, we decided to present a pre-recorded performance. As for the intervention, in some productions, the audience members carried out the discussion, and the actors enacted the scene. In our case, I insisted the audience members act out the scene. Although they were not taking part in the performance in person [when they were acting in front of their video cameras], they were engaged in it in their minds. There was still instant reaction and interaction. To an extent, it was acting out real life.”

Despite the difficulties, the production offered some surprising insights for Yau. When it came to filming, it was not easy for the group of non-professional performers to get used to acting in front of the camera in a short period of time. As the team had to think through the camera movement carefully, they came to a deeper understanding of the work and the positions of different characters. It fostered greater participation and engagement from the female performers, which strengthened the empowering impact of the process. “During the filming, they would voice their opinions about shot selection and style, and they would get into debates. When they were playing facilitators, they had to lead the discussions. They had to select the spect-actors who would take part in the intervention, based on the willingness of audience members, the feasibility of different approaches, and the diversity of perspectives. To an extent, they were doing some of the joker’s [my role’s] work. In my previous forum theatre works, decision making was usually in the hands of the instructor or the director, who had to juggle a lot of things. In this production, we worked together as a team. After the production was over, the female performers said they would like to take part in creating work again. I felt that hard times brought us closer and made us stronger. It was a true reflection of the spirit, ‘women say’.”



Actors and creators of *Women Say* — Photo: wiselychan@DuoProduction

As a forum theatre practitioner, the online experiment opened up a new world for Yau. “In my role as the joker, some of the work that I would have to do was replaced by the camera movement and the arrangements of facilitator-led discussions. It gave me room to observe and reflect on the work and offer appropriate suggestions. When it comes to pre-performance activities, the audience’s presence and participation is essential to forum theatre. It was a challenge for us to keep the audience engaged and make them feel they had a ‘say’ in what was happening on screen for them. I experimented with several modes of interaction such as using words and sounds, turning the camera on and off, and making facial expressions, to invite the audience members to express themselves and participate in the performance. Interestingly, the audience members felt more secure being in their homes, and they were keen to voice their feelings and thoughts. Since it was impossible for us to interact physically during the intervention, we explored different ways to create dramatic impact without physical contact. For instance, how could we convey the tension of sexual harassment on screen? These experiments in emotional expression were very interesting.”

In Yau's view, the online showcase transcends temporal and spatial limits. It poses many advantages for small organisations that do not have sufficient venue space, and makes it easier for participants and audiences to take part in performances. It may even take the works beyond geographical borders and connect people from different regions, offering a space for them to learn from one another. The online showcase also inspires more diverse perspectives and exchanges, which captures the essence of forum theatre. On the other hand, Yau acknowledges the drawback of online interaction, where the lack of physical participation weakens the intensity of connections and exchanges. In the future, Yau hopes to explore other possibilities for presenting forum theatre online.

The Light through the Darkness

Interviewees: Comma Chan (Founder and Art Director, Theatre in the Dark and Artscompana), Scarlett Cheng (Executive Director, Theatre in the Dark and Artscompana), Eddie Lin (Producer, *Seven Days of Low Carbon Living@365 Store*)

When the theatre industry was struggling amidst waves of bad news, Theatre in the Dark, an arts group that presents theatrical works with a focus on darkness, had its biggest breakthrough in 2020. On the one hand, the group's breakthrough was fuelled by opportunities that arose during the pandemic. On the other hand, it was shaped by the vision of the group that works to shed a new light on the concept of "limits" and promote inclusive arts. As one of its key features, all of the group's productions are performed in total darkness. The dramas stimulate audience senses other than sight, promoting the message of disability inclusion. With its focus on art for the five senses, Theatre in the Dark has faced tremendous challenges due to the prohibition of group gatherings and public health considerations since the start of the pandemic.

In 2020, Theatre in the Dark collaborated with the Council for Sustainable Development for the first time to present the "Sustainable Development Council—Interactive Dramas"

programme. The group staged a total of 90 drama performances featuring darkness for local primary and secondary schools. In propagating the message of sustainable development, the dramas also highlighted the skills of people of different abilities (such as the daily living skills of the visually impaired). After each performance, there was an introduction of the cast and crew, which consisted of people of different abilities. It deepened students' understanding of the everyday life and talents of disabled people, whose roles are not limited to receivers of help and support. As Eddie Lin remarks, the group's proposal was successful partly thanks to opportune timing and circumstances. "During the social movement and the pandemic, many arts groups that won the tenders in 2019 were unable to complete their touring performances. As a result, there were fewer arts groups who tendered for this programme. In addition, the element of darkness seemed like a fresh idea to the funding body. That was why we were offered the opportunity." As the pandemic surged, however, most of the project's performances had to be moved online. It was a test of the team's creativity to conceive of new ways to include darkness in an online performance. For instance, the effect of power outage was evoked with a black screen, rather than the light being switched off as originally planned. The interactive sessions in which students were to use their senses of taste, smell and touch were replaced by the actors' descriptions of tastes and textures.

While it takes creativity to make the right changes to a performance, it takes patience to follow through with administrative rearrangements and technical adjustments. After reaching a consensus with the funding body on moving the touring performances online, the group entered into a series of lengthy discussions with the participating schools. At the time, most schools and arts groups were reluctant to do livestreaming, and they were not familiar with various digital platforms. Some schools demanded that the livestreaming be done using the schools' intranets, while others opted for Google Meet. In some cases, the group was asked to perform in the school hall, while the performance was streamed live in the classrooms. Each of the 90 performances required a customised plan that posed specific constraints. The

group had to do a trial run of each plan, which put a heavy workload on the administrative staff and technicians. Meanwhile, performances were postponed several times as the pandemic situation remained volatile. Rescheduling was difficult since all the cast members were freelancers. As for performance venues, the original plan was to perform in the school halls of participating schools. After trying out different plans and encountering various obstacles, the group decided to customise its studio for the performances, in order to create a space actors of different abilities would feel at ease performing in. The group originally planned to hire two videographers to record the performances, but the producer took over the task at the end. The group had to cover all the additional expenses that were incurred. Despite thorough preparations by the group, there were several accidents throughout the programme. The most serious one was where a performance was cut short after five minutes because of internet connection issues.

As seen from the experiences of Theatre in the Dark, it is more important to have “the right people” than “the right timing” when one thrives for a breakthrough in challenging circumstances. As Comma Chan explains, “The vision of Theatre in the Dark is to work around different limits. Everyone is dealing with different limits during the pandemic, whether they are able-bodied or disabled. In the face of adversity, we must not give up easily, but try to think of possible solutions.” Chan believes the students learnt from the experience of tackling difficult situations in this programme. He hopes that the dramas expanded students’ knowledge of people of different abilities, and fostered greater understanding and acceptance among students. “The students have their own unique situations. Some of them have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, while others have learning disabilities. The programme was a chance for them to see that there are different people in society, and to learn about how they communicate and get along with one another. It drove them to reflect on how to get along with their own classmates, and inspired them to become more accepting of one another.”



Seven Days of Low Carbon Living@365 Store shooting in progress — Photo courtesy: Theatre in the Dark

While the programme proved to be an arduous attempt, the team was encouraged by the positive feedback they received. Some teachers said they were amazed at how the team created space for interaction under constraints. In the future, the group plans to develop more online touring performances featuring darkness as a way to expand its reach among local schools. On the other hand, the group has reservations about making works that are performed in total darkness at present. Apart from uncertainties about performance venues, these works might resemble radio programmes when presented online since they focus on darkness and the five senses. In addition, these works involve a high degree of tactile experience for the audiences. As a pandemic precaution, the group is waiting for the right moment to return to the theatre. Fortunately, Theatre in the Dark founded the affiliated group, Artscompana, which successfully registered as a charitable organisation in 2019. With funding from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, Artscompana created *My Unlimited*

Space, a dance video with audio description, during the pandemic. Although darkness was not featured in the work, it was a platform for people of different abilities to showcase their talents. The group invests its energy and resources in projects that cater to the changing circumstances, which exemplifies the importance of keeping a flexible mindset.

Staying True to One's Aspirations

**Interviewees: Esther Ng (Acting Assistant Education Manager, Oxfam Hong Kong),
Sandy Wong (Education Officer, Oxfam Hong Kong)**

Established in 2005, the Oxfam Interactive Education Centre aims to promote global citizenship education. In its early years, the centre employed applied theatre as a main educational tool. In the design of applied theatre activities and experiences at Oxfam, participants are situated in dramatic contexts in which they immerse themselves in the characters' thoughts and feelings. The design seeks to strengthen the participants' sense of empathy and their ability to think from multiple perspectives, while they experience interdependence in a group setting throughout the process. The dramatic contexts are taken from Oxfam's projects and based on real-life events, allowing participants to gain deeper knowledge of the issue of poverty in Hong Kong and worldwide.

With its focus on participant experience, Oxfam places an emphasis on the setting and atmosphere of activities. Before the pandemic, Oxfam organised close to 300 activities annually, including community visits, simulation experiences, and the Human Library. The centre was the main venue for its applied theatre performances. In 2019 and 2020, many of Oxfam's face-to-face activities were cancelled due to the social movement and the pandemic, and the organisation had to look for new ways to move forward with its planned projects. After examining different possibilities, Oxfam devised four main strategies while taking the objectives, content and format of each activity into account.

The first strategy was using pre-recorded videos in in-school/online activities. *Fifty Square Feet*, a work of theatre in education, was an example. As all out-of-school activities were cancelled, Oxfam condensed the three-hour activity into a one-hour activity that could be held in the schools. After the screening of a 20-minute pre-recorded drama performance, the instructor divided students into groups for role-play discussions. Apart from being an instructor-led in-school activity, it was also adapted for the online format using breakout rooms for group discussions. The second strategy was organising fully online activities. In the case of *A Cloud on the Horizon*, the process drama was turned into a one-hour activity on Zoom. As it involved a greater degree of student participation (where students had to enact the drama in addition to taking part in discussions), it was relatively difficult to make adjustments to the activity content. To the team's surprise, the junior primary students were more engaged in the activity than expected after having a sufficient warm-up. The third strategy was to produce pre-recorded videos as parts of teaching materials. Take the *Parent-child Workshop: Curry Mission*, which combined drama in education and the Human Library, as an example. The drama performance and sharing were pre-recorded, and the video was combined with the video recording and toolkit of *Africa Storm Rescue*, a STEM parent-child workshop, into a full set of learning materials. The parents and children could watch the videos and make STEM crafts together at home. The fourth strategy was livestream performances. In the case of *Oh My God: Community Interactive Children's Theatre*, performed by children from low-income families, the training and creative process were moved online. After the team overcame a series of obstacles, the performance was livestreamed on Zoom. Despite the difficulties, the team considered it a worthy endeavour. As Esther Ng says, "The work was a chance for the participants to make their voices heard. The children and our team put their hearts into it. We did not want the children to lose the opportunity to perform, or they would feel really let down."



Oh My God: Community Interactive Children's Theatre — Photo courtesy: People Service Centre

Looking back on this journey filled with unexpected turns, the team thinks the biggest challenge was being selective about activity content. Sandy Wong says, "Our experiential activities are usually two and a half hours or three hours in length. The duration allows students to gradually get into their roles, empathise and engage, as they come to a deeper understanding of the issue. When the activity had to be condensed into one hour, we had to balance drama, content and information, and the participants' experiences. There were many discussions and trial runs." Fortunately, there were well-defined focuses and objectives for each programme. The team was also willing to explore different functions of Zoom so as to make the activities more interesting and interactive. As Ng explains, "It is about making the presentation of the issues and messages fun and memorable. Isn't that why we use applied theatre to begin with?" Throughout the process, the instructors, schoolteachers and parents gained different insights. Ng adds, "The instructors became more open-minded. They were sceptical about onscreen interaction at first, but they came to discover various possibilities.

The schoolteachers and parents were amazed at how effective Zoom could be when it was used to encourage interaction and reflections on different values. Now they inquire about other online activities, which expands our reach [among local schools and families].”

Oxfam is committed to exploring different educational models in its quest to promote global citizenship education. Speaking of its future plans, Oxfam believes the adjustments in recent times have been excellent opportunities for growth. As Ng says, “After the pandemic eases, we will definitely relaunch our face-to-face activities. But the pandemic has changed our relationship to technology, and we have developed the facilities and capabilities for hosting online activities. Even when we resume our face-to-face activities, we will keep the online format as a possible option for local schools and the public to take part in our activities. It is something that we can maintain and develop.”

Conclusion

As this article draws to a close, I would like to take a moment to reflect on my exchanges with the interviewees and the difficulties we went through in 2020. As practitioners of playback theatre, my teammates and I experienced many moments of weariness, gloom, hesitation and inner struggles. There were many issues that we had to address, such as privacy protection and security concerns regarding online interaction, how to connect with audiences, and how to reconcile the different levels of acceptance of online performance among our team members. As a performer, the online platform was not where I felt most at home. Amidst the impact of the social movement and the pandemic, however, I felt that playback theatre was exactly what we needed—it was a space where individuals could make their voices heard and connect with one another. It prompted me to learn about new subjects and take up new experiments.

For instance, I took part in “Open Space”, an online playback theatre platform, where I had in-depth exchanges with practitioners worldwide. I also studied the use of light and shadow and camera movement, wrote about my experiences and reflections on playback theatre in a column, and interviewed different applied theatre practitioners for this article. As someone who used to be preoccupied with a busy work schedule, I was inspired, nourished and empowered by these encounters. Some years from now, we may feel grateful for the growth and crystallisation of ideas that we experienced in such a difficult year. When past formulas were no longer working, we had no choice but to stretch ourselves within constraints and probe deeper into our experiences, question the nature and essence of our profession, and develop different possibilities so as to adapt to the circumstances. Meanwhile, we were forced to address certain situations that were not ideal, but which we had become accustomed to (such as the passive position of freelancers, who are often not understood). It was an impetus to change. If we stay true to our aspirations, keep questioning the methodologies of our profession, and explore different paths in our practices in the face of constraints and changes, I believe “the worst of times” will also be “the best of times” for us.²

(This article was commissioned by the Hong Kong Drama/Theatre and Education Forum)

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)

2 These phrases are taken from *The Worst of Times and The Best of Times* by Lee Yee, who reversed the order of the phrases “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” from *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. I feel that Lee’s phrasing resonates with the sentiments in my article.

Kiki Ng

is the co-artistic director of Encounter Playback Theatre, and coordinator and facilitator of StoryBox. She is a graduate and accredited trainer of the Centre for Playback Theatre (New York). She received her Bachelor of Arts in Humanities (First Class Honours) and Master of Philosophy in Humanities from Hong Kong Baptist University, where she works as a part-time lecturer. She also completed the Satir Transformational Systematic Therapy Course (Level 1). A freelance practitioner in theatre and community cultural development, Ng is active in the theatre as well as community arts, education and research, and she believes stories have the power to change the world.

香港戲劇概述 2019・2020

HONG KONG DRAMA OVERVIEW 2019 & 2020

版次 2022年6月初版

First published in June 2022

資助 香港藝術發展局

Supported by Hong Kong Arts Development Council

計劃統籌、編輯	陳國慧	Project Coordinator and Editor	Bernice Chan Kwok-wai
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協作伙伴	香港戲劇協會 香港專業戲劇人同盟 香港教育劇場論壇	Partners	Hong Kong Federation of Drama Societies The Alliance of Theatre Professionals of Hong Kong Hong Kong Drama/Theatre and Education Forum
設計	TGIF	Design	TGIF

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出版 Published by

國際演藝評論家協會(香港分會)有限公司 International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong) Limited

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國際書號 ISBN 978-988-76137-6-3



International Association
of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong)
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

國際演藝評論家協會(香港分會)為藝發局資助團體
IATC (HK) is financially supported by the HKADC

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*藝術製作人員實習計劃由香港藝術發展局資助 The Arts Production Internship Scheme is supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council