

## **A Different Bottle of Wine – Rethinking the future of Small and Medium Performing Arts Organizations in Hong Kong**

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### *Abstract*

The “Big Nine” in Hong Kong performing arts are all organizations that have their origins in the late seventies or early eighties. Their organization structures manifest the artistic creeds of that period: a full time regiment of artistic staff plus an enviable complement of administrators. Their artistic output has also been consistently the same – qualitatively, quantitatively and even ideologically. As with publicly supported institutions all over the world, such consistency is always a tremendous attraction to funders. The product is “safe” and publicly acknowledged to possess certain qualities. Little exercise of judgment is required when renewing funding allocations from year to year, and appointed directors on the board further ensure that nothing “risqué” ever happens to embarrass the funder. While it is not easy to shift the inertia of such arrangements, I must argue that it is not impossible to change the game. In fact, one might say that the game has already changed.

The artistic organizations that depend on the ADC and other funders for support of their endeavours are mostly born in the nineties and after. Their organization structures reflect the low level of support they consistently receive: skeleton staff, artists on project contracts, mostly outsourced production and promotional services, etc. Yet for companies with artistic aspirations, perhaps this is a blessing in disguise.

This paper will illustrate with a number of examples how remarkable that so much success, both artistic and popular, such artists have garnered. A few has even found fame and fortune. For the artist with something to say, there has always been ways and means to say it, on or off the beaten track.

### *Keywords*

Performing Arts, Funding Strategies, Big Nine Companies in Hong Kong, Producing Arts, Independent Artists

### **Accent du Terroir**

If you want to make good wine, you must first choose a good site for growing your grapes.

I believe everyone in this room is more familiar with how the grants are given to performing companies in Hong Kong. So at the risk of citing common knowledge, please indulge me for a few minutes as I speak a little of the lay of this land of grants, not of the hows, but perhaps of the whys.

The “Big Nine” are companies that stemmed from the 70s and the 80s, with six of them actually the brainchild of what you might call “the establishment”. The other three may seem to be more plebeian, but I would say that perhaps they are more connected than commonly realized.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the performances these nine companies put on are either “traditional” in form or “tame” in content. When they perform “classical” pieces the old middle class (and their grandchildren) flocks to them. When they perform “original” or “innovative” pieces their usual audience runs away for fear of being bored to death. Ever so rarely there is a show that captures the imagination of the public, but it will disappear into the night like a meteor after a few dozen performances at best, only to re-emerge some years later when the public has lost all interest in it.

As you may be perceived already, the “Big Nine” behave less like cutting edge performing companies than big fat museums. They provide the arts education that our children are deprived of in schools.

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<sup>2</sup> These are statements that I will recant at a moment’s legal notice. But not right now.

Their organization structures manifest the artistic creeds of the seventies: a full time regiment of artistic staff plus an enviable complement of administrators. Their artistic outputs have also been consistently the same – qualitatively, quantitatively and especially ideologically.

Every publicly supported institution all over the world understands this: that such consistency is always a tremendous attraction to funders. The product is “safe” and commonly acknowledged to possess certain good qualities. Little exercise of judgment is required when renewing funding allocations from year to year, and appointed directors on the board further ensure that nothing “risqué” ever happens to embarrass the funder.

This is the *terroir* that produces middle of the road wines for consumption by middle of the road people. Given more money, some of them might even grow into top flight vineyards. But there is never enough money. Not from the Hong Kong Government, anyway.

And what about the *terroir* that is the Hong Kong Arts Development Council? Here the ground is rather poor. Correct me if I am wrong, but I understand that the highest of the annual grants totals just over two million a year, and the lowest are in the low six figures. Each grantee is expected to perform their work brilliantly and according to schedule, and every grantee must hand in their reports and financial statements correctly and on time, if they want to stand a good chance of getting the next grant. Their organization structures reflect the low level of support they consistently receive: skeleton staff, artists on project contracts, mostly outsourced production and promotional services, etc. Yet for companies with artistic aspirations, perhaps this is a blessing in disguise.

The vine that struggles to obtain nourishment eventually produces better grapes than if it is irrigated and fed with chemical fertilizers. Can this be true of performing art companies? And to continue this analogy, might not the companies that got no grant at all produce even greater art if they survive?

### Old Vines or New?

Performing artists are of two kinds: those that perform with their or their bodies and those who produce with their minds. The first includes all musicians, singers, actors, dancers, etc., and the other includes writers, composers, directors, choreographers, etc. Both kinds, perhaps with the exception of dancers, produce their best work not when they are first out of the academy, but usually when they are some years into their trade.

Like vines, they don't produce their best fruits until they are produced a lot of poor grapes in their early years. And like good wines after bottling, their art continues to mature.

The important difference between the two kinds of artists though, is that performing artists must perform as frequently as possible. You may be born a virtuoso, but you cannot remain a virtuoso by staying home. You need to practice, and perform, as frequently as possible. The human tongue is not the only instrument that grows sharper with use. For these artists, getting into a company that stages regular performances every year is of vital importance. In Hong Kong they must strive to get into one of the Big Nine. A small company that performs once or twice a year will not help improve their craft. Failing that they must either give up their art, or try to find a suitable company in another town.

But for those who are not satisfied with repeating *Serenade* or *The Four Seasons* forever and ever, they need to consider moving into new forms of expression. Just like the second kind of artists, those who work with their minds rather their bodies, the choice of avenues here is much wider. Composers and choreographers are needed across the spectrum of media; directors and writers too. String quartets now play in various public spaces with a newer and stronger beat, and dancers make their names in advertisements and public squares. The worst thing they can do, however, is to form their own companies in order to get their works performed. The philosopher Dagobert Runes who founded the *Philosophical Library*, a small and very serious publishing house, commented thus on his business:

*'The worst thing that ever happened to writing is that it became a business, The purpose of business is to make money, and to achieve that end it is necessary to please as many people as possible, to amuse them, to entertain them - in short, to do everything that will help increase the volume of sales.'*<sup>3</sup>

While as a philosopher he could write to his heart's content, running a publishing house is another matter altogether. If your objective is to create works of art, then it is not the reason to create a company, something that will sap your time and energy, and asks you to compromise everything every day.

Is this just idle talk from one who doesn't know the dire strait performing artists are in here in Hong Kong? How could you get your works performed without grants of any kind? But of course you can. Let me cite you a few examples.

### **In Other Vineyards**

The first example of artists who work in this fashion are the Cantonese Opera companies in Hong Kong. The Cantonese Opera artists who chose to remain in Hong Kong after 1949 took a different path from their colleagues in Mainland. Here they remain vehemently commercial in operation for decades afterwards, banking on their own productions, seeking out sponsors and patrons, and relying on the fineness of their craft and the allegiance of their fans.

A look at the typical organization of a Cantonese Opera troupe will show how different they are from the other performing companies in Hong Kong. The two lead singers register their company and created what we now call their "brand", but there is no one else in the company that receives a regular salary. When there is an engagement to play everything else is out-sourced, from fellow singers to the stage hands and musicians. This means no overhead and no rental. In turn the minor role singers, stage hands and musicians are able to service other lead singers for other runs. A loose association of the trade, the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, acts as their union and their club to this day. There are allies and rivalries, sure; but there is also the eternal interest of getting more work. In the last four decades or so they also receive bookings from Festivals and Government, but there is absolutely no need for the formation of a non-profit company or society.

The second example of such independent spirits are a group of comedians who have succeeded in capturing "the form and pressure" of our age. I am talking about Dayo Wong (黃子華), Jim Chim (詹瑞文), Kearen Pang (彭秀慧), and quite a few others.

Dayo Wong is not a company man. He didn't fit into Commercial Radio, and he didn't fit into the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre. On the other hand, he does have something of his own to say, and in time he found his voice in stand-up comedy, a voice that is indubitably his alone. Jim Chim actually had his own company and an annual grant from the government, which he left to pursue his comedy career, creating a persona that is immediately recognizable to a massive audience. Kearen Pang's solo work, *29+1* is to Hong Kong working girls what Mecca is to Muslims – you have to see it at least once. These artists found their freedom and expression without the fetters of grants and subsidies, and now quite a few other artists are deciding that this is what they want. These are the cult wines of our market, and they're all golden.

Another writer, Virginia Woolf, also urged that writers must remain their highbrow selves:

*"... the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea."*<sup>4</sup>

The alternative choice, she said in the same essay, is to be a lowbrow and dedicate yourself to scrounge a living. What you must not do is become middlebrow, which she described as the worst thing that

<sup>3</sup> Dagobert D. Runes. (n.d.). AZQuotes.com. Retrieved May 02, 2016, from AZQuotes.com Web site: <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/1410802>

<sup>4</sup> Woolf, Virginia (1965). "*Middlebrow*" in *The Death of the Moth and other Essays*, p.152-153. Penguin Books U.K.

could happen to an artist. And for her, being middlebrow nowadays probably means trying to please everyone while still pretending to be an artist.

### Climate and Environment Change

Performing Arts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is destined to undergo violent overhauls. At least this is the view of writers such as Michael Kaiser<sup>5</sup>, Scott Timberg<sup>6</sup> and Richard Florida<sup>7</sup>. While they disagree on the details, the consensus seems to be that the traditional format of the performing arts will alter, and that the internet will be the new medium of the masses. The scene will be dominated by the very best people of the genre, wherever the location. Symphony orchestras, opera houses and opera houses will battle their colleagues not across towns but across continents, while Shakespeare will have to compete for “likes” against comic spoofs. If your artistic career is to survive for the next 30 years, you cannot ignore this phenomenon.

When the cinema comes along the result is not the death of theatre but the migration of artist into the new medium. When television happened the cinema did not vanish but branched into yet another medium. It will be the same with internet. All media needs content to survive, and popular content is always the key to commercial success. Already the cleverest artists among us have spotted the opportunity provided here for the publicity, promotion, and presentation of their works. And now you can even find funding for your show online. More interestingly, this new medium provides opportunities not only for products of mass appeal, but also niches for special interest. Hate groups and Chiu Chow opera performers can thrive in cyber space equally well.

In Hong Kong the environment for traditional art forms and traditional performing companies are going to get harder and harder. Nobody here imagines for a moment that Home Affairs Bureau will come up with another billion to give to the existing Big Nine or any new company any time soon. Venues will be harder and harder to get. So why not change the game? Get your own funding and perform in places where you are invited to, and totally of your own control.

When you choose to be an artist, you embark on a lonely journey crowded with the fallen and the injured. Talent and ideas are your only assets, and the way forward is to find your very own unique product, whether it be playing violin from a swing or joining Matthew Bourne’s all-male swans. Like private radios of an earlier epoch, you can even have your own television station. All wines are made of grapes, but you must make yourself into a different bottle of wine, much sought after because the production process is very selective, and also because the wine is uniquely good. Yes, if you have something that wins you a few thousand likes, managers and agents will start tagging you. When you have over ten thousand, investors come knocking on your door.

Producing art is ever more satisfying than begging for grants, and life is too short for bad wines.

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<sup>5</sup> Kaiser, Michael M. (2015). *Curtains?: the future of the arts in America*. Boston: Brandeis University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Timberg, Scott (2015). *Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Florida, R.L. (2012). *The Rise of the Creative Class, revisited*. New York: Basic Books.