

Inherit with Strings

by Suki Chow



The traditional saying about Chinese opera: “One minute on stage is ten years of hard-work off-stage” also applies to Chinese puppet shows as puppeteers have to receive years of training before they can perform for a mere hour under the spotlight.

“It takes at least three to four years for a beginner to be fully capable of controlling the puppet,” said Wong Fai, founder of the Hong Kong Puppet and Shadow Art Centre (HKPSAC). “If you want to master the skills, it takes at least eight to 10 years.”

As the main actor of Winning Glove Puppets Art Troupe, Mr Wong said beginners have to learn the basic skills first. “For example, you have to hold up a marionette (the only string-controlled puppet among four which are originated from Fujian, a southern province in China) for half an hour to train your patience before you start moving it.”

After that learners can move on to manage the gestures and actions of the puppet. Only after all these can they proceed to run through the drama script, according to Mr Wong.

Having been a puppeteer for more than 30 years, Mr Wong said this traditional Chinese art with about 2,000 years of history is declining. “Audiences are bored with tradition. They want to see faster-paced entertainment,” he added.

He said audiences may think puppetry is amazing after they watched a show, but not realising that it takes years of training to be “amazing”.

“In the past, learning puppetry was a life-long commitment. There was no immediate outcome,” said Mr Wong. “I practised every day since I was a student. It was tough.”

Hardly anyone these days is interested in learning the craft which requires lots of hard work, according to Mr Wong. “People treat puppetry as a hobby rather than a career now,” he said.

In order to attract more young people to learn puppetry, Mr Wong said the HKPSAC is organising a training programme in 15

secondary schools which is not as harsh as the traditional one.

The programme lasts for a few weeks only. "It starts from the teaching of Chinese opera. The primary task for students is to be familiar with the songs and to grasp the precise time of when to make the puppets appear on and off the stage," added Mr Wong.

Students are not required to finish an action perfectly, according to him. "It is of utmost importance that they have interest," he said. "We hope to attract more young people to continue the art of puppetry."

20-year-old Cheung Lai-ching joined a workshop in HKPSAC last year. She said she was greatly impressed by the marvellous skills seen in a puppet show.

Despite having some skills in western puppetry, Miss Cheung said it was difficult to learn the Chinese version at the beginning. "When I saw the demonstration, I thought it was easy (to control the puppet)," she added. "However, in fact it was difficult when I tried for myself."

She recalled that in the first lesson she looked clumsy since the strings of her puppet got mixed up and it was hard to control the movement of the puppet. "I was impatient and wanted to control it quickly. However, the instructor told me that I could not even make my puppet touch the ground," she added with a smile.

Miss Cheung said she has never thought to become a puppeteer since the income is so small. She just regards it as a hobby.

Cheung Chun-fai, the leader of another troupe Sky Bird Puppet Group, also expressed concern about the decline in the art form. "There is no apprenticeship anymore, it (puppetry) might fail to be passed on," he said. "New members are recruited from workshops and friends."

In order to suit the tastes of present-day audiences, Mr Cheung has been

modifying his plays. For instance, a puppet show, originally lasting for about one and a half hours can tell a complete story. Yet now he captures the essence of each play by only taking one scene, for example, the *Xiang Yiao*, a famous scene from the Chinese opera story of Princess Chang Ping in the Ming dynasty, in order to make the play shorter.

New elements have also been added to the puppets. Mr Cheung said he inserted certain things into the puppet tiger to make it seem more alive and thus attractive to the audience.

Succeeding his master Yang Qingyi as the leader of the troupe since 2004, Mr Cheung said he dares not depict himself as the one enhancing and glorifying the traditional art, which he describes as the combination of music, drama, architecture and craft. "I am just trying my best to preserve it instead," he added.

With an average age of over 30, members of the troupe are conducting a Hong Kong tour for the 2009 Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme, organised by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

In the scheme, they are organising puppet workshops, performances and demonstrations. During the demonstrations, they will invite some children to go onstage and try out managing the puppets. "They are excited about how a doll (puppet) could act like a human being," said Mr Cheung.

He added they target people of all ages. He recalled one response from an audience member. Once after a show, an elderly woman came by and praised their effort. "She told me that it reminded her of when she watched puppet shows when she was a kid," he said.

Despite the positive feedback, Mr Cheung is still worried that he might have to cancel the upcoming courses organised by the troupe due to a lack of



1-2, 4, 6-8. Different characters of Chinese puppets.
 3. There are 28 strings to control the movement of a Chinese puppet.
 5. Founder of the Hong Kong Puppet and Shadow Art Centre, Wong Fai says nowadays people treat Chinese puppetry as a hobby rather than a career.

applicants. "In Hong Kong, fewer and fewer people are interested in puppetry," he added.

He said he has been simplifying the basic skills in handling puppets for students who are beginners. "I just ask them to hold up the puppet for just one minute instead of half an hour (in the past)," he added. "As for handling a marionette, I get them to handle the four outer strings first since they are easier to handle."

Offering students chances to perform is another way to attract new blood, according to Mr Cheung. "A performance is the biggest motivational force of learning puppetry."

He said that he would assign them some minor roles at first. "This helps build up their confidence since complicated roles would frustrate beginners," he added.

While few people are willing to put effort in learning the traditional art, Sandy Lau Chui-lin, a 47-year-old housewife, has been learning puppetry for about two years.

"I was impressed by Mr Cheung when I first watched his performance. It was fabulous," said Ms Lau.

She said learning puppetry is not easy. Just making them walk is difficult, as there are many kinds of "walking" such as being gentle, feminine and clown-like. It took nine months before she could make the puppet walk like a "real person".

"I was so pleased when I could finally do it," said Ms Lau. "Then I asked myself how to do this in a more natural way. Learning puppetry appeals to me as there are always new things to learn."

She said she practises for an hour every day. She once considered giving up because it really exhausted her. "It is a physical thing. I get very tired holding a marionette because it is as heavy as half catty of rice," she added.

However, Ms Lau has never given up. "The process is hard yet the outcome



COURTESY OF CHEUNG CHUN-FAI

1. The Chinese puppet troupe, Sky Bird Puppet Group is conducting a Hong Kong tour for the 2009 Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme, organised by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department.
2. Leader of Sky Bird Puppet Group Cheung Chun-fai (third from the left), offers his students chances to perform in order to build up their confidence.

“Only by overcoming difficulties can skills be acquired. This is what our ancestors taught us.”

is awesome,” she said. “I bring my children to my shows. I feel so happy that all my efforts have paid off.”

“Only by overcoming difficulties can skills be acquired. This is what our ancestors taught us,” said Ms Lau. “So, this kind of traditional art should be preserved.”

The co-artistic director of the All Theatre Art Association (ATAA), who identified himself as Hoi Chiu, is teaching another form of puppetry in Hong Kong.

He once learned Chinese puppetry for a short while, but did not keep it up since the training was too hard. He recalled that students practised stretching their little fingers for a long time. “Many students quit because it was too hard,” he added.

The kind of puppet used in his theatre is a Japanese puppet called

Bunraku. Hoi Chiu said players can directly control the puppet without strings, which allows them to express personal feelings.

The focus of his training is different from the traditional type. Yiu On-shun, a 22-year-old artist of the ATAA, said Hoi Chiu focuses on fostering student’s creativity and how they use their body.

“He uses amusing games to inspire us to think about our relationship with the puppets” he added. “One of the most unforgettable games was when he asked us to act as if we were a washing machine.”

Another difference is that they do not have fixed stories or plots when playing Bunraku, it all depends on their own feelings and emotions, according to Mr Yiu. ▼

