



All the World's a Stage

by Victor Chan

As diners sip milk tea and read their newspapers, enjoying a meal in between hectic schedules at a classic Hong Kong-style diner or cha chaan teng, they are suddenly interrupted by shouting at one of the tables. Some of the customers appear to be furiously quarrelling over a family inheritance. If this seems dramatic, it is because it is. A site-specific drama is taking place. Some of the diners have come because they know a drama will take place, others are caught by complete surprise.

The term “site-specific art” originated in the United States in the 1970s and refers to art that is created with the location in mind. The relationship and interaction between the work and the location in which it is situated or performed is a central concern of the work. In theatre, site-specific performance is by no means limited to the stage.

KEY_Theatre is a drama group formed by four core members, a teacher, a psychotherapist, a lecturer and a freelance performer. They are all amateur artists who are dedicated to promoting site-specific drama and have staged their performances in cha chaan tengs and cafes.

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For William Shakespeare, all the world may have been a stage and all the men and women merely players; for Story Koo Ching-man, life is a play. Koo, a final-year cultural studies student at Lingnan University, is KEY_Theatre’s scriptwriter. She says her inspiration comes from the things happening around her. “The most dramatic scenes are from real life.”



Performance posters of KEY_Theatre.

When the play starts at the cha chaan teng, the actors actually have no idea how it is going to end. “There will be many possibilities for the development or ending of the story. It all depends on the interaction between the audience and the actors,” Koo says.

She recounts one performance, in which the leading actress threw away her ring and left the leading man alone in the cha chaan teng, just as the script told her to. However, one of the diners in the cha chaan teng enriched the story in a way nobody could have foreseen. “She gave her own ring to the actor and asked him to chase his girlfriend [the actress] back,” Koo recalls.

The audience is part of the performance.

Anything can and does happen during the shows. Once, a couple of mice dashed in during the play. Even so, the writer has to take the unpredictable and make it a part of the story. Fanny Heath Wai-yin, the art director of KEY_Theatre, says the power of site-specific drama rests in the fact that the audience is part of the performance.

There are no fixed scripts for actors to follow, which means they have to improvise a lot. Actress Gloria Poon Yuen-mai says, “The audience will always surprise you in a site-specific drama, I think that is very exciting.” Yet she also finds it very difficult not to get distracted by the people around her.

As for the audience members, they can find themselves deeply drawn into the world of the drama. Dianty Ho Yuen-yee, a hardcore fan of site-specific drama, has watched one particular show seven times.

“I can get myself totally immersed in the story. It’s like I am one of the characters in the drama. That is very interesting and fresh to me,” Ho says.

Apart from theatre, there are also dance performances taking place away from the stage.

Kom Tong Hall in Mid-Levels is a colonial three-story mansion built in a classical style popular during Edwardian Hong Kong. Today it is the home of the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Museum, but it is also the unlikely venue for a contemporary dance performance.

The dancers begin their performance along the veranda, between several Greek-style granite columns. Following the saxophone melodies of the popular 1940s mandarin song, “Rose, Rose, I Love You”, the performers and the audience continue on to the foyer of the hall. As the vantage point of the audience changes, a vivid story is to be unfolded.

Choreographer of the Dance Art Performing Group, Francis Leung Ka-ken picked the historical Kom Tong Hall to stage his new work, Shattered Shackles, because he believes the location can symbolise some of its themes.

The work is based on the two stories, “Crystal Boys” and “Love’s Lone Flower”, by the Taiwanese writer, Pai Hsien-yung.

“We hope to unveil taboos in this performance, like the homosexuals and sex workers shunned by traditional Chinese society,” Leung says. “The Kom Tong Hall has historical architecture; I use it to symbolise the traditional shackles constituted by different levels of societal norms.”

Throughout the performance, the audience can flow freely from one place to another as the scene changes.

Leung’s colleague, Andy Wong Ting-lam, is both a choreographer and a dancer. Wong agrees with Leung about the importance of the location. He says dancers in site-specific performances have to be more sensitive to the environment.

“We have to research and explore the location first, such as studying the texture of the ground, the direction of air flow, the lighting and so on. These things will affect the atmosphere. But these are not things we can learn from our normal dance training,” Wong says. He adds, “To perform a site-specific dance is to put the language or structure of dance into a particular space, which makes the two elements interact with each other.”

Apart from the performers, Wong believes audience members also enjoy a richer experience from site-specific dance as well. “The feel of the resonance of the site, the context and the performance would stimulate both the performers and the audience to think,” he says.

When watching a site-specific performance, audience members can make use of all their senses to experience the space. It is common for people to be puzzled by the theme or other elements of a performance. Wong encourages them to express their views actively and says the artists are open to communicating with the audience.

Leung and Wong are not alone. In recent years, more young dancers have been trying experimental performances at various outdoor sites, including factories, parks and shopping malls.

“It is amazing because young artists are attempting to merge art into our daily life,” says Wong as he talks about one of his students who performed in Victoria Park. “In the past, we wanted to perform on stages like the Fringe Club or the Hong Kong Cultural Centre. That is quite different [for us].”

In a city where walking a dog and even playing ball games are banned from public parks and beaches, site-specific art shakes up preconceived ideas of space and invites the public to question their experience of space. For Wong, that is the value of art, to alter deeply rooted ideas. He believes art can turn impossible spaces into the possible.

Nonetheless, the movement has limited space to develop in money-oriented, market-driven Hong Kong.

“I think Hong Kong people do not have the time and interest to develop those [industries] without commercial value, such as art and aesthetics,” Wong says, “Why can’t we deal with social problems like the debate about how we view and use public space in an artistic way? No one is willing to spend time to understand art in Hong Kong.”

