

Janice Poon

## Women's Voices in Hong Kong

Traditionally, men dominate the theatre scene in Hong Kong but, compared to the situation in other Asian countries, women's voices are not suppressed. For example, there is the bi-annual event, Girl's Play, featuring women theatre artists whose performances often deal with women's issues. Generally, though, women artists in Hong Kong are likely to be making their own solo performances or performing traditional material from famous playwrights that does not reveal particularly female qualities.

The main issue is that there are not many outstanding women artists, although there is a lot of potential. The work of Olivia Yan, artistic director of Theatre Ensemble represents some of the best of this potential. She co-founded Theatre Ensemble with Jim Chim in 1993, bringing a new creative vision to Hong Kong by developing theatre through physical work and devising with an emphasis on humour and satire. Olivia has developed a series of solo performances about women from the grass-roots in Hong Kong, in which she serves as both the director and the actress. She describes this experience as one of the most important periods in rediscovering and reconfirming her own artistic path. After this, she made *The Game* (adapted from the renowned Ionesco play *The Lesson*) with Jim Chim. Olivia says: "People always comment on our work as his (Jim's). Even I do the same! Some people think that I am his student! I need to challenge myself, but I am aware how difficult it is to develop both the form and the substance. I feel that my directing and writing skills are not sophisticated enough, but Jim and I have to be actor, director and writer at the same time. We have no other choice."

Brought up in an artistic family, Olivia has inherited from her mother, a Cantonese Opera actress, a very Chinese sense of stage and performance. There are lots of references to Chinese Opera in the way she uses her voice and her body. Many women artists in Hong Kong are more

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Sean Curran in *Overcoat* directed by Bonnie Chan. Photo: Cheung Chi Wai

eager to search for their Chinese roots nowadays although they have been educated in the English system, and collaborations with Chinese artists have resulted in a number of interesting pieces. The issue of "death" is Olivia's current preoccupation and her next creative incentive in searching for the difference in perception between the Eastern and Western tradition. Olivia trained at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts and was awarded a scholarship to train with Philip Gaulier in Paris. In addition to various acting awards, Olivia was presented with the Rising Artist Award by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council in 2003.

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Other women theatre artists in Hong Kong who are worth noting include Lai Hoi Ling, an internationally renowned choreographer, who uses many theatrical and literary references in her dance pieces; Annie Ho, the only female stand up comedienne in Hong Kong; Wong Yuen Ling, who has been developing women's theatre and Theatre in Education in Hong Kong; Law Ching Man, who has developed a series of female solo performances devised from the quality of the four seasons; May Foo and Bonnie Chan.

Bonnie Chan co-founded Theatre du Pif with Sean Curran in 1992. Originally based in Scotland, in recent years the company has been involved in community theatre, working with women living in areas more remote from the city centre in Hong Kong. "Bonnie's work has a strong feminine quality, it is soft and sensitive. As women, we observe the world in a different, more delicate way, than men. We like to ponder on trivial things, while men ignore them, preferring to be logical and to analyse," says Olivia Yan about Bonnie Chan. The work of Theatre du Pif is described as poetic, operating at the cutting edge of modern theatre. But they face the problem of the lack of good artistic partners, a general problem for many women artists in Hong Kong. "I need good artists to work with," says Olivia, "otherwise, I can't achieve my creative ideas." Olivia and Bonnie have worked together in a couple of plays, and they hope to continue their collaboration in the future to achieve further satisfying and fruitful results.

JANICE POON (Hong Kong) is a cultural critic and columnist of *Mingpao*, a Chinese newspaper in Hong Kong. She is also a playback practitioner and her recent performances include *Yi*, a retrospective performance in memory of her brother, who committed suicide. Janice Poon collaborates with the Theatre Ensemble and other experimental theatre companies in Hong Kong.