

# CITY STAGE

HONG KONG PLAYWRITING  
IN ENGLISH

**Edited by Mike Ingham and Xu Xi**



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# Hong Kong-based English-language Theatre

*Mike Ingham*

## English-language Theatre in Perspective

It is intended here to provide an introduction to the topic of English-language theatre in Hong Kong as a general phenomenon, before introducing the selected plays for the present anthology. Since the late 1980s there has been a tendency away from the hitherto exclusively expatriate and British amateur dramatic ethos towards an arguably richer and more culturally diverse environment. In this more plural context, some English-language theatre in Hong Kong from the 1990s onwards appears to be positioning itself within the site of Hong Kong-cultural and cross-cultural discourse. In a postmodern and post-colonial society this phenomenon is not in itself remarkable. But what is perhaps worthy of note is the proliferation of splinter groups and marginal, experimental companies employing mixed language and multimedia theatrical communication techniques, mostly within the last ten to twelve years.

The present co-existence of a clearly identifiable English-language mainstream and an increasingly exuberant fringe theatre, in which language is not necessarily the predominant medium of communication, affords some exciting opportunities for development. At the same time, such diversity is a cause for concern in the battle for financial survival and viability, given the rapid social and cultural changes that are occurring in Hong Kong. More theatre groups appear to be competing for a shrinking audience. Furthermore, the existing audience base for theatre in general is being enticed away by an increasingly sophisticated array of entertainment choices to suit the convenience of the increasingly busy Hong Kong citizen.

One of the main questions we wish to address by showcasing these plays must be this: How is Hong Kong English-language theatre reinventing itself in order to retain its audience base? And a second perhaps even more elemental question: Is its survival important or indeed necessary? Other questions that come to mind in connection with this anthology are as follows: Is there any place for conventional play text-based performance in the current climate of devised and heavily adapted theatre work? Will contemporary audiences who are becoming increasingly accustomed to professional, genre-based acting and production styles tolerate amateur or semi-professional theatre? Finally, to what extent is theatre discourse in Hong Kong a reflection of a meaningful bilingual and bicultural heritage?

## A Brief Historical Overview

The history of British expatriate theatre in Hong Kong bears all the hallmarks of what is now termed cultural and linguistic imperialism. That is the assumption that the language and culture of the ruling political power, the colonizer, is inherently superior to that of the colonized. Throughout the British Empire in India and Africa, but interestingly much less so in Hong Kong, the literary canon, with Shakespeare at its epicentre, was perceived by administrators as an appropriate vehicle for promoting specifically British cultural and linguistic values and

‘improving the minds’ of receptive locals, to make them more amenable to cultural influence. For colonial administrators the arts in general and theatre in particular were to be encouraged only insofar as they maintained the status quo. Any challenge to existing power relations in the best subversive traditions of Western theatre from Euripides to John Osborne and Sarah Kane was unthinkable.

In Hong Kong from the mid-nineteenth century onwards the formative role of the military in the development of amateur English theatre as a form of entertainment and diversion from the routine of army life is significant. The roots of English-language theatre in Hong Kong can be traced back to entertainments and burlesques for army entertainment with a strong element of officer and army wife participation. Much of the early theatre consisted of circus-type acts for the recreation of the military staged in rudimentary and temporary premises, ‘matshed theatres’ as they were known. As early as 1850s there are records of play productions by the Garrison Theatricals, including unnamed farces and operettas. In 1859 the Garrison Theatricals gave a performance of a piece entitled *Medea — or the Best of Mothers with a Brute of a Husband*, which went ahead despite part of the *ad hoc* theatre catching fire!<sup>1</sup>

From the mid-1860s onwards, it was also common for visiting British navy ships to entertain the Hong Kong British community with comic revues, burlesques and short plays. These would be performed either at the City Hall or in military barracks in makeshift theatres. However, there appears to have been little indication from the cosy, safe and fundamentally nostalgic forms of entertainment that a theatrical revolution, spearheaded by controversial iconoclasts like Ibsen and Shaw, was occurring in the motherland. Other Shakespearean burlesques and theatrical entertainments for the English-speaking community included productions of comedies, such as a locally acclaimed 1913 production of *Twelfth Night* and the 1923 production of *The Tempest*, both by the Amateur Dramatic Club. The attention to visual effects, details of costume, set and lighting, which are referred to in the contemporary *China Mail* reviews, as well as the tendency to include cameo ballet sequences, attest to lavish expense and abundant financial and manpower resources. Moreover, such grandiose large-scale productions were in keeping with Edwardian Shakespeare, which retrospectively seems nostalgically sentimental, jejune and romantically precious. This focus on form and look at the expense of content and ideas in the plays has been the curse of Hong Kong Shakespeare, both Chinese and English, right up to the present time, reinforcing Peter Brook’s argument in his book, *The Empty Space*, that nowhere does Deadly Theatre (i.e. stale, clichéd theatre) insinuate itself more than in Shakespeare productions.

It seems that what expatriate amateur theatre in Hong Kong from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, as in other outposts of the Empire, excelled in was presenting light entertainment to while away the dull routine of military and administrative duty. Not only did military officers and their wives form the nucleus of performers and backstage crew but also civil servants. The unlikely event of any directors or actors wishing to make politically sensitive comment on the colonial status quo in Hong Kong through English theatre was prevented by the restrictions enshrined in the code of conduct for Crown officers. During the Japanese incursions into China in the 1930s, agitprop companies and productions in Hong Kong proliferated. The British expatriate theatre, by contrast, reflected its identity as primarily a form of troop entertainment, traditionally a jingoistic and uncritical genre it has to be said,

<sup>1</sup> Lau Kar and Frank Bren, *From Artform to Platform: Hong Kong Plays and Performances 1900–1941*, 6, IATC (HK), 1999.

and in the minds of colonial educators and administrators a subsidiary tool of cultural propaganda, particularly in the cultural iconicity of the Bard. All the subversive social implications and political scepticism in his drama were studiously avoided.

Such burlesque entertainment forms lent themselves naturally to the time-honoured tradition of British pantomime, which originates in Europe in the eighteenth century as a variant on the older Italian *Commedia del Arte*. Pantomime has proved to be an enduringly popular theatre form, mutating within the basic framework of traditional stories such as *Cinderella*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Dick Whittington* and *Mother Goose* to provide multilayered entertainment for parents as well as children. Traditional roles such as the Pantomime Boy (played by a female), the Dame (played by a male), the villainous baron, the star-crossed lovers, lost children, and so on, all belong to a recognizable and endlessly recyclable theatrical form. However, the inclusion of local, contemporary references gives the form its particular blend of timelessness and immediacy. These local references in the script are usually good-humoured, occasionally ironic, but virtually never satirical in the Hong Kong context, since satire is a pre-eminently political form of theatre. Pantomime remains the most lucrative and most popular form of English-language theatre in Hong Kong. This is hardly surprising in view of the resources allocated to it, formally by the Garrison Players and Hong Kong Stage Club, who took turns and occasionally combined forces to present a guaranteed money-spinner each festive season. Latterly the Hong Kong Players, the progeny of the merger of these two longstanding groups at the beginning of the 1990s, has continued to maintain the strong pantomime tradition, which is such an integral part of the English theatre heritage.

The Garrison Players and the Hong Kong Stage Club were both formed in the immediate post-war era of the late 1940s. As their name suggests, the Garrison Players retained close links with the British forces' garrison, and represented an offshoot from the original Garrison Theatricals. Their patron was, as a matter of protocol, the Commander of the British Forces stationed in Hong Kong. Their role was unequivocally seen as a social bridge between the armed forces and their civilian counterparts in government and commerce. From the Garrison Players and the Hong Kong Stage Club, the Hong Kong Players inherited a firm belief in the social and bureaucratic structures that had come to characterize Hong Kong amateur theatre. These were not unlike British 'am-dram' groups with their social committees and emphasis on 'activities', some of which included regular productions. At the risk of being unkind and possibly a mite unfair, one might say that, in general, enthusiasm and endeavour and a laudable belief in the social value of participation were prized above aesthetic or critical input into the productions. For this reason pantomime was the ideal form. Unfortunately with more demanding drama, such as Shakespeare, the production values and acting and directing approaches of pantomime, were still clearly discernible. Viewed from the socio-political perspective I have referred to above, in which social amateur dramatic groups provided a clear sense of a palpably British cultural identity, such an aesthetic critique of the worthy, if parochial, local English-language productions, hardly seemed to matter.

Like any other dynamic metropolis Hong Kong has changed rapidly and irrevocably, and the days of packed auditions and absence-free rehearsals are gone. Goodwill and dedication to amateur English theatre are much less in evidence in today's hectic urban lifestyle. Two other factors which should be alluded to are the decline in membership after 1997, with the traditional support base in the former colonial expatriate civil service being considerably eroded. Also the emergence of a flourishing and distinctive Hong Kong culture with its own Cantonese language or mixed code, image-based, multimedia style challenged the cultural

hegemony of English-language theatre. Whereas Cantonese and English theatres previously co-existed as segregated forms with quite distinct target audiences, the gradual blurring of boundaries in addition to the demographic changes brought about by the Handover, has made traditional British amateur theatre more culturally obscure and less viable.

A good case in point is the passing of another peculiarly British theatrical entertainment form — the music hall. Molly's Music Hall, presented annually by the Garrison Players and subsequently for a brief time span by the Hong Kong Players, evoked sentimental memories of British Victoriana and along with the annual pantomime represented the staple of British expatriate theatre. My father was a music hall MC in wartime troop entertainment in Britain, and I knew about this nostalgic hybrid of song, dance, comic sketch and melodrama by hearsay from him. When I arrived in Hong Kong, I was astonished to find that a form that was only extant in the West in the contemporary form of comic revue, a much more satirical and politically conscious form, was still alive and well here. It was fascinating to see one or two of them before the inevitable demise. The last one was staged in 1992 by the Hong Kong Players. On top of other production headaches, the loss of the old China Fleet Club in Admiralty as a venue proved a decisive factor. The form had a good run for its money in Hong Kong, and a much longer one than anywhere else in the world, including Britain. Such are the ironies of post-colonial Hong Kong, I would not be surprised to see it revived like a phoenix from the ashes!

Unlike the music hall and the more serious speech drama, musical theatre continues to enjoy relatively good fortune in terms of subsidy and audiences, and is considered a more globally attractive and economically viable theatrical form. Hong Kong is no exception to this trend and touring professional companies have enjoyed great success in the last decade with Lloyd-Webber productions and others such as *Mama Mia*, as well as more linguistically challenging works such as *Les Misérables*. The amateur scene has relied heavily on the Hong Kong Singers and before them the Garrison Players to provide regular doses of Western musical theatre with productions of earlier classics by Rogers and Hammerstein and Cole Porter. However, two local musical productions are notable for being written or devised for the Hong Kong context. One was an almost exclusively expatriate 1977 musical based on Austin Coates' book on Macau, *City of Broken Promises*, one of the first productions at the then new Hong Kong Arts Centre in Wan Chai. The second, more ambitious and large-scale, was the 1994 musical multimedia event *The Walled City*, about the history of Kowloon Walled City in mixed language medium. On the whole, the vehicle of musical theatre tends to be, rather like pantomime and music hall, a rather retrospective and nostalgic one. One has only got to bear in mind the Victorian nostalgia inherent in productions of the ever-popular Gilbert and Sullivan light operas (despite their original topicality and political satire in the Victorian era) to appreciate that this form is by its very nature conservative.

Appropriate venues, both for rehearsing and performing, have long been a major consideration and a frequent headache for amateur groups. In a real estate-conscious city like Hong Kong, this is not very surprising. However, the increasingly prohibitive costs of production at the Shouson Theatre in the Hong Kong Arts Centre has led groups like the Hong Kong Singers and the Hong Kong Players to gravitate back to a more natural habitat, namely the City Hall. Both the old City Hall and the 1962 replacement building provided a solid base for British amateur dramatics, and during the theatrical high-points of the 1960s and 1970s regular productions were staged there. Previously, a regular diet of Agatha Christie thrillers, drawing-room comedies and whimsical one-act plays had served to fan the flame of nostalgia



for the shires and to remind British expatriates that in this distant land there was still a little corner that would be forever England.

It is evident from the various strands of English-language theatre — from the early burlesque entertainments for the troops until virtually the closing stages of the colonial presence — that the mainstream theatrical discourse was dominated by a privileged English-language theatre. The growing socio-political awareness of Cantonese-language theatre in the early decades of this century was certainly nowhere reflected in the English drama. However, even Cantonese-language theatre here has been heavily influenced by English-language theatre, especially in the form of translation. In the case of the first professional Cantonese-language group, the Hong Kong Repertory Company, the predominant tendency has been to perform Shakespeare and other European playwrights in translation. Non-English plays have tended to be approached through the medium of the English language, rather than through their original versions. The conditions of cultural production and reception affecting English-language theatre in Hong Kong have in the main, until fairly recently at least, been nostalgic in orientation and hence reactionary. Only in recent years has a more critical, plural and diverse theatre discourse started to emerge in tandem with a definable sense of Hong Kong cultural identity.

### **Towards a Post-1997 Pluralism**

Undoubtedly, the belated 1976 recognition of Chinese as an official language in Hong Kong made the choice of English as a creative medium for theatre less politically loaded than had previously been the case. However, it is difficult to identify one particular source of change in the established mode of theatrical production. The accelerating shift towards localization in the government from the mid-1980s through to the late 1990s in preparation for the resumption of Chinese sovereignty adversely affected the traditional recruitment base of the British expatriate amateur groups. The increasing number of American expatriates in Hong Kong strengthened the existing American Community Theatre, which was now using the Hong Kong Arts Centre as a regular venue for musical and speech drama productions of growing confidence and technical sophistication. One of the most memorable for me was their well-timed 1994 production of the David Henry Hwang cultural critique play, *M. Butterfly*, with outstanding performances from Hervé Braneyre and Sean Kwan as Gallimard and Song respectively. For British expatriate theatre, by contrast, the writing was on the wall. In the past, it had been sufficient to advertise in the press to draw sufficient audiences. Now, with a much richer and more varied cultural programme offered by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, dynamically developing programmes at the Arts Centre and the relatively new Fringe Club in Central, local English theatre needed fresh impetus, reorganization and, above all, a new ideological focus to appeal to a younger and wider audience.

Perhaps the most important catalyst for change was in the field of education. The drama laboratory at the University of Hong Kong under the aegis of Jack Lowcock and Vicki Ooi had become a site for English-language theatre in a more intimate studio environment. By engaging students and audiences at a more cerebral level than had been customary with the expatriate groups, they nurtured a more questioning and theoretically sophisticated audience. In the process they also helped to develop a nucleus of culturally aware young actors and critics, who were adept at crossing the cultural divide. Transcultural, as opposed to mere literal

translation, became an issue in looking at play texts. These younger graduates and postgraduates, in addition to an increasing Eurasian and returnee population involved in theatre, have begun to break down previously firm linguistic and cultural boundaries between local and expatriate theatre scenes. The fact that many of the newer theatre groups and even some of the more established ones are brought together under one roof at the Hong Kong Fringe Club, where they rub shoulders with smaller overseas professional companies at the Fringe Festival time, has helped to promote a more integrated and egalitarian ethos.

Another vital cultural bridge was provided by the establishment of Chung Ying (literally Chinese-English) Theatre Company in the early 1980s. Their brief was to promote drama in schools. They toured schools giving performances in both languages and had both Chinese and English native-speaking personnel. One of the original directors of the company, Colin George, was an outstanding Shakespearean actor, once considered to be the natural successor to Olivier. His contribution to theatre in general in Hong Kong, both with Chung Ying and as Head of Theatre in the then new Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, was substantial. Purely in terms of technique, George provided a standard of acting from which local actors could learn a great deal. His self-reflexive one-man shows on Shakespeare, Chekhov and the nature of theatre performed at the Fringe Club and the Academy in the early 1990s were delightfully inventive and economical, and clearly demonstrated that there is no substitute for solid acting technique allied to theatrical imagination. Chung Ying's language medium appears to have become primarily Chinese, and the position of drama in local education is as marginal as it ever was. However, the theatre values and stagecraft promoted by the group have remained influential in the local scene.

Other regular influences at the Fringe Club in the field of mime and movement have been the visits of UK artists David Glass and Peta Lilly. While not strictly relevant to a discussion of language theatre, their technical expertise has furthered interest in physical theatre resources and helped to focus attention on the actor's communication with the audience, as opposed to the authenticity of costume and the qualities of lighting and set. In typical reviews of mainstream expatriate productions, these elements were usually subjected to greater critical scrutiny than the acting and the effective communication of narrative and ideas. Other professional touring groups have also provided inspiration, from the Royal Shakespeare Company and National Theatre tours, to the more modest but equally impressive Fringe Club initiatives, such as the showcasing of the group Black Box from Melbourne in the past few years. Robert Wilson and the Wooster Group have been distinguished visitors to the Hong Kong Arts Festival and the Fringe Festival respectively.

The Fringe Club, situated on the edge of fashionable Lan Kwai Fong, has evolved in its fifteen years' life span into the mecca of experimental, alternative or simply small-scale groups. It is an ideal venue for more intimate, studio theatre and in the past decade has played host to virtually all Hong Kong's English-language companies. Indeed, it has encouraged their development by offering them performance space that is well suited to resources of both budget and manpower. The list of groups who have not only performed at the Fringe but in many ways been nurtured by its congenial climate is a who's who of recent and contemporary drama companies using English or mixed language medium: Breakaleg, American Community Theatre (ACT), Not So Loud, Theatron, Agitprop Theatre Co., The Stage Renegades, Queens' Café Company, Theatre Action, and Théâtre du Pif. All have established a local following and a clear identity through their fruitful association with the Fringe. The Fringe is also a convenient performance locale for the regular productions by a small duo with Hong Kong,

Japanese and British connections, known as Performance Exchange. These two, Daniel Foley and Riso Ataka, like numerous other groups and individuals, have been regular contributors to the Fringe's vivid cultural mosaic.

The Fringe has also provided opportunities for new playwrights and devisers to put on their own work in a friendlier context. Dino Mahoney, one of the most notable writers in English as well as mixed medium drama in Hong Kong, scored a big hit with his play *Yo Yo*, performed by the Stage Renegades in the 1993 Fringe Festival. *Yo Yo*, which dealt with the sensitive subject of child abuse in a cross-cultural context, was subsequently published as a Methuen play-text, and then produced in a Cantonese version at the Shouson Theatre. Dino has gone on to work on a number of innovative theatrical projects and co-wrote with Simon Wu Chi-kuen a critically acclaimed script for the World Radio Drama series broadcast internationally in September 1999. This ground-breaking radio play, which aroused considerable external interest, was entitled *Looking for Stones*. It used local English-speaking Chinese talent and explored Hong Kong's wartime past through the prism of semi-autobiographical childhood experiences.

Another important figure in Hong Kong English playwriting was the late Piers Gray from the English Department of Hong Kong University, whose original creative work for Breakaleg Company was a regular feature of the Fringe Festival drama programme. Piers wrote his plays for Breakaleg with a blend of robustness and lyricism, a style which was well suited to the subjects, particularly his popular one-man show about the life of the war poet, Ivor Gurney. Jonathan Douglas played the eponymous poet memorably and the show was revived by popular demand several times after its 1994 premiere. Work began on a film version, but this was not to be completed before Piers's untimely death two years later. Daniel Foley's representation of Puccini in Piers's last play, *The Dream of Puccini*, conveyed at the time a sense of bittersweet retrospection, which now seems imbued with the author's prescient awareness of mortality in the playscript.

Other groups and performers have also risen to the challenge of developing a more personal, idiosyncratic style, frequently with strong cross-cultural elements. These include Théâtre du Pif, a physical theatre troupe, whose quirkily imaginative and movement-rich productions, such as *Fish Heads and Tales* (1995), *Metamorphosis* (1997) and *The Overcoat* (2001 and 2004), gave ample opportunity to their creative spearhead of Bonni Chan and Sean Curran to demonstrate their range of movement, dance and image-oriented theatre skills. Groups like the Stage Renegades, Theatron (led by accomplished ex-Chung Ying actor Michael Harley) and Theatre Action have all performed plays by the iconoclastic British actor-director-writer, Steven Berkoff, at the Fringe Club within the last six years. Physical theatre was also demanded by these productions, but in addition a facility with language, which made the productions of *West, Greek and Metamorphosis* (a different *Metamorphosis* from that by Théâtre du Pif) challenging for both performers and audience. This great challenge in terms of material, ideas, linguistic sophistication and general creativity in the Fringe theatre programme is one that has been met most enthusiastically by both receivers and producers of the various texts. Fresh, topical and often wildly irreverent comedies on Hong Kong's cultural idiosyncrasies are the *forte* of Not So Loud, while Agitprop Company, Spare Parts, and Teresa Norton and Andrea Miller have approached gender issues and feminism in theatre styles ranging from the serious, to the deeply ironic or the light-hearted.

The language barrier separating English and Chinese-language productions has also been challenged by image-based and dance-oriented theatre groups. The opening for the 1992 Asian

Arts Festival was an ambitious cross-linguistic, cross-cultural version of Dickens's novel *Great Expectations*, performed at the Cultural Centre Grand Theatre, utilizing professional Cantonese-speaking actors/dancers and Australian English-speaking actors. The Hong Kong-based dancer Lindzay Chan played Estelle to great effect, although the production generally lacked an integrated vision, despite looking good. More recently, it is heartening to see a Hong Kong-born Eurasian actress like Veronica Needa, who works in both London and Hong Kong, doing her recent show called simply *Face*, with the popular Fringe group, No Man's Land, on three nights in English and the other three in Cantonese. *Face* confronted issues of culture, gender and ethnicity. Like Daniel Foley and other Fringe regulars, Needa has helped to create an indeterminate space in Hong Kong theatre, which is not too inward-looking in terms of its sociocultural sources. Theatre Action's production of Brecht's first play *Baal* for the 1998 Brecht Centenary in Beijing also promoted a more diverse cultural initiative by blending German, Cantonese, English and Mandarin in an experimental linguistic cocktail. It was performed at the People's Youth Theatre in Beijing in a programme that also included a larger-scale Putonghua version of the better known *Threepenny Opera*.

Having said that, other groups such as Not So Loud, in addition to a number of bilingual but primarily Cantonese-language groups like No Man's Land and Theatre Fanatico, have focused attention on specifically Hong Kong cultural issues. There would also seem to be a healthy balance between groups such as Theatron, The Stage Renegades, Hong Kong Players, American Community Theatre (ACT) and Queens Café Company, which are more orientated towards established playwrights and playscripts, and those performers who, like Veronica Needa and Théâtre du Pif, have a predilection for devised theatre. The popularity of a theatrical genre somewhat akin to the one-woman or one-man show, namely stand-up company, reflects a thoroughly postmodern and contemporary eclecticism. The Comic Cuts show at the Fringe combines an essentially theatrical spontaneity with a timeless form that owes its origins to Greek and Roman comedies as well as to the music hall tradition.

The greater emphasis placed on drama in the curriculum by local schools, international schools and English Schools Foundation schools has also proved fruitful. Student-based groups, such as South Island School's Sitcom and the Li Po Chun United World College Theatre Arts group, have acquitted themselves very creditably in front of Fringe Club audiences. Such groups often provide a pool of young talent on which other local companies may draw. In addition, the burgeoning Youth Arts Festival, under the energetic leadership of Lindsey McAlister, presents in each November a wide cross-section of drama, dance, musical and multimedia productions that draw on the combined talents of many schools and visiting youth companies. English tends to be the lingua franca of this hybrid showcase of arts projects, but again linguistic boundaries are often crossed in resourceful, mixed-language productions.

### **English Playwriting in a Globalized Context**

To sum up, this spirit of eclecticism and intercultural, inter-formal experimentation, which has been such a strong feature of the theatre of the past decade, has provided the sort of impetus that English-language theatre in Hong Kong clearly required. In this thriving capitalistic metropolis, in which free competition is valued so highly, it would have been inappropriate for one or two established companies to have continued monopolizing the English-language theatre scene for too long. On the other hand, there is a school of thought that is sceptical of

capitalism's claim to encourage true competition. Perhaps it is only wishful thinking to believe that the kind of cultural diversity and pluralism of the last decade can really last. In an era of increasing commercialization and globalism, independent theatre still holds attractions for thinking audiences, as the healthy audiences for Hong Kong Fringe Festival and Arts Festival events have always indicated. At the same time, the popularity of dinner theatre, admittedly a pleasantly entertaining form, at hotels with purpose-built stages, is significant. The audience for this type of function is usually from a different socio-economic category from that for Fringe theatre. Nevertheless, I would argue that in the pluralistic landscape I have posited, it has its part to play. For one thing the actors are professional and highly experienced, even if the farce genre, which predominates in dinner theatre, is, like pantomime, not exactly on the cutting edge of innovation.

Perhaps in the future, we shall see a wider range of groups performing a wider range of theatre in a wider range of venues. Before that can happen, there needs to be some clarification of arts policy in Hong Kong — especially on the proposed West Kowloon cultural hub — for the coming decade or more. I believe that English-language theatre is from the point of view of cultural policy worth preserving for Hong Kong audiences. However, it should not be viewed as something entirely separate from Cantonese or Mandarin theatre. Theatre as an institution, both in its traditional forms and in its experimental forms, is in the view of a significant number of theatre-goers in Hong Kong, intrinsic to a civilized way of metropolitan life. It contributes to the discourses of Hong Kong's mixed social and cultural heritage, and reflects its trilingual and bicultural identity. It has already shown evidence of its ability to participate dynamically in a growing number of cultural exchange projects and provide a site for social interaction, in addition to its more controversial propensity for socio-political critique and commentary on hot contemporary issues.

I share the view that theatre often thrives in adversity. However, I also think that more traditional concepts of what theatre should aspire to, in respect of its human and financial resources, may have to change, and indeed they are already changing. The bloated production plans of English-language theatre of the supposed halcyon days of the colonial past have been largely scaled down. The results seem to be, as I have indicated, greater pluralism and experimentation, which I see as positive developments. Language is, of course, an important element of the system of signifying codes in the overall semiotic of the theatre. But it is not the only one, as the emerging theatre for the deaf and dumb has proved. In Hong Kong, English language plays an important role in social, professional and cultural communications. But the language issue, and the issue of English as a medium, cannot be considered in a vacuum, distinct from the necessity of improved communications *in toto*. So it is with theatre. We may value English-language theatre in Hong Kong, and find it worth preserving in the form of the traditional repertoire, and especially in new playwriting. However, we should recognize that theatre, like music, cannot be simply circumscribed by its use of language, and that, like music, it can transcend the language barriers of specific speech communities.

The plays chosen for this anthology have little in common in terms of theme, style, structure, but all were written in English or conceived bilingually, and for all their diversity, the plays represent a very vibrant, creative spirit at work within a comparatively short period in Hong Kong. Devised or improvisational work and established classics tend to be at opposite ends of a creative spectrum in the theatre, though it is by no means necessary to see the situation in such conceptually polarized terms. New writing, however, can be regarded as the fulcrum providing a sense of balance between the two tendencies, imposing a certain discipline

of thought and structure, and allowing contemporary and often local issues to be presented directly, rather than allegorically or obliquely through classic plays. Playback theatre, originally a US phenomenon, but now a burgeoning form in Hong Kong, together with community theatre, itself an intrinsically democratic enterprise in spirit, provide exciting options and possibilities for capturing fresh audiences and dealing with issues that are thoroughly relevant to people's lives. However, they rarely generate 'well-made plays', to borrow a somewhat old-fashioned term. This is where new writing comes into the picture. Plays conceived and written for performance with local audiences in mind often succeed in saying something both cognitively and affectively compelling and memorable, while the impact of other types of less carefully structured performance may fade more quickly.

Obviously, most of what needs to be said in theatre in Hong Kong needs to be said through the medium of Cantonese — most, but by no means all. As this anthology demonstrates, good writing in English can enable us to engage with issues from a different perspective, but still a concerned one. What one does not get from these playwrights is a sense of being alien and uninvolved in Hong Kong affairs. In all cases they are, or were, resident here, and a palpable sense of belonging is transmitted through their writing. What one also derives from the eclecticism of the mix, however, is a world-view, one that is based in Hong Kong, but not rooted to it in a blinkered or parochial stance, the kind of internationalism that the selectively globalized commercialism of Hong Kong tends to filter out. The plays included here are not consciously 'internationalist' in any deliberately programmed sense. But they are broad in their scope and awareness, and in their subject-matter and structure. While Cantonese-language plays and translations are certainly capable of addressing broader themes, bilingually and biculturally orientated texts, such as Veronica Needa's *Face*, Teresa Norton and Nury Vittachi's *Back to the Wall*, Simon Wu Chi-kuen and Dino Mahoney's *Gymnopedy* and *Looking for Stones*, and Mike Ingham and Jessica Yeung's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, are intended to tap into both sides of the cultural and linguistic psyche. Significantly, the majority of the plays that feature in this anthology are co-written, and a number of these writing collaborations span the ethnic and cultural divisions referred to by Xu Xi in her introduction.

Some plays in the present collection are excerpted for reasons of length. The selected representative dramas are grouped into four broadly cognate sections. This has been done partly for the convenience of the reader, and partly to identify major areas of interest and concern on the part of the respective playwright and theatre company. The sections are as follows: (1) Hong Kong Identity; (2) Expatriate Identity; (3) Chinese Identity; and (4) Losing Identity. There is, of course, a certain degree of overlap between these sections, and a case could be made for assigning some of the plays (*Back to the Wall*, for example) to a different section, because they deal with more than one aspect of Hong Kong's hybrid identity. Nonetheless, the plays contained in each section generally reflect the varying perspectives and emphases on our individual and shared senses of identity. Even losing identity can be viewed ambivalently, if not positively, in the shedding of fixed identity in exchange for something less restrictive and imposed by others, as in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. To put it another way, the loss of identity could be seen as a form of escape. While the microcosm is our 'World City' (to quote the official publicity line!) here in Hong Kong, the macrocosm, as becomes evident in the final section, is our common humanity. All good plays, however local and particularized their frame of reference may seem, are ultimately universal in reference. In that respect, this anthology is no exception to tradition.

## There Are No Innocents Here

Xu Xi

My first encounter with English-language theatre in Hong Kong was in the mid-1970s, soon after returning home from the US where I had spent three years completing my bachelor's degree. In college, I had acted a little and wanted to continue that interest. This led me to audition for a local amateur group, the Garrison Players. The verdict, however, had nothing to do with whether or not my audition was any good. The reason they said they could not cast me was simply this: *they could not see a Chinese person acting a non-Chinese part, in English.*

Such an attitude seems at best quaintly innocent and at worst blatantly racist in our twenty-first-century city, where actors of all races perform in English-language dramas, and where the language of performance slips and slides between English and Cantonese, along with Putonghua or Tagalog as well. Suffice it to say, English has long ceased being 'owned' by the English; certainly, my American college experience proved that even with my Asian face, I could be Eliza Doolittle, a Noel Coward sophisticate or a reader's theatre performer in a play about the American poet E. E. Cummings. Yet, Hong Kong theatre in the 1970s still remained hopelessly divided by language and culture. That a hybrid identity and culture emerged at all, in spite of the narrow colonial vision for local culture, demonstrates the 'spirit' of the Chinese and Hong Kong people. I borrow here the term from Lin Yu-tong's 1915 tract *The Spirit of the Chinese People*, in which he examined the question of the *kind of humanity* Chinese civilization produced.

Mercifully, Hong Kong English theatre has evolved from its primitive origins into something richer, something more imaginative, and more humane. It is also more truly reflective of the cultural hot-pot that defines this city.

In this anthology, we attempt to showcase the diversity of talent in Hong Kong English theatre. Mike Ingham provides a history of that evolution and critical analyses of the plays. My introduction will focus broadly on three areas. The first is to comment on two of the actual performances with specific references to the bilingual or multilingual/cultural issues in these performances and also in the texts of the other plays; this commentary will also include reference to a third play which we were unable to include in the anthology. Secondly, there is a general discussion of the 'spirit' or ethos of the plays, which appears loosely to be a kind of desperate desire for innocence. Finally, there is the arrangement of the selections into four aspects of identity which requires further elucidation: Hong Kong identity; expatriate identity; Chinese identity; and losing identity, all of which characterize and grace our city's stage.

### Changing Voices, Changing Faces, Changing Places

'To change your language,' Derek Wallcott said, 'you must change your life.' This notion wavered around my consciousness as I watched Veronica Needa's *Face*, and again while watching the Mike Ingham/Jessica Yeung adaptation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, both of which I first saw performed in Cantonese prior to reading the English scripts.

Needa's Cantonese performance of *Face* did also include English, but the bulk of the presentation was in Cantonese. Although Needa speaks Cantonese with native fluency, she has minimal Chinese literacy. Consequently, memorizing the translated playscript was for her an entirely aural experience because she could not read this 'fake book'. The play mimicked the experience of Eurasians in Hong Kong, who switch languages with apparent ease, but whose lives constantly remind them of their dual existence; they are caught between these two places of blood, neither of which they fully inhabit.

In the performance of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the 'life' of the text did, in some measure, change as a result of language. Gilman's protagonist in the original story never heard or sang Chinese opera. Yet, in listening to the Cantonese voice of the speaker slowly going mad, and as her words grew to have less and less connection to the 'reality' around her, the strains of Chinese opera heightened that experience (echoes of the Cultural Revolution perhaps). The performance itself took on the meaning of madness, a condition beyond belief, beyond humanity, beyond life as reasonable, as we know it ought to be. Performer and co-author Yeung is fully bilingual, which no doubt contributed to the Chinese and English adaptations each having a distinct and unique character.

Both these performances originated in English texts and represent one kind of cultural reality — bilingual and translated — for original English plays from Hong Kong. The fact that many local actors are virtually or fully bilingual in Chinese and English enhances performance in the city, offering a truly multilingual and multicultural experience and sensibility that is not as readily duplicated elsewhere. Likewise, in Rob McBride's *Amah Drama*, Tagalog dialogue mixes with English in a farce that reflects a specifically local experience. This facet of linguistic gymnastics in Hong Kong theatre is a welcome evolution from its earlier, more limited state.

By contrast, Joanna Chan's award-winning play, *One Family, One Child, One Door*, renders an all-Chinese experience in English. Like the writers Lin Tai-yi and C. Y. Lee, who both wrote English-language novels depicting the Chinese and Hong Kong experience, Chan's play is set in China during the Cultural Revolution. It presents characters whose multicultural experiences are limited to a China gazing at the West as 'other', as something almost beyond their reach. When Ming, the protagonist, is praised for being the second in the village to be a big shot after Big Uncle Chang, he demurs, 'Oh, no. Big Uncle Chang is in America. I have a long way to go yet.'

The Yangtze Repertory performance I saw in New York had a mostly Asian-American cast. Several were not ethnic Chinese, and the majority (with the possible exception of two actors whose accents sounded distinctly Hong Kong Chinese) probably would not speak Chinese fluently, if at all, except as a second language. Regardless of whatever accents the actors brought to Chan's Anglicized Chinese dialogue — and there were Filipino, Hong Kong Chinese and 'ABC' Chinese and Asian-American accents — the black comedy of a man who protects and nurtures daughters in China, including the unborn and illegal second child, transcended accent, face and place. It brought the audience to the horror of China in 1987. In fact, I could not help noting how *appropriate* this multi-accented English seemed for the play.

The performance brought to mind the works of the American writer Pearl Buck, a Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winner, and a missionary in China who was literate in the language. Her Sincized English was satirized by the likes of Robert Benchley ('It was the birthday of Wang the Gong'). In the context of her times, when China was still a closed culture to the West, her rendering of a Chinese sensibility in English might have seemed quaint and even laughable.



Yet, in our increasingly multilingual, multicultural world, of which Hong Kong is a leading example, it is Benchley, despite his wonderful contributions to American satiric film and literature, who now appears quaint, dated and lacking in vision in this regard, not unlike the attitude of the Garrison Players in the 1970s. Yangtze Repertory also performs a wide range of Western plays using Asian actors; that *is* the point of theatre after all, to transport us to the world rendered on stage, regardless of voice, face or place.

This 'cross-border performance' was also striking because it made me wonder if Chan's Hong Kong background did not provide a peculiarly useful vantage point for both language and political commentary. Unlike the characters in her play, she does not fix her gaze on the West as other, since she is herself as much at home in America as she is in Hong Kong or China, both culturally and linguistically. The playwright is also a significant figure in local Chinese-language theatre. Unfortunately, the editors were unable to obtain permission to include an excerpt of the play in this anthology.

Similarly the two plays, *Looking for Stones* by Simon Wu Chi-kuen/Dino Mahoney and *The Naked Earth* adapted from Eileen Chang's novel by Evans Chan, also employ the English language to render both a Chinese experience and sensibility. McBride's *Amah Drama* extends the cultural and linguistic scope to Tagalog in his farce about a Filipino domestic, who has an affair with her employer. Hong Kong, it seems, is that 'good earth' out of which does grow such cross-cultural adventures in theatre. As such, the seemingly 'innocent' Western perspective of an earlier generation about the hybrid cultural milieu of Hong Kong, and by extension the post-colonial world, appears ignorantly blinkered in its apparent attempt to resist changing voices and faces that eventually took place in the local English theatre.

### Inscrutable Winks, Nudges and Asides

In *The Naked Earth* Ko Shan, a senior woman cadre, shouts, 'Comrade Su! You should be ashamed of your innocence!' Sun Nan, the younger woman, has resisted the advances of an influential party official who can save her boyfriend Liu Chuen. Despite Ko Shan's assistance and intervention, Su Nan has failed to understand that the only way she can help her wrongly imprisoned lover is to submit to the party official Ko Shan has introduced her to. The latter is doubly infuriated because she was formerly Lui Chuen's mistress and genuinely wants to help save him, even if doing so is for Su Nan's benefit and not her own. 'Some women are such idiots,' she says. 'All they've got is their useless pride, just like this goddamn country, when there's nothing going for them in real life.'

In Cultural Revolution China, an insistence on clinging to pure and innocent ideals will doom you. This same theme prevails in *One Family, One Child, One Door*, where the protagonist, despite all his courage and noble aspirations, is unable to prevent the population control forces from descending upon his pregnant wife.

Despite the diversity and range of the plays in our selection, I was struck by this ethos, if not shame, of the real or imagined *culpability* of those who wish to remain innocent. In *Back to The Wall* by Teresa Norton and Nury Vittachi, set during Hong Kong's handover to China, an illegitimate Eurasian girl longs for her English father to bring her away with him to England. She agonizes over her last communications with him, where in a fit of pique, she leaves twenty voicemails on his office phone. 'Why did I do that?!' She admonishes herself in Cantonese and then, switching back to English says, 'Even the mistakes I make are . . . just annoying.'

Never anything important. Always just little and ugly and stupid.’ In that moment, she acknowledges the truth of her circumstance, and chooses to shoulder blame as the illegitimate offspring by doing ‘something important tonight’, which is to step off the roof in a suicidal leap. The play presents several perspectives of Hong Kong’s fate arising from the Handover of which this is the bleakest, an ‘illegitimate’ territory that regards itself as nothing more than ‘little and ugly and stupid’.

There are no innocents anywhere and certainly not in history. Maintaining innocence can even seem pointless. In *Looking for Stones*, an aunt argues with her nephew Ah Fai over his having to study the French Revolution, complaining that wars in history do not teach anything except misery.

- Aunt: If people had proper respect and minded their own business, there wouldn’t be any wars in the first place.
- Ah Fai: Anyway, it wasn’t war, it was a revolution.
- Aunt: People still got killed, didn’t they? . . . Look at that poor Emperor . . . he lost his head, didn’t he.
- Ah Fai: (*Correcting her emphatically*) King.
- Aunt: (*Irritated*) King, king, yes king but what’s the difference, he still got his head chopped off.
- Ah Fai: Well, he was a very bad king.
- Aunt: What difference does that make? . . . There were plenty of bad Chinese Emperors, but that didn’t mean people had to go around chopping off their heads, did it?

Similarly, in *The MacLehose Trail*, which depicts the expatriate Hong Kong world, the pretence at innocence is stripped away in private, even though the desire to preserve the public face remains strong. The aptly named Marilyn Kipling, a divorced, bored socialite who usually fund-raises through charity balls, joins a charity walk team headed by Sir William Bywater. Bywater’s PR man Robert, also on the team, suspects Marilyn of wanting to make a play for Bywater, and they argue out of earshot of the rest of the team after she confronts him for ‘goadings’ her.

- Robert: Don’t preach to me, miss holier-than-thou. God, you’ve got some face. Since when were your fund-raising activities based on altruism?

(*Robert looks off to the wings, to see if the other two are coming. During the rest of the conversation, he keeps looking to see where they are.*)

- Marilyn: Don’t change the subject, Robert. We’re talking about you and me, not the politics of charity. I’m as much a member of this team as you are.
- Robert: Yeah, but only because you got your hooks into William before I had a chance to intervene.
- Marilyn: What exactly are you trying to say?
- Robert: You know exactly. You think it’s not common knowledge how you whipped your knickers off for William after the Hilton —

(*Marilyn slaps Robert across the face.*)

They argue further and Marilyn then turns the table on Robert:

Marilyn: Oh my Robert, you really don't like girls, do you?

Robert: I certainly don't like gold-diggers like you.

Marilyn: Gold-digger! Robert, I've already got more money than I know what to do with. Why on earth do you think I do this charity nonsense in the first place. You're the one fawning over William, not me!

*(Robert looks anxiously to the wings.)*

Marilyn: What's wrong, Robert? Scared he'll arrive and see you making an arse of yourself? Shall I tell him for you? Are you too shy to make a pass at him on your own?

Robert: God, you have no shame, do you? At least I don't flaunt myself. At least I've got some dignity.

*(Robert is suddenly conscious of confirming Marilyn's suspicions.)*

The desperation that underlies these diverse expressions of a loss of innocence colours these and other plays. Perhaps it is a kind of *cri de coeur* of the city by Hong Kong's playwrights, who must confront a political and historical reality that has few parallels.

### **And All These Belong on the City's Stage**

In our attempt to define the *nature* of these selections, we settled on identity as a common theme that seemed to categorize the plays into the four groupings described in Mike Ingham's introduction. However, language provides an entry to an interesting facet of local identity; English drama raises the curtain on four distinct kinds of 'Hong Kong identity' of concern to local playwrights that Chinese drama might not.

There were five, fairly short plays which are included in their entirety that we thought of as 'Hong Kong-centric' stories. While the conflicts and human dramas are universal, it is clear that none of these could have been set anywhere else except Hong Kong, or perhaps even be written by any but a 'belonger' to the city, and represent the diversity of local identities. These include *Face*, *Looking for Stones*, *The Life and Times of Ng Chung Yin*, *Back to the Wall* and *Two Girls from Ngau Tau Kok*.

All five plays draw upon the city's particular history, although there are two that speak to specific historical events. *Back to the Wall* chronicles one of Hong Kong's most significant historical moments, that of the 1997 'Handover' to China. For each of the characters, it is a retreat, a flight towards an emotional 'wall'. Yet, the significance of history is not lost on them as they each seek to mark this changeover with an individual stamp. The subtitle of *The Life and Times of Ng Chung Yin* by Mok Chiu-yu, adapted into English by Evans Chan, is in fact 'a Hong Kong story', one that is not often told about the radical politics and secret revolt in the colonial city during the 1970s. Ng Chung Yin was a one-time political comrade of the internationally known director John Woo, who was himself an angry radical youth. The play is a kind of docu-drama that seeks to recover lost history, and presents the side of Hong Kong that was not necessarily the beneficiary of economic progress, as the following monologue excerpt demonstrates:

Ng Chung Yin: (*Getting louder and louder*) The contradictions of the capitalist system in Hong Kong are deepening. As we flourish as a so-called Asian economic miracle, tens of thousands of people are being driven into shame-faced poverty. The historical tasks of the Revolutionary Marxist League are to: FIRST, bring together the most progressive sectors of the workers and the students. SECOND, to carry out class struggles and to set up a truly revolutionary Marxist-Leninist vanguard party. And THIRD is to lead the Hong Kong workers to join the Chinese and the World revolution.

Quite a contrast to the city that is often characterized as apolitically interested only in money and commerce.

The other three plays speak to cultural experiences that are uniquely local through personal stories. The autobiographical nature of *Face* in both the playscript and Needa's performance presents a kind of 'living history' of the Eurasian experience. *Looking for Stones* draws on the life of co-author Simon Wu Chi-kuen, and through a drama of a generation gap, depicts the schism in a city divided by its Chinese past and colonial present. *Two Girls from Ngau Tau Kok* by Amy Chan and Janet Tam documents the world of public housing estates, many of which are built on reclaimed land and often create entirely new urban districts from the large swaths of countryside and nothingness. The two girls are only named by the initials A & J, and A describes the daunting landscape of that world as one that supersedes all nature. 'Blocks, a forest of blocks, mainly identical, concrete — if you're not used to it it's a strange landscape, like some futuristic extraterrestrial terrain . . .'

Since plays in English would naturally cover, at least in part, the expatriate world of Hong Kong, it seems reasonable to look at the comment those plays make on expatriate identity. Of the three selections included, we found the dramatic concerns further subdivided into: (1) the world the expatriate comes from, i.e. *Gymnopedy* by Dino Mahoney (included in its entirety); and (2) the Hong Kong expatriate world (*The MacLehose Trail* and *Amah Drama*, both of which are excerpted) which Mahoney was also part of. Mahoney also wrote other full-length plays including *Yo Yo*, published in the UK as a play-text by Methuen, and several radio dramas that are very local in subject-matter, many of which reflect his concerns as an English-language educator of Hong Kong students. In *Gymnopedy* we trace those concerns to their origins in the expatriate's native world. The two plays that deal with expatriate concerns in Hong Kong are Tom Hope and Dave Anderson's *The MacLehose Trail*, and Rob McBride's *Amah Drama*, both of which also offer useful observations of colonial life in the city. MacLehose is the name of one of Hong Kong's most popular and effective governors, and there is in reality a trail where charity walks have taken place, as recorded in the play. The term 'amah', while not exclusively used by expatriates, is a primarily Western term which does not have an equivalent in Cantonese; local Chinese refer to their 'amahs' as 'servants', making no bones about the social hierarchy involved.

The third group speaks to the inextricable connection of Hong Kong's identity to both that of the Mainland's and the larger historical-cultural context of being Chinese, as over 96 percent of the population is. Two plays are noteworthy for their dramatic structure, *The Seventh Drawer* by Hoyingfung and *Millennium Autopsy* by Tang Shu-wing. The settings for both are surreal; the first is described as a 'dream play' where a chest of drawers forms a kind of Greek chorus

to the central drama and the second is peopled by puppets and a soul around an ‘autopsy’ lecture by a surgeon. *The Seventh Drawer* speaks to the crowded conditions of Hong Kong, where people live in small flats, as small as the closet which houses the drawers of the play, out of which pop all kinds of family stories. The individual drawers are all characters that speak and their stories address the dominance of Confucian familial demands, an inescapable cultural heritage. *Millennium Autopsy* combines puppet theatre with a lecture, creating an unusual ‘stage’ for the polemic of the piece, an autopsy of time and the fast pace of progress. In some respects, the play highlights China’s shaky footing along this space/time continuum, one that is as lost as the rest of the world’s. *The Naked Earth* adapts a Chinese-language novel of the same name into an English play. The author of the novel, Eileen Chang, was a student in the Department of English at the University of Hong Kong in the late 1930s and early 1940s. An interesting feature of *The Naked Earth* is that the playwright Chan has added an American character as a ‘guide’ to the drama, thus making a historical statement of the balance of power in Sino-US relations. We include *Millennium Autopsy* in its entirety and excerpts of the other two plays.

Finally, the last grouping is perhaps the most intriguing voicing of the nature of identity. Although none of these plays are specifically about Hong Kong, all three were written and performed locally, and reflect the mutable question of identity which characterizes the city. Madness prevails: the protagonist in *The Yellow Wallpaper* slowly goes mad in her confinement, while the other two plays dramatize a more benign, yet still troubling, form of ‘madness’ in the overly intense, emotional expressions of the protagonists. Identity slides along the slippery slopes of one, who was, is and will become something else, not unlike the city itself with its peculiar and unique history.

Two of the selections are adaptations of literary texts. These are also important examples of the unique intercultural and intertextual nature of local dramatic expressions. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a dual-language adaptation of an English short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and *The Overcoat* is an English-language adaptation of the Russian short story by Nikolai Gogol. The latter, by Sean Curran and Bonni Chan from Théâtre du Pif, is a representative example of the kind of English-language theatre performances by a leading theatre company which comprises a mainly Chinese cast. *The Ivor Gurney Show* by Piers Gray, a long-time expatriate, draws on his native world in much the way Mahoney does in *Gymnopedy*. Ingham has already detailed Gray’s importance in the development of Hong Kong theatre. We can draw comparisons with the poet Edmund Blunden who, like Gray, taught at the University of Hong Kong, and whose poems appear in our prose and poetry anthology, *City Voices: Hong Kong Writing in English, 1945 to the Present*. Both writers found a muse in their homeland, which speaks in part to their ‘exile’, and hence, the lost identity of an expatriate, especially during an earlier colonial era. Blunden, of course, like Ivor Gurney, started writing poetry in response to the horrors of his experience during the First World War.

*The Ivor Gurney Show* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* are included in their entirety along with an excerpt of *The Overcoat*.

## Conclusion

Hong Kong English drama would not have developed its creativity or its hybridity if we had clung to colonial, racially divisive notions about who may or may not participate. The

selections in this anthology contribute to the chorus of our *City Voices*, on stage, a vital and growing contribution to Hong Kong writing in English in all the genres. That identity should be the defining connection seems only fitting in a city where identity is ever an uncertain thing. Not only that, but the diversity of forms and performance styles of these plays is matched by their thematic sophistication; there are no ‘innocents’ here, either among the performers, the directors or the playwrights.

## About the Playwrights

(According to sequential order of table of contents)

### *Veronica Needa*

Born in Hong Kong to Eurasian parents and trained at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, Veronica Needa is at home in both English-speaking and Cantonese-speaking circles. Having worked in theatre in different capacities with Chung Ying in Hong Kong and with Yellow Earth Theatre in London, she has become an accomplished performer, deviser, storyteller and playwright. *Face*, performed bilingually in Hong Kong and London, is her first solo play. Veronica is also an expert in Playback Theatre.

### *Simon Wu Chi-kuen*

Simon Wu Chi-kuen, born in Hong Kong and a solicitor by professional training, has studied and worked in Hong Kong and London, where he at present resides. His playwriting skills emerged with *Wolf in the House* and the mainly autobiographical piece *Looking for Stones*, but his theatre knowledge and judgment have long been appreciated in his highly regarded theatre review work in the *South China Morning Post*.

### *Dino Mahoney*

Dino Mahoney has lived in Hong Kong and London since the late 1980s. His budding playwriting skills developed in Hong Kong, where he worked as a professor in the City University of Hong Kong. His successful plays include *Gymnopedy* and *Yo Yo* and radio adaptation work on the translation of Gao Xingjian's *Weekend Quartet*. Dino is also a respected music and theatre critic for the *South China Morning Post*, and has scripted a popular and long-running English education soap opera series set in Hong Kong for broadcast on RTHK Radio 4.

### *Mok Chiu-yu*

Mok Chiu-yu has been active in Hong Kong on social and political issues for the past three decades. He is a founding member of the Asian solidarity theatre group Asian People's Theatre Festival Society, and is expert in techniques of socially engaged theatre, including Forum, Playback, Educational Theatre and Theatre for the Disabled. His plays include *The Big Wind* and *Most Obediently Yours*.

### *Evans Chan*

Evans Chan, Hong Kong-raised film-maker, novelist and critic, adapted his *Life and Times of Ng Chung Yin* in English for the New York performances before adapting it into the medium of film in 2003. He has also adapted the Eileen Chang tale, *The Naked Earth*, for stage

performance in New York. Best known as a documentary and feature film-maker, he is the director of the critically lauded films *To Live(e)* (set in pre-Handover Hong Kong), *Journey to Beijing*, *The Map of Sex and Love* and *Sorceress of the New Piano*.

### ***Teresa Norton***

Teresa Norton has been living and working in Hong Kong for twenty years, acting, broadcasting, writing and teaching communication skills. Through her company, Strategic Entertainment, she writes, produces and directs corporate and retail entertainment, and in her Spotlight on Success workshops and one-on-one coaching she specializes in the application of theatre techniques to professional communication and presentation skills. As well as appearing in numerous plays and running theatre workshops, she has also been a newspaper columnist. Her book *Mixed Nuts* is a collection of her weekly columns written for the *South China Morning Post*.

### ***Nury Vittachi***

Nury Vittachi is a prolific comic author, editor and journalist of Sri Lankan origin, and a long-time resident of Hong Kong. In addition to editing *Dimsum*, the Hong Kong journal devoted to publishing new pan-Asian English-language fiction, collaborating in the founding and ongoing organization of the city's annual literary festival and writing a weekly column in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, he is the author of a number of works of fiction for adults and children, including *Asian Values* and *The Feng Shui Detective* series. The tone of his writing is frequently whimsical and sometimes farcical.

### ***Amy Chan***

Amy Chan graduated from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and currently works as a pathologist, but her alternative theatre engagement involves set and lighting design, and acting and directing for diverse groups including Amity Drama Club, Come On Theatre and Arts for the Disabled. She holds a postgraduate diploma in East-West Theatre Studies, and is a founding member of Well Drama Club together with Janet Tam. Collaborating with Janet, she wrote, acted in and directed the phenomenally popular *Two Girls from Ngau Tau Kok*.

### ***Janet Tam***

Janet Tam's professional background as project officer with Arts for the Disabled and experience in theatre and arts administration dovetails well with Amy Chan's all-round theatre expertise. She holds a postgraduate diploma in East-West Theatre Studies. Her plays include the puppet piece *Everyman 1999* and the solo performance *Metamorphosis Since 1989*.

### ***Tom Hope***

Tom Hope was a Hong Kong-based lawyer and co-founded the Not So Loud Theatre Company with Dave Anderson in 1990. The work of the company specifically addresses issues of Hong Kong. Tom wrote *Hong Kong Hamlet*, *Slippery Mountain* and *At Sixes and Sevens* (a witty reference to Hong Kong sporting events). He lives in London now and is engaged as theatre producer and consultant to The Old Vic Theatre.



***Dave Anderson***

Dave Anderson is a multimedia producer by profession, and co-founded the Not So Loud Theatre Company with Tom Hope. They co-wrote *Home Run*, *Serious Loss of Face*, *Chicken Wing* and *The MacLehose Trail* for performance in Hong Kong. Now residing in London, Dave works in multimedia for the BBC and writes children's stories.

***Rob McBride***

Rob McBride has worked in the Asia-Pacific region as an international television journalist for the past decade. His playwriting and film work is in part derived from his professional experiences in this field. His witty dialogue and plotting in Hong Kong-based pieces *Amah Drama* (1996) and *Tongue Tied* (2000) were widely acclaimed, as was the more tragi-comic vein of his Cambodian plays, *One Legged Puppet Show* (1997) and *Angkor Wot?* (1998).

***Hoyingfung***

Born in Hong Kong and educated in drama and fine arts here and overseas, Hoyingfung graduated from Houston University and established a versatile and prolific theatre career back in Hong Kong as a set and lighting designer, producer and director, video artist, translator, and latterly playwright. He has over one hundred stage shows to his credit and has won local and international awards. In 1996 he founded Theatre Fanatico, which emphasizes cultural creativity in the Hong Kong context. Hoyingfung is also noted for his developmental work encouraging younger artists on the Hong Kong scene.

***Tang Shu-wing***

Hong Kong-born Tang Shu-wing received his theatre training in Paris and, since his return in 1992, has become a respected and sought-after practitioner as both actor and director, as well as being an accomplished creative workshop facilitator. Tang's work with his group No Man's Land has been performed extensively and has garnered awards on the local as well as the international scene. Tang has found fertile ground in the techniques of Chinese opera, tai-chi, mime, puppet theatre and yoga to facilitate a more creative consciousness in the performer. His acclaimed performance work includes *Two Men in a No Man's Land* and *Two Civil Servants in a Skyscraper*, and his directorial work includes multilingual productions of Gao Xingjian's *Between Life and Death*.

***Peter Suart***

Peter Suart, a multi-talented music and song composer, graphic artist, performer and writer of children's books (including *Where Is the World?*) has pursued a prolific career in the arts between Hong Kong and the UK.

***Sean Curran***

Sean Curran studied at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London and specialized in mime in Paris, studying under Jacques Lecoq. He co-founded Théâtre du Pif with Bonni Chan in 1992, thus embarking on a fruitful theatrical collaboration, which takes them regularly to Paris, Edinburgh and Hong Kong, where they are normally resident. In addition to devising

and adapting many productions in recent years in Hong Kong including *Fish Heads and Tales*, *Metamorphosis*, *La Casa de* and *The Overcoat*, which was critically acclaimed at the Edinburgh Festival, Sean and Bonni conduct workshops for professional and community theatre groups and for schools in both Hong Kong and Scotland.

### ***Bonni Chan***

Bonni Chan graduated from the Hong Kong Academy of Ballet and the Academy for Performing Arts. After moving to London in 1991 to study with various theatre and dance teachers, she met Sean Curran and co-founded Théâtre du Pif. With Sean, she devises all of the company's productions and also directs. They work with a range of culturally eclectic artists from the worlds of dance, music and theatre, and have established an enthusiastic and ethnically diverse following in Hong Kong on the strength of their capacity for cross-cultural fusion in their work.

### ***Piers Gray***

British-born and brother to playwright Simon Gray, Piers Gray established his reputation as an academic, critic and playwright. His career was spent in Hong Kong where he produced his critical war-poet study, *Marginal Men*, and his plays, *The Ivor Gurney Show*, *The Twelfth Man*, *After Chekhov* and *The Death of Puccini* for Breakaleg, the Hong Kong-based company he helped to found. Piers died in 1996.

### ***Mike Ingham***

Mike Ingham works as an academic at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, and has lived in Hong Kong since 1989. He is a founding member of theatre companies *Queen's Café Company* and *Theatre Action*. His theatrical interests include theatre criticism, acting and directing, as well as working on student productions. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is representative of his keen critical interest and practical work in the area of adaptation.

### ***Jessica Yeung***

Jessica Yeung is a Hong Kong-born academic, theatre critic and creative writer, working at Hong Kong Baptist University. Her areas of expertise include Chinese opera and theatre translation. Following her doctoral studies in London on twentieth-century *xiqu*, she served as chairman of the Hong Kong chapter of the International Association of Theatre Critics and is currently a member of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

### ***Vicki Ooi***

After a long and distinguished career in the English Department at the University of Hong Kong, where she was responsible for curriculum development in theatre studies, Vicki Ooi has recently discovered a second vocation working with primary students on multiple intelligences and creativity. She is the artistic director of the primary educational theatre project Shakespeare 4 All. Over a twenty-year period she directed many plays for the Seals Theatre Company, specializing in Western theatre in fresh translation. She has won many awards, served on the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and has published widely on theatre and cultural policy research.