



Photo: Nora Tam

Theatre of dreams

Matthew Gregory's singular vision has made the Faust youth company a successful reality, writes Liana Cafolla

About 14 years ago, when Matthew Gregory was in the planning stages of launching youth theatre company Faust, he sought advice from others in similar businesses in Hong Kong. One doyenne of the industry offered him some frank advice, which he did not hesitate to disregard.

"She said 'It'll never work unless you use it as a mechanism for teaching English', which I've made sure we haven't done," says Gregory.

Instead of leaning on the company's English-language credentials, which would probably have helped build up his clientele and his bank balance, Faust proceeded to produce a series of popular shows aimed at young audiences, including a much-lauded production of *Peter Pan*, which he also directed.

Faust has grown in line with Gregory's determination to build a performing arts company whose aim is solely on the theatre, rather than education. "We focus on doing one thing very well. We don't do other things, which I think is quite important as a general rule in life – do what you do well."

The strategy has served the

company well. From teaching 54 children in its first year, Faust now has about 1,000 students a week during term time in an operation run by 12 full-time staff and about 60 part-time employees. The various drama programmes culminate in an annual four-week multi-performance festival held each summer. Gregory also runs Kids Fest, a four-week children's theatre festival that takes place in January and February each year.

He formed his next company, ABA Productions, in 2006 to move into bigger shows. "What I realised was Faust couldn't go any further with the big shows ... and we needed to make the switch from very, very good amateur level, to full-time professional production company," he says.

He approached theatre companies in his native Britain, and proposed bringing their shows to Hong Kong. Again, he had to face down the naysayers. "Often, you go to a theatre company, and they say, 'Oh, I don't think we could do that'," he says. "I explain that instead of taking a bus to a UK theatre, they just take a plane to Hong Kong, and everything will be set up for them in just the same way."

It has not always been as easy as he makes it sound – building a reputation and mastering the logistical arrangements took time – but Gregory now has an experienced team and a history of good relationships with overseas theatre companies to smooth the way.

His interest in the arts started in childhood. Growing up in Yorkshire in north England, he was a chorister at York Minster Cathedral from the age of seven to 13, singing at two services every day. His first performance role model was his father, now a retired vicar.

"I think there is some similarity with what I do," says Gregory. "He would preach and do sermons – standing up in front of a crowd. And York Minster is a spectacle of epic proportions. In a way, it's theatre."

Gregory played the cello and piano, and won a music scholarship to secondary school, where he became interested in acting. A turning point was attending an inspiring Royal Shakespeare Company production of *A Clockwork Orange* at the age of 17. Now, with ABA, Gregory will bring the play to Hong Kong next month – about four weeks after the company presents *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare – Abridged*.

While studying English literature and theatre studies at Warwick University, he also tried his hand at directing in the university's youth theatre, and he used the same structure when forming Faust years

later. He then did a post-graduate certificate of education in English and drama at Cambridge, and in his gap year, he taught at a school where many of the students and their parents were from Hong Kong.

One parent asked him to recruit other gap-year students to help local Hong Kong teachers in teaching English – a precursor to the current native English teachers, or NET, system. Gregory liked the idea, and moved to Hong Kong in September 1996. But teaching English was not for him. "After a year, I realised I really liked Hong Kong, but I didn't particularly like my job," he says. "I decided I was going to set up a children's theatre."

Working in his spare time as a private tutor to earn extra income, Gregory quit his job in 1999 and set up Faust. In the early days, his biggest headache was finding suitable venues, and he occasionally had to resort to unconventional solutions. After getting the go-ahead to put on *The Lion, the Witch and the*

Wardrobe in St John's Cathedral in Central, the company asked if it could remove the cathedral's centrepiece: the altar. Permission was granted. "We had to get it back in by Sunday, which was fair enough," says Gregory.

In 2005, Faust produced *Peter Pan*, and it was a major professional turning point. After seeing a performance, an audience member approached Gregory and offered to help take him to the next level.

"I've been fortunate to meet, along the way, a couple of key people who have helped me – quietly, silently – move things along in a way that maybe might have happened anyway, and that was one," Gregory says.

It was also a personal turning point, cementing his dedication to the company and setting his sights on even bigger things. "*Peter Pan* was probably my biggest personal success," he says. "I remember coming home and saying to my wife, 'Everything is going to be different from now on'. And it was." thereview@scmp.com

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare – Abridged, Wed-Oct 27, various times, Drama Theatre, Academy for Performing Arts, various prices. HK Ticketing: A Clockwork Orange, Nov 6-10, various times, Lyric Theatre, Academy for Performing Arts, various prices. HK Ticketing. Inquiries: 2547 7150



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MATTHEW GREGORY