

CULTURE HK

Theater Where children come to play

One of HK's most-watched English-language theater groups for young people, Faust is now in its 20th year. **Rebecca Lo** had a ringside view of the preparations toward the upcoming anniversary production — *Peter Pan and Wendy*.

It is a chilly Tuesday evening in January, rehearsal night at Faust International Youth Theatre's Sheung Wan studio. In a nondescript commercial building, more than 50 children aged 8 to 17 are sitting on the carpet. This is no after-school cram session — director Matt Baker is pep talking the amateur actors during the precious few weeks leading up to Faust's 20th anniversary production, *Peter Pan and Wendy (PPW)*.

Baker, himself a kidult with long locks and an infectious smile, taps his laptop for musical cues that include Blondie's *Rapture*. A 16-year-old gets lifted into the air by six of her fellow actors as she swoops in for a crucial scene. There are giggles and chatter from the kids watching from the sidelines. Baker turns around to shush them, and proceeds to shout encouragement to his merry band.

Baker says *PPW* is the perfect production to showcase Faust's achievements.

"It is dramatic, imaginative and exciting," he explains. "I wrote a production that re-imagines some of *Peter Pan's* classic characters for 2019 while sticking to the story's timeless appeal. We want to inspire other young people to come and join our programs by showing them that with hard work and talent they could end up on one of Hong Kong's biggest stages."

Shedding inhibitions

Faust's goal is to get local children involved in English-language theater. Founded by Matthew Gregory in 1999, Faust has seen more than 14,000 children between the ages of 3 and 18 take part in its after-school, weekend, and holiday workshops.

"My family doesn't speak English, and my parents thought it

would be better for me if I was fluent in both English and Chinese," says Chloe So Hoi-ching, age 12. "As there wasn't much drama taught at my school, I started at Faust when I was 5 years old. Since then, I have learned how to tell stories. I think directing may be a good career choice for me. Faust has helped me with my reasoning skills."

"Not all of our alumni become actors," notes Keon Lee, Faust's general manager. "We learned that some use the skills they developed at Faust to command a boardroom. Faust gives children confidence."

Along with its annual Faust Festival productions held in theaters including Youth Square and Hong Kong Arts Centre, the company puts on large-scale productions open for auditions to students aged

8 or above. *PPW*, the company's 20th anniversary production, is in fact a tribute to *Peter Pan*, Gregory's first major Faust play.

James Tsui, age 13, has landed a comic pirate role in *PPW*. "I am an underling of Captain Hook, and I hope that people will laugh at my jokes," Tsui says. "I had my first lesson at Faust when I was around 6 years old. Now, I have a lot more homework so I have to learn how to juggle both."

Aside from appealing to parents of participating children, Baker believes that *PPW* has a universal message. "This is a show about the wonder of childhood, first love, and responsibility," he says. "We will still dazzle little ones with fantastic puppet fairies and mermaids, larger than life comic performances, and wonderful costumes. For young adults, there will be advanced physical theater, sword fights, and high quality acting. Big kids will enjoy a timeless

tale that takes them back to their adolescence, and the beauty and heart break of growing up."

Lizzy Marland, age 17, will alternate between the roles of Captain Hook and Mrs Darling. She has been a Faust student since she was 10. "I was a very hyper kid and my mum suggested I join Faust," Marland recalls. "I fell in love with theater. All those school rules are gone when I act. Theater is a good fit for me, and I want to become a professional actor."

Feminist spin on Barrie

Marland sees *PPW* as a feminist revamp of the original story by J.M. Barrie. "I watched every film version of *Peter Pan* available to prepare for the roles," she says. "This production is unlike any of them: It is weird in the most wonderful way. Wendy isn't a little girl who follows Peter around. She has her own agenda and she isn't afraid to speak her mind."

The original iconic story of Peter Pan was revamped to add contemporary context, explains assistant director Talulla Ho. "We felt that both Wendy and our audience shouldn't be subjected to the gender norms of 20th century Britain. We made changes to her character, dialog and relationships with other characters to reflect modern realities regarding gender roles."

"We have staged a production of *Peter Pan* before and the story holds fond memories for many staff members," says producer Sarah Dyson, adding that many cast members have grown up with Faust. "It made a lot of sense to restage the show for our 20th season, to celebrate not only how far Faust has come, but the industry itself and the world around us."

IF YOU GO

Peter Pan and Wendy
Presented by Faust International Youth Theatre
Dates: Feb 21-24
Venue: Shouson Theatre, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2, Harbour Road, Wan Chai
https://www.faustworld.com/shows/peterpan_and_wendy.asp



Lizzy Marland, who plays two roles in *Peter Pan and Wendy*, would like to become a professional actor.



After seven years with Faust, Chloe So is hoping for a career as a theater director.



James Tsui plays for laughs as an underling of Captain Hook in *Peter Pan and Wendy*.



Faust workshops offer youngsters plenty of opportunities to try out physical theater.



Faust's general manager Keon Lee says theater skills help develop a confidence that is useful beyond the stage.



An intense moment during the rehearsal of Faust's 20th anniversary production, *Peter Pan and Wendy*. In its two decades in Hong Kong, Faust has trained more than 14,000 young people between 3 and 18.

Performance art

Xi Xi's women find their voices in new chamber opera

By LIM MENG

Some of the ancillary events of Hong Kong Arts Festival (HKAF), which begins on Feb 21, have been running since January. One of these is the Cattle Depot Creative Hub project. From January to March, artists from Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland and beyond have been gathering at Cattle Depot Artist Village in To Kwa Wan, to work collaboratively on developing new productions commissioned by HKAF.

Daniel Lo, a local composer and a lecturer at the University of Hong Kong's Department of Music, is full of praise for HKAF for backing his project, *Two Ladies*. He has been collaborating with artists from various fields. Lo is trying to hone a piece of literature into a form suitable for stage adaptation through a series of rehearsals, workshops and excerpt demonstrations.

Lo has received commissions from both local and overseas agen-

cies to create stage shows based on contemporary music and operas on earlier occasions. He says in most cases the production schedule is goal-oriented and artists often do not have sufficient time to develop and polish their works. Cattle Depot Creative Hub, however, aims to optimize the creative process and provide a "freer" platform for artists from different fields to work and share with each other, says Lo.

The six-set chamber opera, *Two Ladies*, is inspired by two short novels by Xi Xi, one of Hong Kong's most internationally renowned authors. Lo has adapted a number of Chinese short novels and modern poems written by Hong Kong authors into music pieces, including the choir-based work *Mary's Chalk Circle*, also based on a short story by Xi. The piece premiered in 2017, sung by the local choir group Hong Kong Voices. Lo also wrote the English chamber opera *A Woman Such as Myself* which premiered at the Ostrava Centre for New Music in the



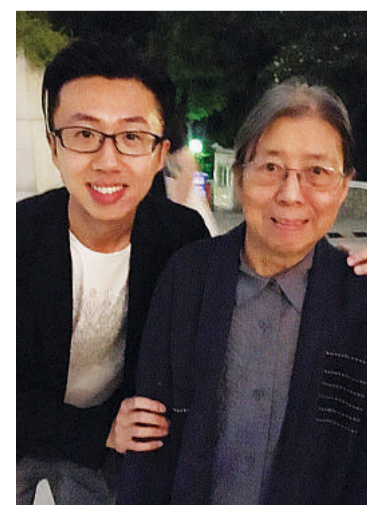
Hong Kong Arts Festival's Cattle Depot Creative Hub project has brought together artists across disciplines to create new work.

Czech Republic last summer.

In *Two Ladies*, Lo and the librettist Wong Yi combine two of Xi's short stories — *A Girl Like Me* and *The Cold* — to create a two-hour opera about women. This is the first time Xi's work has been adapted

into Cantonese chamber opera. Also to have local artists singing in Cantonese in an opera based on a Hong Kong author's work is a rarity.

Written in the early 1980s, both stories are informed by the same idea: how urban women might



Daniel Lo's (left) *Two Ladies* is a six-set chamber opera based on Xi Xi's (right) fiction.

achieve their personal goals and a sense of identity even as they try to strike a balance between the traditional and modern value systems.

"At first the two stories seem to talk about love, marriage and family," says Lo, who believes a closer

read reveals that they are more than just love stories. What impressed the 32-year-old composer most about them is that in the end both female protagonists reject negativity and muster up the courage to plan their futures the way they want.

The social realities of the 1980s in Xi's stories still resonate with the present time. Women looking for personal freedom is a universal theme and viewers today will probably find it more relevant than ever.

Cattle Depot Creative Hub project also includes the innovative Cantonese opera *Journey to the West*, created by playwright Kong Chun-kit, composer Kam Shing-hei and director Donald Chung, and the immersive theater piece, *You Are Absent and What Does That Mean*, performed by Onnie Chan.

Until March, Cattle Depot will serve as a happy meeting ground for singers, composers, theater directors and writers — a space where new performance art is created.