



ART FOR Life

by Joey Mok

For Hoi Chiu, art is basic food for the human soul. He has spent the last 17 years practising art in various forms to spread that message to the people of Hong Kong, particularly teenagers.

Hoi Chiu has led a rich and colourful life as a puppeteer, illustrator, actor, director dancer and more. Whatever form his art takes, once Hoi Chiu finds something he is interested in, he immerses himself in it completely.

Take his recent performance *Mirage*, staged at the Fringe Club in

October – Hoi Chiu created different images with sand on a light box and projected the images onto a screen. Images of a mother and child morphed into scenes where the child had grown up and was looking after the mother. Other scenarios showed tiny people overwhelmed in a cramped urban landscape. The images were complemented by sound effects and a mime performance.

“When doing sand painting, I can integrate my passions for drawing and live performance, and the audience can

freely interpret my work,” he said. “I feel happy about this so I spend more energy on it.”

“I go to different beaches to find suitable sand, I study books and pictures. I research what kinds of tables can make it easy for me to create images and how different body movements can beautify the sand painting.”

As a multi-tasking artist, Hoi Chiu’s goal is to share various forms of art with others. He said Mok Chiu-yu, a famous anarchist artist in Hong Kong, has been a great influence on him.

“ I have realised what I have dreamt of, and I believe I fulfilled my responsibility to myself. I could die any time. ”



Hoi Chiu performs with his wife in *Life, Love and Death*, a mask and dance show based on their love story.



Masks and puppets designed by Hoi Chiu.

COURTESY OF HOI CHIU

JIMMY TSANG

They met almost by chance when Hoi Chiu was 17 years old. He was turned down for a place to study at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts but one of the interviewers referred Hoi Chiu to a theatre company, where he later met Mok.

“At that time I joined his giant puppet project. It was a free-of-charge show in the streets and many people came to see it after work.” Hoi Chiu said, “I was deeply impressed by the spirit behind the project. Art is something that every person should be able to enjoy, not just rich people.”

Inspired by Mok, Hoi Chiu borrowed more than HK\$10,000 from his friends in order to promote puppet art. Aged just 23, he set up the Hong Kong Puppet Centre on Lamma Island. Entry was free so as to attract more people to find out about puppet art.

It did not last long, the centre closed after just six months as Hoi Chiu said it was meaningless to keep it open. “At that time, I was too busy with other jobs and I could not spend an entire day in the centre when so few people came,” he said. “I had to spend time designing and selling T-shirts to run the puppet centre, instead of making puppets. It was like putting the cart in front of the horse.”

Yet, this experience did not weaken his determination to promote puppetry. In 2008, he set up Hoi Chiu Art Gallery at the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre in Shek Kip Mei.

“This time I spent more time in the studio. When neighbours come to look at my studio, I invite them in and explain my works to them, including puppets, masks, and drawings,” he said. He also makes sure to display new creations so anyone who passes through

the studio will have fun. For Hoi Chiu, these are ways to encourage people to incorporate art into their lives.

One group he feels a particular responsibility to reach out to, is teenagers who are interested in performing art.

“If I possess such skills as making puppets and painting, and teenagers want to learn more about these, then I will teach them,” he said, “I want them to learn all my skills so that the art can continue.”

In addition to teaching art to teenagers, Hoi Chiu usually shares his life experience with them. He believes that every person is a unique individual but today’s teenagers judge their sense of identity and self-worth from their performance in centralised examinations.

Recalling his relationship with his peers at school, Hoi Chiu said, “Even though they got better exam results, I knew that I could be better at painting than they were. If we do not recognise our strengths and believe in a common and centralised system instead, we will feel inferior forever.”

Hoi Chiu believes people should do what they really like to do, and act immediately once they find their own interest.

This is a belief that has driven him since he was a primary school pupil. From an early age, he was aware that people can die at any time, under any circumstance. He therefore decided it was important that he should pursue whatever he was interested in before he dies, leaving no regrets.

“When I was about six or seven, I told myself that I would die at 40,” Hoi Chiu said. “It made me more determined to concentrate on my favourite things.”



Hoi Chiu (right) creates different sand paintings on a light box and projects images onto a screen in *Mirage*.

COURTESY OF HOI CHIU



Hoi Chiu said if he does not die at 40, he has another plan for his life. He will focus more on backstage work.

JIMMY TSANG

In primary school, he just drew pictures in his lessons and did not listen to what the teachers said. He even earned money by helping his classmates finish art homework, so that he could buy painting tools.

Although Hoi Chiu discovered his interest in art when he was young, his determination was a concern to his family members.

“They were worried that being an artist would not bring a stable income,” he said. “But I did not listen to them. Every sentence uttered by my parents became a barrier to my interest.”

In order to be independent and to focus on his passion, he left home at 17 and moved to Tai O.

As time passed, Hoi Chiu started to understand his parents’ concerns. He discovered they had been keeping up with his career and life through newspaper articles and interviews on television programmes, but not by talking with him.

“I was about 30 and my parents still knew very little about me. I thought it was not appropriate and I had to think of ways to ease their worry,” Hoi Chiu said. “I told them about my work in other ways. For example, I said I taught drama to students because they believe teaching can bring a stable income.”

He also gives them leaflets about his performance and tells them it is similar to the shows of famous actors, like Jim Chim Sui-man, so they can have a more concrete idea about his work.

Hoi Chiu is now living near to his family so that he can communicate more with them. “No matter how far away you live from your family, the relationships still exist forever,” he said.

Family is more important to Hoi Chiu now than ever before, and marriage to his Canadian wife has marked a change in his life. Before marrying her, he did not believe that a marriage certificate could ensure love for life. All that changed after he met his future wife.

“I really love her!” Hoi Chiu said. “She is different from the other women I have met. She can thoroughly understand the meaning behind my paintings and appreciate what I am doing. I can cry in front of her because she can tolerate my weakness.”

Hoi Chiu and his wife have created a performance about their love story and they have shown it around the world. He is going to continue the performance. “It is a life-long project in my life. It means I will live with her forever.”

After 17 years of working in different fields of the arts, Hoi Chiu has

realised his dream of creating art. Now he is 34, just six years short of the age he said he would die.

“I have realised my dreams and I believe I have fulfilled my responsibility to myself. I could die any time,” he said.

If he does not die at 40, he has another plan for his life. “I have set another target for my life after 40. I will focus more on backstage work, like designing puppets and masks and promotion of art to teenagers. I will even try making films,” Hoi Chiu said.

“Except the show with my wife, I will not perform on stage anymore. At that time, you could say Hoi Chiu is dead.”

Yet, Hoi Chiu thinks that his work, before or after 40, will still focus on the theatre that he loves. All the paintings, puppets, dancing, stage props and other things he does are for the theatre.

“An artist is somehow a leader in society. He has the ability to touch the audience and inspire them to think of different life issues,” Hoi Chiu said. “Theatre is a place that contains different elements and style. Performers and their audience can interact and enlighten each other. My work is always to promote love and peace to the audience in a theatre.”