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Szu-Feng Chen

Szu-Feng Chen, Assistant Professor - Department of Theatre and Dance

Professor Szu-Feng Chen was invited by The Theatre Practice (TTP) in Singapore to create set and costume design for *Lao Jiu: The Musical*, its feature musical production for the Singapore Kuo Pao Kun Festival.



Szu-Feng Chen (second from right) with colleagues in Practice Theatre camp workshop

I was invited by The Theatre Practice (TTP) in Singapore to create set and costume design for its feature musical production for Singapore Kuo Pao Kun Festival. *Lao Jiu: The Musical*, is a musical version of Kuo's signature play. It was opened in July 2012 in memory of ten years of Kuo Pao Kun's passing. Kuo Pao Kun was the pioneer and art educator of Singaporean theatre—awarded the National Culture Medallion in 1989, the Culture Award in 1992, Asean Cultural Award in 1993 and the Excellence for Singapore Award in 2002. The festival is hosted by The Theatre Practice and supported by Singapore National Arts Council in honor of Kuo's contribution to the Singapore performing arts.

Singapore is a young and diverse country that has many languages, cultures and religions. Most of the citizens are immigrants and their descendants from China, Malaysia and India. After Singapore declared independence from the United Kingdom in the 1960's, the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew decided to make the first language English based on Singapore's colonial history. The policy tried to build a national identity by making English the bridge among citizens who speak different languages. English has been used as the official language for government administration, business and education; while Singlish, an unofficial mixed language of English, Malay and Chinese dialects,

is spoken by most citizens.

People of Chinese ethnicity constitute around 80% of the population of Singapore. The languages spoken by Chinese Singaporeans differs from English, Singlish, Singadarin, as well as from Chinese dialects including Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and many others. Since the 1980's, all schools in Singapore have begun to use English as the primary language with Mandarin as a secondary language. The intention was to unify the Chinese Singaporeans from different dialects groups along with citizens from other cultural backgrounds. The increase of English/ Singlish speaking younger Singaporeans results in attempts to replace their mother language. The story of *Lao Jiu: The Musical* is set in 1980's, the era of cultural and language conflicts. The story is written in mixed languages of Mandarin, English and Hokkien, it represents a picture of Singapore history, generation gap, and the life experience of low-income Chinese immigrants during that time.

My collaboration process with TTP started early in 2011. It was an interesting process of long distance engagement. Kuo Jian Hong, the artist director of TTP and the director of *Lao Jiu: The Musical*, and I used Skype as the main communication method to discuss the play. We also held several production meetings with other theatre artists via conference calls. I started out doing intensive research in Singapore history, social, politic, and culture background to get a better understanding of the story setting. It became the foundation of my design development. The production carries a warm reminder to the local audience that the stories from their parents should not be forgotten. Therefore my design focused on creating an 80's life sketch in a contemporary silhouette. I visited Singapore in the summer of 2012, to finalize the design and help execute it. The production was well received from both theatre critics and general audiences. The modern form of the musical and the new design elements successfully introduced theatre arts to the younger spectators as well. This particular production has been invited for an international tour to Malaysia in 2013.



Kuo Jian Hong, artist director and director of TTP and Szu-Feng Chen



Aside from my collaboration for *Lao Jiu: The Musical*, I was invited to host a three-day theatre design workshop for theatre artists as well as the general public at Lassalle College of the Arts. This professional workshop hosted theatre artists from Singapore, Taiwan, Austria and United States who shared their creative processes in directing, acting, and design. My session focused on introducing the elements of design and the art of collaboration. The students age ranged from 14-65, which created an interesting dynamic in the classroom. I was able to tailor my course design to fit this particular group. It was also an interesting challenge to teach bilingually. I had to prepare my material in both Chinese Mandarin and English. It was fascinating that the same content could be received so differently depending on the language. I was not only teaching, but also learning from this unique experience.

Overall, I had a rich and fulfilling experience during my recent stay in Singapore: I participated in the rehearsal and production process and helped to execute both set and costume design for *Lao Jiu: The Musical*. I shared theatre production experience and exchanged design methods with theatre professionals from different countries. I am confident that I will be able to bring this experience into my classes and advising to the benefit of my UNH students on many levels. I am grateful to the support of the CIE international Development Grant that made my trip possible. This visit allowed me to develop a strong



Scenes from the production

working relationship with Singapore theatre artists, with whom I am looking forward to future project collaborations.



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