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The art of stimulation

Editor's Note: Hong Kong Arts Centre's (HKAC) Cultural Masseur program — where artists and arts practitioners led people from a non-arts background toward art appreciation — is coming to an end after a one-and-a-half-year run. In the lead-up to the season finale, Dragonix Multi-arts Festival which kicks off on June 29, HKAC chief Connie Lam spoke to China Daily Hong Kong.

Q: "Masseur" is a curious term to use in the context of culture. Why this odd juxtaposition in the name of the program?

A: The massage metaphor suggests we want people's minds to get activated. The idea is that the exposure to our arts programs will stimulate people's minds, gear them up in a way that they will start wanting more such experiences. I say it's all about touching.

Q: Stimulation of the mind can work both ways here: Just as experts help participants develop a sense of arts appreciation, the "art learners", as you call them, could be offering mental stimulation to their mentors by picking their brains...

A: Yes, I totally agree that stimulation is both for the audiences as well as the participating artists. We as organizers get particularly excited when we have a great mix of very young and elderly participants. Our oldest participant, Betty Luk, is 70. She is a retired teacher who was on a workshop about devising creative solutions to everyday problems, curated by Law Man-lok. She designed a soap-holder made of sponge that would absorb the water dripping from wet soap and keep the sink dry. The idea is to send out a message to the public that art is not distant but related to their everyday lives.

Q: You ran the Cultural Masseur program for one and a half years and now seem to be ready to showcase the harvests from it through the upcoming Dragonix Multi-Arts Festival which opens on June 29...

A: We ran this program like a pyramidal structure. First we opened it to a mass audience. A group selected from among them joined our workshops, attended the camps and still fewer have stayed on with us, completing the journey. We started with over 80 people and now have a core group of around 15.

Q: Quite a few artists participating in the Dragonix Multi-Arts Festival seem to have ventured out of their regular area of work for this show...

A: The idea is to expand the horizons of the arts professionals and artists. At HKAC we like to challenge the artists, encouraging them to break through into other disciplines and leave their comfort zones. It's a cross-disciplinary festival. For instance, Enoch Cheng will be taking the audience through a



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very special journey into the unknown — one that combines elements of contemporary dance and Cantonese Opera movements with a guided tour. He invited a Cantonese Opera actress to our studio and tried deconstructing the opera form, from dialogues down to the hand gestures.

Q: An interesting mix of overseas artists are participating in Dragonix...

A: We had begun on a local premise but at the end of the day the festival has turned out to be much more international. Then the local context is very strong even when the artist is from abroad.

For example, the Japanese artist Chikara Fujiwara's piece, "Engeki Quest", is about exploring Choi Hung district through a foreigner's perspective. And Dimitri de Perrot from Switzerland will have his very first sound installation in Hong Kong in the heavily-crowded public passageways in Hysan Place.

Q: So is the Cultural Masseur program going to see another new edition?

A: It will, but in a somewhat different form. We hope to have a long-sustained relationship with the Cultural Masseur participants. We wish they continue to use our network to make new art.

For instance, we're organizing "Chill Chat" sessions as part of the Dragonix festival. It's a speed dating-style exchange between aspiring artists of the city and

eight local and international art veterans. Grants worth HK\$50,000 and above will be awarded as startup capital to the three most deserving pitches for realizing a creative idea. The mentoring will take place from July to December. By next January, our sponsor will provide a platform for the three chosen projects to be showcased. And the sight of these artworks will hopefully inspire other people.

Q: How did the Cultural Masseur program go down with the city's younger arts enthusiasts?

A: The youngest participants are about 17-18, just finished high school. Some of them are now volunteering for Dragonix; some are working as apprentices to the artists participating in the festival. Some have joined well-respected arts institutions like Asia Art Archive.

The journey from having no background in art to becoming a professional artist's apprentice can be quite awesome. It also helps broaden the horizons of the young participants. They begin to realize there might be a career in the arts. A pair of sisters who joined an earlier arts program of ours went on to open their own film animation company. Perhaps we'll feel the impact Cultural Masseur participants of today make after five years.

Q: What would you expect the art learners to take away from the Cultural Masseur program and how would you expect them to use these new-found skills?

A: Our goal is not necessarily to make art lovers out of the participants. We want to get the message across that art is part of our lives, it could be fun and it's something you can engage with on a daily basis. For instance, someone living in Choi Hung will probably see the place from a different perspective after joining Fujiwara's "Engeki Quest".

Q: Would you have a recommendation for the local government to help make your work easier and more effective?

A: I would like the government to reduce the burden of textbooks on school-going children's shoulders, give them more free time. It will make our task of generating arts awareness among young people that much easier. I am grateful that in spite of the heavy burden of studies some high school students still sign up for our programs. We sometimes worry if it isn't a bit too much for them.

Interviewed by Chitralkha Basu.