



the  
**ONLY SHOW**  
in town

The circus is back in town, and this time it's a home-grown affair

by Stanley Lam, Jessica Li & Howard Yang





On a Sunday afternoon, a group of primary school children in PE uniforms are gathered in the Tai Kok Tsui Sports Centre with their parents. They are not here for extra classes or even a school sports day. They are here for a Circus Experience Day under the Joint School Circus Scheme organised by Hong Kong Circus, the city's only local circus.

One boy looks around and asks what performances there will be. He does not have to wait long to find out. Once the show starts, the children are treated to juggling, unicycling and hula hoop performances as well as a spectacular aerial dancing display.

Although the circus can trace its origins back to the hippodromes of ancient Greece and the amphitheatres of the Roman Empire, the modern circus is thought to have evolved from

equestrian performances in 18th-century England.

In Hong Kong, the golden age of the circus started in the 1950s when there were limited forms of mass entertainment. The circus was popular with the whole family and ticket prices were relatively affordable.

One of the best-known circuses was the Sheng Changfu Circus, which was made up exclusively of ethnic Chinese performers and which hailed from Singapore and Malaya. The circus performed in the now demolished Lai Yuen Amusement Park.

For local audiences, Sheng Changfu Circus was a new and exciting experience. There were elephants, a tiger jumping through flaming hoops, acrobats and trapeze artists.





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But as more recreation activities became available and local television arrived, the circus began to lose its appeal. Even the Sheng Changfu Circus was disbanded.

The circus had to evolve in order to survive. The establishment of Cirque du Soleil in Canada in the 1980s revolutionised the idea of what a circus could be. The performing animals were dispensed with and the shows put more focus on the aesthetic content and a character-driven narrative approach.

“The [contemporary] circuses add in a variety of elements such as musical, drama and lighting effects,” says Venus Wong, the director of a publicity and events company that helped with the staging of Cirque Mechanics Birdhouse Factory in Hong Kong.

Like these contemporary circus companies from the west, Hong Kong Circus also wants to bring something new and different to audiences. Established in 2012, Hong Kong Circus is the city's first and only local circus,

although some of the performers are from overseas countries such as Japan and Spain.

Co-founder Margaret Ho Hiu-nam is a graduate from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts who used to work as a full-time performance artist at Hong Kong Disneyland. Ho, 29, says there are various juggling and acrobatics groups in Hong Kong and they wanted a platform where artists and performers could meet up and perform together. That gave her the idea to set up Hong Kong Circus.

The journey has not been entirely smooth. “The lack of favourable venues is the biggest problem we are facing,” says Ho. “This venue [Sports Association Lim Por Yen Centre] charges us HK\$600 per hour. I am confused as to why the government doesn't support us.”

Apart from the venue issues, safety concerns are another impediment to the development of the circus in Hong Kong.



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“Actually all sports can be dangerous,” says Ho, “but circuses give people the impression of being very dangerous.”

Ho says most injuries that arise from circus acts can be recovered from quickly, and that circus arts are a less dangerous activity than taking part in ball games and dancing. She hopes the government will come to realise this and give more support to circus development.

Cooperation with schools is one way to educate the public about circus arts. Hong Kong Circus recently set up the Joint School Circus Scheme with the aim of popularising the culture of circus and performing arts in society. Under the scheme, primary and secondary school students are invited to take part in circus arts training.

Wu Wing-tak, a teacher at one of the participating schools, says parents may think aerial performance is dangerous and the schools may not have the required facilities.

“People commonly think that circus arts or clowns are not good. How will children benefit from learning and practising circus arts?” asks Wu,

“Circus arts are not solely about learning to be a clown. They let kids learn and practise certain tricks and master them through which they learn persistence,” replies Ho. “Circus arts are special in that kids can bring happiness to others and they learn more from sharing their joy.”

Despite the challenges, Ho is optimistic about the future of circus development in Hong Kong. She says people are always surprised to learn there is circus in Hong Kong; they don't think it is possible. Ho wants to prove them wrong.

“Although we started late, I don't think our working conditions compare poorly with other places,” she says. ▣

*Edited by Tiffany Tsim*