

YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2016

LIU XIAOYI



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11 · KUO PAO KUN DEVISED, 2012
Photo credit: Bob Lee



SALUTE TO PAO KUN – ACCORDING TO LEGEND, 2013
Photo credit: Zuni Icosahedron



ART, 2014
Photo credit: Tan Ngiap Heng

Liu Xiaoyi (b. 1982) is an actor, playwright, director and educator. A committed practitioner with a desire to push artistic boundaries, Xiaoyi is considered a promising figure at the forefront of the experimental Chinese theatre scene in Singapore.

Xiaoyi became a Resident Artist at The Theatre Practice (TTP) in 2004. He is well-known for the titular role he played in the musical *Lao Jiu* (2005), one of Kuo Pao Kun’s classic scripts. As both a director and playwright, Xiaoyi’s works aim to provoke and question. Notable works include *Fluid* (2014), which explored the meaning and importance of theatre to society, and *Citizen Pig* (2013), a play that looked at Singapore’s flat rental situation. *Fluid* won Best Original Script in the 2015 Life! Theatre Awards, while *Citizen Pig* was nominated for both Best Director and Best Original Script in the 2014 Life! Theatre Awards.

Beyond local shores, Xiaoyi has also been working in close collaboration with Hong Kong theatre doyen Danny Yung since 2010. Their collaborations include: *A Hundred Years of Solitude: Cultural Revolution* (2011) which was screened at the Huayi Festival in 2012, as well as *Salute to Pao Kun – according to legend* (2013) and *Memorandum* (2014). Xiaoyi is deeply interested in the intercultural dialogue of art forms, particularly between the traditional and contemporary. He had been invited to the annual Toki Arts Festival for exchange performances, in collaboration with world class artists from Tokyo, Beijing, Nanjing, Bangkok, Jakarta and more.

Xiaoyi now serves as Director of TTP’s The Practice Lab, which aims to explore and break new grounds in the field of experimental theatre. Since 2013, Xiaoyi has developed an Actor’s Lab, Director’s Lab, Playwright’s Lab and a Reviewer’s Lab to uncover new talents, facilitate creative sharing and explore new approaches to theatre. He also set up Singapore’s first Chinese reviewers group, 众观 Re-Viewers, and serves as editor. ■



A CONVERSATION WITH LIU XIAOYI

*Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts.
Who or what were your key influences?*

I do not remember. In retrospect, everything seemed serendipitous. My father was a factory worker and my mother a homemaker; hence my encounter with the arts was limited. But I read widely as a child and I started to write poetry in secondary school. One thing led to another and one day, I found myself on stage.

Everything was unexpected – leaving home in my formative years gave me the space to think, feel and experience. I joined The Theatre Practice thereafter and it provided me with the opportunity to learn, explore and grow. The late Kuo Pao Kun's words nourished me spiritually and Danny Yung guided me on my journey to reach deeper into my psyche. These two masters remain my biggest influences.

What are some of the biggest challenges you face as a director and how did you overcome them?

I am my biggest challenge. As an artist whether you challenge the system, culture or the audience – you are challenging yourself. It is tough challenging yourself all the time. Audiences may not like my work. My peers may not understand what I am trying to say. In that uncertainty, I would start to doubt myself. Sometimes you may flinch, or waver or even want to give up. The important thing is to balance that uncertainty and fear with optimism, curiosity and an equal dose of aspiration and openness to keep inching forward. Sometimes when we take

a step back and take the challenge in stride, it actually helps to release us from trepidation and to transform into a positive force for creation.



What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

I would like to think that I have become a better person. When I am able to reach deeper into my thoughts, I can let go of more; when I am able to feel more, I can see higher and further. As I have benefitted a lot from the generosity of many, I hope to be able to share what I have accumulated with others. I hope to do more. Theatre is a powerful tool and through my work, I hope to do my part, no matter how small.

I believe theatre is revolutionary. I hope to create theatre that revolutionises the community's view on art, life and existence.



FLUID, 2014
Photo credit: Calvin Wong

How would you describe your directing process, and what do you want the viewer to experience through your work?

Meta- and critical thinking are very important processes in my creation. I believe that life is about questioning and not taking anything for granted. I apply this principle to my writing and theatre making. In my creation, I am constantly looking back, constantly contemplating, constructing and deconstructing the framework.

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Time, space and people (body) are the three basic elements of theatre, life and existence. By exploring their intrinsic relationships through critical thinking, experiments and making, my goal is to foster a theatre that revolutionises our outlook on art, life and our very existence.

Please share what a typical day in your life as a director and/or actor is like?

I hope that I can find a poetic meaning to my life, as well as my works. There is no such thing as a typical day for me but I am a creature of habit. I always have my breakfast for one. I enjoy a cup of teh halia (ginger tea) and kopi siu dai (coffee with less sugar). I prepare for my rehearsals by jotting down my thoughts and doodling in my notebook. I enjoy a chat before rehearsal starts although I am usually the listener. Listening helps me understand the thoughts and creative state of my fellow collaborators. It is usually late when I reach home. I love to sleep and try to get more of it.

What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in your field?

My advice is not to follow advice blindly. Everyone has to walk his or her own path. It is imperative for an artist to be a listener and an independent thinker. Listen carefully, learn earnestly and march boldly.

What are your vision and hopes for Singapore's theatre scene?

True freedom. Open multiculturalism. Profound exploration. ■



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I would like to give thanks to:

- Ms. Kuo Jian Hong for the nomination.
- The National Arts Council and the Panel for this recognition.
- My family.
- The Theatre Practice, my second family, for giving me a home to grow.
- Kuo Pao Kun and Danny Yung; *and*,
- My mentors, benefactors, peers, friends, collaborators, students, readers and audiences.