

## Nothing is Retainable

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*In an extremely dense, extremely fast-paced and extremely modernised place like Hong Kong, this independent theatre group is like a film camera. It keeps giving out grating 'click-click' sound on stage. That is a nostalgic sound. That is also an unreciprocated, or even futile, effort to retain the past.*

'Nothing is retainable'. Before the show started, this line (in Chinese) appeared on the screen. This is the second time I saw a production by Hong Kong's Theatre Ronin, thanks to the Beijing Fringe Festival, which brought them to Beijing in two consecutive years. Even before the show opened, melancholy had made its appearance.

*The Mariana Trench* is set in Hong Kong in the 60s. It's an era where many bachelor girls from Shunde came to Hong Kong and worked as maid-servants, aka 'Ma-jie' – as portrayed in Ann Hui's film *A Simple Life*. Living in their master's home, they usually wore a long braid and appeared in a white top and black pants. They had decided to remind unmarried back in their hometown; it's a commitment for life. As the silk industry in Shunde had become stagnant, they had no choice but to emigrate to the south to earn a living. Many failed to keep their promise. Yet, the maid-servant in this play has turned down the man who teaches her to read and writes letters on her behalf. She sustains herself on her own for the entire life.

She has brought up her young master, who becomes a photographer. His life is carefree and his romantic life troubled. In a gathering, he meets a girl whom he used to fall for. They fall in love passionately but briefly. The relationship ends as swiftly as a flicker of the flashlight.

The whole play is conducted in a completely parallel structure. The two actors never exchange glances or talk to each other, since they live in different time zones – or more accurately, they are trapped in their own zone. Ma-jie always chats with her mates while hanging out the washing on the balcony. If not, she would be looking at the horses at the racecourse, or going to find the letter-writing man to read or write letters, longing for her father. The young master, on the other hand, is constantly running around and yelling, if he isn't pressing the shutter. All along, he is bitterly persevering with his unrequited love.

There were a few moments that gave audience the impression that the actors would be talking. But they merely brushed past. Such intentional detachment (or separation) in terms of eye contacts and words is presented in an especially rational manner to depict the intertwinement of the old memories. Compared with their last show *Landscape In the Mist*, which is also set in Hong Kong in the 60s and 70s, the ‘seaman’ returns to his hometown in Shau Kei Wan after working outside for over ten years. He is also trapped in the maze of memories. Yet, the structure of that maze isn’t parallel, but dissipated – it’s fog, it’s an emotional structure that drowns people.

Likewise, another comparison can be drawn regarding the theatrical treatment. The last show is more realistic: the life-like seagull and a sea made by disposable white tablecloth brought audience to vivid nostalgia. In this show, the props (horse heads), costume and lighting are subtler. They only construct a faint bridge between the past and the present. This is also a characteristic of Ronin Theatre: the sentiments are old, yet the language is very novel and the theatrical treatment is ever experimental. What makes it slightly regrettable is the seemingly unexploited potential for the two protagonists to build further connections.

‘Theatre Ronin’s every production doesn’t follow a fixed theme, but I personally enjoy looking for old things and stories. They appear in my own works initially as intuitions.’ Among these intuitions, director Tam Hung-man fishes out Hong Kong’s identity from his point of view. This is also what I appreciate Ronin Theatre the most. Their theatrical productions display a position in which young people conduct themselves in modern society, which is limited to their own point of view and simultaneously caught up in the past. The only way out is to honestly confront this kind of life experience and find out a means to build the sense of history. The director believes in ‘transference’. ‘Those old people and stories in fact repeat themselves in everyone and everyday in the present. As long as we know how to transfer, there is no difference between Ma-jie looking at the horses on the balcony in the 60s and a post-90s girl browsing weibo at midnight.’ Thus, they always portray those basic emotions and the helpless moments among humans that have never been so sentimental. In an extremely dense, extremely fast-paced and extremely modernised place like Hong Kong, this independent theatre group is like a film camera. It keeps giving out grating ‘click-click’ sound on stage. That is a nostalgic sound. That is also an unreciprocated, or even futile, effort to retain the past.