

## **Flying Inkpot's theatre and dance arm closes**

### **Funding and manpower issues are among the reasons for the decision**

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THE theatre and dance arm of long-running online review journal The Flying Inkpot is shutting down today.

Co-editors Kenneth Kwok and Matthew Lyon, together with a team of regular volunteer writers, are calling it quits after reviewing Singapore's theatre and dance for almost 20 years.

Mr Lyon, part of the School of the Arts' theatre faculty, tells Life! the site had started to become out of date.

The Inkpot has barely any social media presence and the website runs on HTML4, not even on the latest HTML5.

To remain relevant, the team would have to pull out all the stops, continue to regularly train arts writers and overhaul its branding with videos, blogs, feature articles and podcasts.

To balance this with full-time jobs would have been next to impossible for its editors, and would have required a dedicated full-time team.

Mr Lyon says: "There's nothing stopping our writers writing on their own websites as well... The quality of the work is what's important. Do I want to continue plodding on with something I know is not the best it can be?"

Mr Kwok, a public servant working in the arts and culture sector, echoes this sentiment.

Running the Inkpot independently for many years - in addition to his own full-time job - has been draining. He says: "We've never wanted to be the definitive review site. We've always wanted to be one of many, for different voices and different views."

Mr Lyon, together with Inkpot writer Adeline Chia, a former Life! theatre reviewer, had initially approached the National Arts Council for funding to keep the Inkpot afloat, but these discussions did not work out.

He acknowledges that his preferred model, where the council would have provided more than 90 per cent of the funding "indefinitely", would have been untenable.

In terms of other avenues of funding, the Inkpot also wanted to remain impartial and did not want to be beholden to sponsors.

He says: "We have no sellable product and I find it unlikely that we would have found other sustainable sponsorship, because part of our job, when required, is to be, well, rather horrible to people. What sponsor wants to be associated with that, even if we're also good to people?"

The Inkpot's editors are in talks to hand over their archive of more than 1,000 reviews to "another institution", which will be revealed at a later date.

The Flying Inkpot started in 1996 and its first theatre and dance editors were arts enthusiasts Arthur Kok and Sherrie Lee.

Mr Kwok and Mr Lyon, together with others with a passion for writing and the arts, joined several years later as writers.

Mr Kwok took over the section as editor and was joined by Mr Lyon, in the early 2000s.

At that point, blogs were only just coming into fashion and social media platforms were non-existent.

The Inkpot gradually built a reputation for consistently writing about the performing arts and various arts companies started to regularly set aside tickets for their writers by the mid-2000s.

Mr Kwok says: "I think one of the factors for being a reviewer is that you are there and keep writing. If I were a theatre practitioner who's been in the scene for very long, I want a reviewer I can spar with, who has seen my work and can contextualise my work, as opposed to 'This is the first Haresh Sharma play I have ever seen', which is what I wrote in my first review of his work."

He adds: "I think the fact that we've kept going and kept writing has helped us to build that credibility. Whether you like it or don't like it, you have to accept that we have seen x number of plays over x number of years."

The Inkpot has received its share of hate mail and bitter messages from upset practitioners, but also deeply gratifying compliments.

Over the years, it has also groomed a new generation of arts reviewers such as Ng Yi-Sheng and Germaine Cheng, who have gone on to become freelance reviewers for major newspapers here and abroad. It had a roster of about 10 writers before closing.

Ms Cheng, a dancer and freelance writer, started writing for the Inkpot in late 2012. Now a freelance dance reviewer for Life!, she says: "I was very surprised when I found out that all these people had been writing for so many years for no money.

"It's an amazing, commendable thing that it's been able to sustain itself for this long and it's really a testament to their dedication. It takes a certain sense of responsibility to write, document and create this really big pool of work."

Playwright Tan Tarn How, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, is sad to see the site go.

He says: "Just by being an alternative source to the mainstream media, The Flying Inkpot occupied a special and important position in the sparse media and critical landscape of Singapore arts and culture."

"Although there is a little more now available online and offline than when it started, it is far short of what Singapore's rich cultural scene needs and deserves. The closure of this seminal website will leave a big hole."

Director and playwright Chong Tze Chien has been reviewed by the Inkpot "since the start of my career" at The Necessary Stage.

Now company director of The Finger Players, he still relies on the Inkpot to look up reviews dating back to the 1990s, saying that he can rely on its "consistency and in-depth analysis of plays that further the discourse on theatre and theatremaking".

He says that the site will be missed. "If you just document the reviews they have done in terms of quality and quantity, they have captured a good number of artists and the dramatic trajectories of the arts and theatre companies over nearly two decades... They gave birth to and inspired so many aspiring theatre critics."