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HONG KONG BALLET

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Hon. MA Fung-kwok

Chairman

Panel on Home Affairs

Legislative Council

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China

9 December 2013

Dear Hon.Ma,

Panel on Home Affairs**Meeting Agenda on 13 December:****“Promoting Artistic Creation and Autonomy of Art Groups”**

We recognise the concerns raised by the Panel of Home Affairs of the Legislative Council (“LegCo”) on the incident related to the performance *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. We are writing to respond to your letter dated 25 November 2013 inviting The Hong Kong Ballet (“HKB”) to give written views on “promoting artistic creation and autonomy of arts groups” and to explain and clarify the matter to the Panel members.

A. Support Artistic Creation & Respect Autonomy of Arts Groups

1. “Promoting artistic creation and autonomy of arts groups” is fundamental to our organisation and sits at the heart of HKB.
2. For 35 years since inception, we have worked hard to promote and make ballet accessible to people of all ages in Hong Kong, while bringing diversified ballet performances and fresh ideas to the region by encouraging cultural exchange and joint productions between local and international ballet companies.
3. *Over the years, we have developed countless performances which promoted artistic creation.*

- 3.1. Nine ballet performances supporting artistic creation have been commissioned by HKB over the last three years including *Sleeping Beauty* (2010), *Luminous* (2010), *Firecracker* (2011), *Room of her own* (2011), *Black on Black* (2011), *Dancing with the wind* (2012), *Nutcracker* (2012), *Frog Prince- A Ballet Chinois* (2013) and *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (2013).
- 3.2. *The Frog Prince - A Ballet Chinois*(2013) – Mr.Yuri Ng, a homegrown choreographer commissioned by the HKB brought the traditional Grimm’s fairy tale to the Forbidden City in China. Set during the Qing Dynasty, Mr. Ng created a colourful ballet of relationships inspired by the past yet relevant to the present. *The Frog Prince - A Ballet Chinois* is an art piece, synthesising French composer Maurice Ravel’s richly textured music with the story of the Frog Prince, all set amidst the demise of nearly two millennia of imperial rule in China.
- 3.3. *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (2013) - This performance was the first joint production for HKB with Ballett Dortmund from Germany and both parties shared artistic creation rights. This production was different from other traditional ballet performances commissioned by the HKB. It is based on *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, one of the four Chinese novel masterpieces, which is a complex story and rarely adapted into a ballet.
- 3.4. HKB relies on subvention, box office sales and fund-raising activities organised by the Board. The Board works relentlessly to raise funds in order to bring such a wonderful array of new productions to Hong Kong. Specific fund raising efforts by the Board include the annual Ballet Ball, the annual Nutcracker Benefit and a number of other fund-raising activities.
4. ***HKB has always respected and supported artistic autonomy.*** HKB’s Artistic Director, Ms. Madeleine Onne, has full autonomy to make artistic decisions as she sees fit and she always works with choreographers to tailor productions for the Hong Kong audiences. This can be demonstrated by:
- 4.1. *The Nutcracker* – A new version of *The Nutcracker* premiered last year (Dec 2012) and will be re-staged this month. Our Artistic Director remains in constant dialogue with the Choreographer Mr. Terrence Kohler to continue to update a number of elements and perfect the production. Mr. Kohler has expressed his appreciation to the endless support from HKB in commissioning his works and in assisting him to realise his artistic creation for greater appreciation by local audiences.
- 4.2. *The Dream of the Red Chamber* – Similar to other productions, our Artistic Director worked very closely with Ballet Dortmund’s Director and Chief Choreographer Mr. Wang Xin Peng. There was an amicable and dynamic relationship between HKB and Dortmund, with both parties listening and respecting each other’s views throughout the preparations. HKB has supported the many requests made by Mr. Wang, which included changing the cast one week

before the premiere and redesigning some costumes a day before the premiere. HKB completely understands, respects and supports the normal practice of all performing arts groups that making continuous amendments to achieve the best outcome is necessary during the creative and production process.

- 4.3. The Board gives full support to its Artistic Director to commission new works or restage old works. Other than setting the budget and the strategies on the overall artistic direction of the HKB, the Board delegates full autonomy in terms of artistic decisions on each of the performances to the Artistic Director.
- 4.4. Some choreographers who worked with HKB over the years have sent us testimonials illustrating how HKB supports artistic creation and autonomy by giving them space to develop artistic productions. We have included these testimonials in the appendix for reference (remarks: mostly in English).

B. Clarification on the misunderstanding of “*The Dream of the Red Chamber*” incident

1. We would like to clarify that this is a joint production of HKB with Ballett Dortmund from Germany. It was a newly commissioned work jointly produced by both parties specifically for HKB. Therefore the version produced in Hong Kong, with a number of elements added and removed, was different in many ways to the production performed by Ballett Dortmund in Germany in 2012.
2. *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is a widely recognized classic Chinese novel with a total of 120 chapters and a complex storyline. We appreciate Mr. Wang Xin Peng was able to visualise the story and present it in a ballet performance which was only approximately 150 minutes long.
3. The first two Acts were based on the original story, so the local audiences will find it more familiar. However, it is worth noting that a neo-classical approach was adopted for Act III, which was approximately 30 minutes long.
4. Mr. Wang Xin Peng mentioned in previous media interviews that he wanted to demonstrate the main character Jia Bao Yu’s everlasting love with the female main character Lin Dai Yu through the passage of time. He also mentioned that “(Bao Yu) was feeling extremely painful after Dai Yu passed away,” and “he put Bao Yu on an empty stage in [Act III] so that the latter could meet Dai Yu in dreams. He passed through Qing Dynasty, the Republican era to the contemporary world. However, the changes through times did not change his feeling to Dai Yu. For Bao Yu...everything else is not important except love”. It is worth noting that the projected background and extras in Act III were just part of the elements demonstrating the passage of times.

5. As we look at the reports by the local media criticising us of intervening autonomy of artistic creation, it is important for us to put the criticisms into perspective of the overall performance. Rather than the quality of the ballet itself, the controversies that surfaced were merely attacks on the suspension of the projected background and extras in Act III used to support this magnificent performance, namely:
 - 5.1. A historical video projection on the backdrop which lasted approximately 12 minutes.
 - 5.2. A 45-second appearance by extras.
6. It is important to note that even with the suspension of the video projection on the backdrop and the appearances of the extras, the choreography of the whole ballet remained as originally choreographed by Mr. Wang Xin Peng; and the duration of Act III and the whole ballet production was never changed (i.e. remained at 30 minutes and 150 minutes respectively).
7. Given the complexity of Act III and its loose connection with the previous two acts, Ms. Madeleine Onne, Artistic Director of HKB, suggested adding subtitles to provide assistance to the audience for this new adaptation. Mr. Wang Xin Peng was in agreement to include subtitles, but owing to a number of unforeseeable factors, the subtitles were not ready for the premiere and became one of the “technical issues” referred to by the HKB.
8. With subtitles missing at the premiere, HKB noticed that certain members of the audience expressed confusion over Act III following the premiere. HKB suggested to Mr. Wang Xin Peng that it would be best to suspend the video projection on the backdrop and the 45-second appearance of the extras (whose appearance would only make sense with the video), while keeping all the original choreography for the dancers; until the subtitles were ready.
9. HKB believed at the time that Mr. Wang Xin Peng gave them the blessing to suspend the video. HKB would like to apologise for the misunderstanding and the impact on the two days’ performances when the suspension was in place.

Technical Issues

10. HKB wishes to clarify that the “technical issues” referred to subtitle arrangement, mechanical failure (such as the malfunction of the electric wagon stage, a faulty electric hoist on stage and lighting problems) and the redesign and delayed delivery of certain costumes. As a result of the mechanical failure, HKB lost around 10 hours of rehearsal time which was critical for such a large scale production.
11. For “technical issues”, we did not refer to any technicians. On the contrary, we want to reiterate our gratitude for their continued dedication and professionalism which helped solve technical issues efficiently.

Press Conference and Press Release

12. As the suspension of the background video and extras attracted significant media attention, HKB decided to hold a press conference to explain the issue to the public (on 30 October 2013).
13. On 31 October 2013, HKB also issued a joint press release with Ballet Dortmund announcing that the complete version of the performance would resume on 1 November 2013. The joint press release was drafted, edited and approved by Mr. Tobias Ehinger, Manager of Ballett Dortmund and HKB. HKB highly regards its collaboration with Ballett Dortmund and has always respected and provided the artistic autonomy to Mr. Wang Xin Peng.

C. What this means for the future of Hong Kong Ballet

1. HKB reiterates its continuous support of artistic creation and respect to artistic autonomy. We also understand public concerns on this incident. We will take to heart these lessons learnt and seriously consider all well-intended criticisms and constructive opinions for further improvement.
2. We would also like to show our appreciation to all staff members in HKB for their patience, continuous dedication and support over all these years for having successfully delivered so many beautiful creative performances to the people of Hong Kong.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

Yours sincerely,

For and on behalf of Hong Kong Ballet

Daisy Ho

Chairman of the Board

Encl:

1. Testimonials from choreographers– Ms. Cynthia Harvey, Mr. Fei Bo (Chinese version), Mr. Kinsun Chan, Mr. Peter Quanz and Mr. Terence Kohler, in alphabetical order.
2. Joint press release issued on 31 October 2013

c.c.: Mr. Tsang Tak-sing, Secretary for Home Affairs

To Whom It May Concern:

3 December 2013

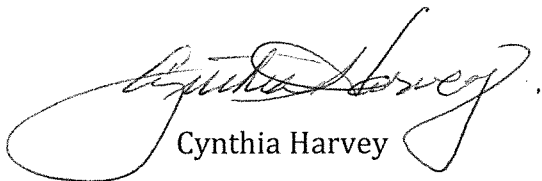
I write this letter to state what a wonderful feeling of harmony and civility exists at The Hong Kong Ballet.

In 2010 I staged »The Sleeping Beauty« for The Hong Kong Ballet, and whilst I found the conditions that the dancers must accept, the lack of rehearsal time on stage and the small wardrobe department to be incomparable to other national companies, the prevailing atmosphere of fairness has been the overriding factor in my desire to return to the company.

Never did I feel pressured to do anything that I didn't want to do. In fact, quite the contrary; I had the full support of the director and the staff in casting the ballet the way I wanted. The only pressure I found came from the outside-from critics who have no place in making comments about casting when indeed the casting is based on many factors and not simply because a dancer happens to be a favorite of said critic.

The internal functioning and fair play isn't something I have found to be as harmonious in other companies for whom I work. I have been freelance teaching and coaching since 2001 and have worked in every continent. In Hong Kong Ballet, I face every day with positivity because I know that the freedom to do as I wish is fully supported. That is not to say that the staff is weak. They do make certain points known - in a fair and knowledgeable manner, but ultimately, the decision resides with the choreographer to fulfill the vision of the ballet.

As a result of my first visit, I have returned a second time and I am very much looking forward to returning again in 2014 to teach these wonderful dancers that Ms. Onne and her staff have nurtured and to witness the varied repertoire and continued success of the Hong Kong Ballet. '



Cynthia Harvey

本人系香港芭蕾舞团委约作品《此时.彼刻》中作品“一间她自己的房间”的编舞费波。

于2011年受團長Madeleine邀請為香港芭蕾舞團創作作品“一間她自己的房間”，期間工作很順利，香港芭蕾舞團給予了我很大的創作空間，沒有給我任何限制，有很強的自由度。演員很配合並且積極的參與創作讓我留下了很美好的回憶。在此也特別感謝團長Madeleine能夠絕對信任我，邀請我。希望未來能夠再有機會合作。

費波

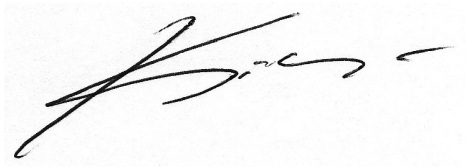
2013年12月1日

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read '費波' (Fei Bo).

2013年12.1日

HONG KONG BALLET | ARTISTIC FREEDOM

Fortunately many of us can take for granted the freedom to express creatively in culture. But take this away and we lose the very essence of the arts. This very voice is what allows society to question and realize itself. Having created with the Hong Kong Ballet, I experienced an arts organization of international caliber who completely supported this truth to the arts but take this away and this worthy cultural ambassador of Hong Kong loses its voice, it's essence, it's soul.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kinsun Chan', written in a fluid, cursive style.

Kinsun Chan
Choreographer

To Whom It May Concern:

December 6, 2013

The Hong Kong Ballet, a company bursting with talent, provided me the opportunity to create and develop a ballet that has been seen by people around the world.

While creating *Luminous*, I was offered a supportive working environment by Artistic Director, Madeleine Onne, and the excellent artistic team that she has assembled. The Hong Kong Ballet gave me the autonomy to reach unrestricted emotional depths in the work and the company has continued to encourage the further evolution of the production. I remain grateful for the rich experience of melding influences of Chinese traditional dancing with classical and contemporary ballet. The dancers and ballet master have remained dedicated to preserving the intent of ballet since its initial staging while simultaneously allowing space for new artists to contribute to the work.

As a company, the Hong Kong Ballet is an organization that delivers the greatest resource that any choreographer could desire - extraordinary artists who are fully committed to the state of their art.

Sincerely,



Peter Quanz
Artistic Director
Q DANCE

Hong Kong December 4th 2013

My name is Terence Kohler and I am an international freelance choreographer.

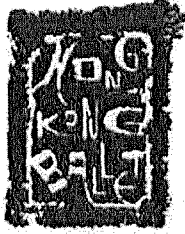
At the premiere of a ballet I had created for the National Ballet of China in 2009, Madeleine Onne invited me to stage a new production of The Nutcracker for the Hong Kong Ballet in 2012. During the three years of development that followed, my artistic team and I were given the creative freedom and trust, not to mention the endless support from both Ms. Onne and the Hong Kong Ballet Board, to realise the production to the best of our ability.

Having worked with many different ballet companies and artistic institutions, I would have to say that the initiative and space that the Hong Kong Ballet allowed my creative team and I to develop The Nutcracker were some of the best conditions in the world. To create the choreography I was given over ten weeks of rehearsal time in the studio with the dancers and the company's board, understanding the needs of realising such a large scaled work, extended their usual production schedule onstage from five days to two weeks. Such investments were not only essential for realising my team's unique vision but also in the best interest of the company and ultimately the creative product that was delivered onstage.

The Hong Kong Ballet understood this and I recommend with complete conviction that the structure the company operates under, more importantly the support Ms. Onne offers her dancers and creative collaborators, nurtures the pursuit of creativity making the company worthy of an international stage.



Terence Kohler
Freelance Choreographer
Munich



香港芭蕾舞團
HONG KONG BALLET



31st October 2013

For Immediate Release

**The Hong Kong Ballet and Ballett Dortmund
Jointly Announce Technical Issues Resolved**

The Hong Kong Ballet and Ballett Dortmund are overwhelmed by the reactions to the performance of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, and would therefore like to take this opportunity to jointly address the concerns raised and clarify any misunderstandings.

First of all, we would like to make it very clear that The Hong Kong Ballet and Ballett Dortmund are long term and true partners and collaborators in this production. We share the same passion in supporting and promoting artistic creativity in the ballet form.

The Artistic Director of The Hong Kong Ballet, Ms. Madeleine Onne had to make a series of decisions, supported by choreographer Mr. Wang, to address the detracting technical issues she encountered during the first three days of the performance. Due to serious on-stage technical problems with the intended subtitles and their composition between video projection, set and extras, Ms. Onne needed to decide to temporarily remove the video projection and extras in matinee and evening performances on the 26th and the 27th of October. Mr. Wang agreed with Ms. Onne's decision for the temporary removal, with the understanding that the subtitles, video projection and extras would be reinstalled as soon as the technical issues are resolved. With a few performance-free days, Ms. Onne has had time to rectify the technical problems and we are excited to announce that the original version (with subtitles, video projection and extras) of the performance will be presented to our audience on the 1st of November (Friday).

We hope that everyone will refocus their attention on the artistic performance after this open dialogue. We welcome everybody to watch the show.

Thank you.