

Sky's the limit for Asia's whirl city

Hi-tech music, dragons and spacemen bring fast-paced Hong Kong to life, writes Joyce Hor-Chung Lau

Apes dancing over the Central skyline, spacemen singing karaoke, a dragon hurtling through the sky to an electronic soundtrack – this is Hong Kong, or rather, 2004: *A Hong Kong Odyssey*.

The production falls somewhere "between being in a dance club, watching a 3-D IMAX film and being inside a video game", says Mathias Woo, director of experimental theatre group Zuni Icosahedron's futuristic work.

The trick is that, during much of this performance, the stage will be empty. Most of what the audience will see are 3-D digital images created by techies John Wong and Pong Lam, along with Professor Tanja Diezmann and Tobias Gremmler of Berlin-based digital design firm pReview. Sitting in the back of the theatre with their laptops, they will manipulate their holographic visions in real time, much the way DJs manipulate electronic sounds.

pReview is working with 15 local artists in this cutting-edge performance, which tries to capture Hong Kong's unique and ever-changing identity. Work started when Woo and a team of six went out with camcorders and digital cameras to record daily Hong Kong life.

"Hong Kong is a very visually driven city," says Woo. "We wanted to capture what we saw every day. Much of the footage is in the dramatic spaces in between buildings, in small streets and alleyways. Some of it is of Kowloon's old neighbourhoods. Other parts show neon signs and the skyline. Sometimes, I think Hong Kong is the physically brightest city in the world."

The team decided that a multimedia approach, with some wacky touches, would better suit tech-crazy, fast-paced Hong Kong than a conventional documentary film. "Hong Kong is never the same from one second to the next," says Diezmann. "And we wanted to use 3-D digital imagery, which we can change and morph at will, to reflect this. It's high frequency – so big, so high, so many people, so crowded, so much happening on the street."

Woo and his team also collected sound bites of Hong Kong street noise, which will be reinterpreted into music by singer Ellen Joyce Loo, electronic musicians Diglick and Pixeltoy,

Canto-pop composers Jason Choi and Yu Yat-yiu, and local bands Gayamyan and Square Fruit. "Even the sounds, the noises you hear are multilayered," says Woo. "Our street noise also reflects Hong Kong's character and unique situation."

The idea for the production came from an earlier project, 2001: *A Hong Kong Odyssey*, based loosely on the 1968 Stanley Kubrick film, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. While the 2004 version explores the same basic themes and uses some of the same images – for example, of monkeys running around the city – it's different.

First of all, the technology is more sophisticated. "In 2001, we were manipulating flat images, and now we are working with interactive 3-D images," says Diezmann. She says this reflects a general trend in multimedia performances. "In the past, the audio-video segments of performances were always pre-recorded and someone would just hit 'play'. This new technology gives us the opportunity to let the media be the actor. Our technology can react in real time to the other media, music, video or visual art, provided by the other artists."

"Hong Kong has changed, too, in the past three years," says Woo. "And we want our new performance to reflect this. People are more politically aware after July 1. Even the skyline has changed. Three years ago, there was no IFC2. That's Hong Kong. We build, we deconstruct, we build, we deconstruct. Our desire to change is so intense."

Woo says he's not concerned the abstract performance might go over people's heads. The audience will be helped along by an introduction and explanation before the show, hosted by actress Kate Yeung (last seen in Sylvia Chang's *20:30:40*) and dancer Dick Wong. "They'll explain the concept to the audience, and I'm sure they will get it," says Wong. "It's just like a tech manual. You have to read it before you understand how to operate your new mobile phone. People here will understand."

2004: *A Hong Kong Odyssey*.
Thur-Sat, May 13-15, 8pm, also
Sun, 5pm. Kwai Tsing Theatre, \$110,
\$180, \$240 Urbix. Inquiries: 2734 9008



An image from Zuni Icosahedron's futuristic homage to Hong Kong