

LCQ20: Performance venues for Cantonese opera

Following is a question by the Hon Choy So-yuk and a written reply by the Secretary for Education and Manpower, Professor Arthur Li, on behalf of the Secretary for Home Affairs, Dr Patrick Ho, in the Legislative Council today (May 24):

Question:

It has been reported that so far the property owner of the Sunbeam Theatre in North Point has only agreed to extend its tenancy agreement to August 2009. The Cantonese opera sector will then face the problem of lacking a permanent performance venue. Regarding assistance to facilitate the development of Cantonese opera, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) of its specific plan to help the Cantonese opera sector solve the problem of lacking a permanent performance venue; and

(b) whether it will adopt the recommendation of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, which represents the Cantonese opera sector, to build, on the cleared site of the former North Point Estate, a standard theatre for use as a permanent performance venue for Cantonese opera; if it will, of the details; and if not, how to ensure the passing on and development of the local Cantonese opera?

Reply:

Madam President,

At present, Cantonese opera performances take place at various venues in Hong Kong. Every year, there are on average 300 opera performances at the Sunbeam Theatre in North Point. These include different forms of operatic performances and singing. Cantonese opera performances account for a majority of these bookings. Apart from the Sunbeam Theatre, Cantonese opera performances are regularly staged in performing arts venues managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). They may take the form of bookings by the professional companies or

presentations by LCSD. There were 364 such presentations in 2002-03, 373 in 2003-04 and 385 in 2004-05. From time to time, other non-government venues such as the facilities of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts are hired for Cantonese opera performances.

The Government attaches importance to the development of Cantonese opera as a traditional performing art form in Hong Kong and is fully aware of the concerns of the Cantonese opera sector over the shortage of suitable performance venues, particularly when the Sunbeam Theatre is no longer available.

Regarding part (a) of the question, we have been working closely with the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee, set up in May 2004 and the Cantonese opera sector, on how best to address the sector's need for performance venues. Short- to medium-term measures in the pipeline include special booking arrangements at various LCSD venues to suit the needs of Cantonese opera performances and improvements to the Ko Shan Theatre where Cantonese opera performances have the highest booking rate amongst other LCSD performing venues so as to make it a performance venue more suited to the requirements of Cantonese opera.

The special booking arrangements tailored to the needs of Cantonese opera performances comprise the following measures -

- * Priority booking of Ko Shan Theatre - Booking for full-script Cantonese opera performances is accorded high priority in Ko Shan Theatre throughout the year. Applications can be made as early as from 12 to eight months in advance ahead of booking by other performances which are only accepted seven months in advance;
- * Reservation of the auditoriums at Sha Tin Town Hall, Tsuen Wan Town Hall, Kwai Tsing Theatre, Tuen Mun Town Hall and Yuen Long Theatre for Cantonese opera performances for the first 15 days of Lunar New Year;
- * Reservation of Ko Shan Theatre for Cantonese opera performances for the first 14 days of Lunar New Year;
- * Reservation of the concert halls of Hong Kong Cultural Centre and City Hall for full-script Cantonese opera performances for Lunar New Year eve and the first five days of Lunar New Year;

* For all Lunar New Year bookings, they can be made by the Cantonese opera sector as early as 24 months in advance;

* Full-script Cantonese opera performances are given priority in booking for the month of September at Sha Tin Town Hall, Tsuen Wan Town Hall, Kwai Tsing Theatre, Tuen Mun Town Hall and Yuen Long Theatre 12 months in advance. This is earlier than the normal seven months' advance booking arrangement for other users;

* Long-running performances have priority in booking LCSD venues. The Cantonese opera performances should be able to benefit from this arrangement;

Improvements to Ko Shan Theatre aim at making this venue more suited to the operational requirements of Cantonese opera performances. Works include -

* Lighting improvement for access road to the Theatre (already completed);

* Dressing room facilities improvement (already completed);

* Sound system improvement (already completed);

* Additional cubicles for female toilets (in progress, expected completion before end 2006);

* Providing a covered loading and unloading bay for props (in progress, expected completion in 2007);

* Providing a covered walkway to facilitate pedestrian access (in progress, under consultation with the Kowloon City District Council);

We are consulting various parties concerned on a plan to construct an Annex Building to Ko Shan Theatre which will provide a 600-seat auditorium and multi-purpose rooms suitable for Cantonese opera training and performance. This plan is however subject to resource allocation according to established procedures.

Regarding part (b) of the question, according to the existing Outline Zoning Plan for the North Point Estate, it is zoned Residential (Group A). According to the notes of the Plan, a performance venue may require a submission to the Town Planning Board. At this stage, we have no intention to make a submission to the Town

Planning Board as the subject site is under land use review.

To address the sector's concern for a centrally located performance venue after the expiry of the lease for the Sunbeam Theatre, we are actively studying how to introduce an even more flexible booking policy at selected centrally located LCSD venues. We shall consult the Cantonese opera sector, in particular, the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, in due course.

As for the longer term development, we would look to the sector to give us their views by making full use of the West Kowloon Cultural District consultative machinery, namely the Consultative Committee on the Core Arts and Cultural Facilities of the West Kowloon Cultural District, the Performing Arts and Tourism Advisory Group (PATAG), and the focus group meetings for the Cantonese opera sector organised by PATAG.

We wish to add that the preservation and development of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong is not just a matter of performance venues. In consultation with the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee, we are undertaking other measures to achieve this objective, namely-

- * Setting up of the Cantonese Opera Development Fund. The Fund has supported a first batch of 18 projects to support Cantonese opera training, promotion and performance as well publication of materials related to the sector;
- * LCSD's regular presentation of Cantonese opera performance programmes, and organisation of seminars and workshops;
- * LCSD's organisation of the District Cantonese Opera Parade;
- * LCSD's invitation of amateur Cantonese opera companies to participate in audience building schemes, such as the Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme, the Programme Partnership Scheme and the School Culture Day;
- *Earmarking the last Sunday of November as Cantonese Opera Day in conjunction with Guangdong and Macau to promote the art form through large scale performances in the three places;
- *Supporting small Cantonese opera companies through the one-year grantee scheme

and various project grants of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council; and

*Diploma programmes offered by the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts to provide systematic training in an academy context to complement the traditional form of apprentice training.

Ends/Wednesday, May 24, 2006

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