

# Passion & Prejudice

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## The highs and lows of staging new drama in Hong Kong

Talking to Henry Coombs, founder of Amphora Theatre Company and Marsha Roddy, set designer of Amphora's first production, *The Marriage Bed*, one thing is blindingly clear – the pair are passionate about live theatre.

'The thing about live theatre is that there is nothing like it. When it is good, it is magic and it'll never be the same again – and that's what's so wonderful. That moment, that night, your energy as an audience and theirs as performers will never be the same,' enthuses Roddy.

She then relays a charming anecdote about the child of a friend who came to see one of her shows. 'He was crying after it and I was asking "Oh no, what's wrong?" It was because he wanted to see it again because

he was so used to videos and watching things over and over again and with theatre, he couldn't! That's what I love about theatre – there's your magic.'

Coombs and Roddy promise this kind of fleeting theatrical magic by the bucket-load with *The Marriage Bed*, a play written by and starring Nona Shepphard, the associate director of London's world-famous Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. The play is an intimate two-hander about a couple's momentous decision over whether or not to get married, with 'the magic' all occurring from within their bed ('a stage within a stage' says Roddy).

Even if you caught the productions in London or New York, where it premiered in 2006 and enjoyed huge success, the Hong Kong show will be a new and unique experience as the larger HKAPA Drama Theatre is an entirely different performance space to its studio predecessors. Roddy, who as the designer of those original productions ('the show has followed me round!') was able to adapt it to its new environment, reasons that 'it will have a different feel but when it is written so well, it works on both an intimate level and a grander level.'

Roddy's very presence is proof that it was almost written in the stars for Coombs to stage *The Marriage Bed* in Hong Kong. Having watched and been enthralled by the play in London, he was determined to bring it here but was unable to secure a performance space in 2007. This year, he discovered that Roddy had actually relocated to Hong Kong – 'all the signs were to go for it... having Marsha here has been the icing on the cake,' he says.

Coombs set up Amphora Theatre Company to plug the gap that he perceived for 'smaller, interesting, professional quality productions that are new and original' in Hong Kong. But starting with *The Marriage Bed* may well prove to be a controversial and topical choice because the couple that the play revolves around are lesbians and civil partnerships are as-yet unknown in Hong Kong – indeed, while recognition is increasing globally, in the USA, only two out of fifty states recognise same-sex unions and a third, California is currently, controversially, in the state of revoking these laws.

'Of course, I am concerned that people are going to be put off by thinking that it's gay theatre – you can't avoid the fact that the two characters are lesbians but that's just the story. It's just brilliant theatre and I hope people have the courage to give it a chance and not be put off by the subject matter. It is appealing because it is about human issues, indecision, fickleness – everyone goes through the same indecision when you've been in a relationship for

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Henry Coombs  
founder of  
Amphora  
Theatre Company

Marsha Roddy  
designer of  
*The Marriage Bed*



some time,' Coombs explains. 'In fact, I'm hoping that we may gain interest from that [topical] perspective. I was worried that it would be construed as a gay play for gays and I was thinking of ways to try to hide it but Marsha said, "There's no point, why not capitalize on it?"' Sheppard herself has said 'I think many people – straight and gay alike – will recognise themselves, their own fears, in these characters. It's a good time to be talking about this.'

Roddy elaborates: 'It's very accessible theatre since it is about the challenges in a relationship; suddenly something legal comes in and makes you reassess everything. It will touch you, stir you, give you an experience, an emotional journey – and how often do you really get that? It is very funny as well and because the humour is about relationships, it is universal.'

Even without the lesbian angle, the challenges of staging new drama in Hong Kong remain, says Coombs. 'This is the frustrating thing – Hong Kong audiences can be quite conservative, quite fickle and if it's something that they don't know, they don't seem that interested to go and check it out. I think that's quite sad, especially in contrast to the UK where there is so much theatre going on whereas here, we only ever get, apart from the amateur stuff, primarily well-known plays that can be banked on. But there is a market for productions to be brought here that aren't your West End/Broadway mainstream theatre that everyone has heard of but are off-the-wall, cutting-edge, new interesting plays that we need to give a chance to. That's my goal with Amphora – to go and seek out really good new theatre'.

In what seems to be a running concern with almost everyone that I meet in the arts, Coombs and Roddy lament a lack of funding. 'If you think of places in the UK, they have subsidies so [theatre companies] don't have that commercial thing of needing to make money,' Roddy explains. 'That's why things keep coming here rather than growing from within – there's a lot of talent here but it needs some support.'

Coombs points out that although Hong Kong is promoted as an arts and cultural as much as a financial hub, it is difficult for performers, unless touting a bankable production, to find either government or corporate sponsors. 'But we need audiences to be supportive and come see new plays; if no-one goes, then it's not going to work. It's a Catch-22 situation – people can't complain if they don't go see them.'

Which is why so much is at stake with Amphora's first production. Coombs wishes to create a reputation for consistency in staging quality theatre so that audiences will develop faith in what he is doing. He hopes that keeping 'a regular rollover of good stuff coming in will improve the scene dramatically'. Since the name Amphora comes from the double-handled vases of Ancient Greece (historic and spiritual home of theatre), the company hopes to literally become 'carriers' of quality, handpicked theatre from both sides of the world.

Coombs firmly believes *The Marriage Bed* is the right play to start the ball rolling. 'I don't think anyone could not enjoy it,' he declares. 'Once audiences come out and give it a chance, they won't be disappointed – it's a guarantee'.

*The Marriage Bed* runs at the HKAPA Drama Theatre from 21-24 January at 8pm. Tickets cost \$490, \$390 or \$290 from [www.hkticketing.com](http://www.hkticketing.com), 31 288 288.

