

Arts Education Matters  
~ Shanghai Grand Theater~

Talking about arts education in China twenty or thirty years ago, what to expect was probably eager parents sending their kids to piano, violin or ballet lessons. Arts education used to engage arts students as their only target audience; however, the situation has changed significantly in the past decade. International cultural organizations such as the British Council and Institut français have been playing a crucial role in cultivating and changing people's perception about arts education through various projects partnering with local Chinese arts organizations – Shanghai Grand Theater (SGT) is one of them.

Established in 1998 and located right at the city center of Shanghai, SGT is the very first performing arts venue of its scale across China. It houses three theaters of around 1600, 550 and 220 seats respectively. As stated in its mission, SGT endeavors to present first-class productions and provide first-class arts experience as well as arts education. The key words for their programming are international, high quality, creative and original. Many internationally acclaimed orchestras, theater/dance companies have performed in SGT, Berliner Philharmoniker, Mariinsky Ballet, Royal Shakespeare Company, just to name a few. In addition, SGT also actively presents the Chinese performing arts, traditional or contemporary. Along with its performance seasons, **Arts Class**, featuring a series of performing arts themed lectures, is its major all year education and outreach program.

Started in 2005, SGT's Arts Class is one of the longest running arts education and outreach programs in China. From 2005 to 2009, Arts Class was managed and operated by the programs department. In 2009, a brand new department dedicated to arts education was set up to produce and present Arts Class along with other arts education related initiatives. "Arts education has become one of our core businesses. We will be allocating more resources and efforts to arts education to benefit the public," said Mr. ZHANG Zhe, president of SGT. "Education is an important function of theaters. Our audience comes from diverse background and different people have different understanding about arts. How to make arts an

indispensable part to people's life and basically to bring more people into our theater? Arts education might be the answer." Zhang added.

In addition to the classic Arts Class, two more series have been created, which are **SGT Access** and **SGT Plus** so as to create more access for the general public to the theater. SGT Access highlights shows and concerts that are under RMB80 (USD12) and SGT Plus presents special public facing events such as Open Day on a regular basis. The aim, like president Zhang mentioned, is to let arts become part of people's life.

The Arts Class series this year embraces a diverse program covering different performing arts genres such as classical music, theater, opera and dance. Most of the lectures are held inside the theater but sometimes there are also workshops conducted externally, for example at local high schools. The 2016 series highlight five themes altogether:

- Classical music and paintings – 12 monthly lectures throughout 2016 featuring themes such as portrait, currency, architecture, cemetery, poster, manuscript, stamp and etc., and furthermore explore the relationship between classical music and paintings focusing on these themes.
- Shakespeare – 2016 marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death and this series of bilingual lectures are to cover masterpieces such as *Henry V*, *Henry VI*, *The Taming the Shrew*, *Richard III*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Twelfth Night* and etc.
- Early western opera – based on the success of the Western Opera of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in 2015, this new series focusing on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, is to introduce major styles, figures and works of the early western opera. The theme next year is planned to feature contemporary operas from the 20<sup>th</sup> century so as to present to the audience a holistic picture of how opera evolves in the past hundreds of years.
- Pre-concert talks with Professor Tao – Professor TAO Xin is a classical music specialist from Shanghai Conservatory of Music. His talks are

based on SGT's concert programs in 2016 to give audience a better understanding of the pieces themselves.

- The world of ballet – the lectures about how to become a star ballerina, introduction of international ballet competition, ballet and Shakespeare and etc.

In terms of ticketing, different from single ticket sales, Arts Class adopts the method of selling two subscriptions a year, the first half and the latter half. For example, the first subscription of 2016 includes 20 lectures, each costing RMB10 (USD \$1.5) and totaling RMB200 (USD \$30). Because of its popularity, every one can purchase maximum two sets of tickets. For the choice of venue, except for the pre-concert talks that are held at the multi-functional hall, all the other lectures are hosted at the 550-seat theater. Marketing is conducted through various channels. In addition to traditional program catalogues, SGT is active in utilizing social media platforms to engage young audience through WeChat (China's No.1 social media app, Chinese equivalent of Facebook), Weibo (Chinese equivalent of Twitter) and etc.

What's worth mentioning about SGT's arts education is not only the interaction between arts education and the major lineup which is the traditional practice frequently seen in other organizations, but also the interaction between its own arts education series, for example the Arts Class and SGT Plus (Open Day). In order to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 2016, SGT Plus presents four themed Open Day events in the four seasons of 2016 respectively. The first Open Day titled *To Be Or Not To Be – The Hamlet Weekend* took place on the weekend of February 20. During the two days, more than 7,000 people showed up in various events such as the Arts Class, Creative Market, Shakespeare theater workshop, and even sword training class. Open Day is free for the same day ticket holders or is available at a modest cost at RMB10 (USD \$1.5) for the general public. The Open Day is a newly created initiative that is centered on the existing Arts Class programs combining some other participatory events. This kind of practice is not only cost/labor effective but also creates a larger impact among both participants and media.

In short, the arts education in China, major cities like Shanghai and Beijing in particular, has witnessed a substantial progress in recent years. As mentioned earlier, arts education is all about people's perception about the arts – whether it is a mere privilege reserved for a small group of people or it is actually for everyone to enjoy and is part of everyone's daily life. Arts education is a long and fun journey for everyone, from arts administrators to senior management, artists to audience to co-explore and experience.

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