



# THE PEOPLE SPEAK: A REMARKABLE MOMENT IN 100% HONG KONG

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*Preface: Twice delayed, 100% Hong Kong hit the stage in a remarkable moment of theatre that tapped into the heart of what makes this city so special.*

Text by Molly Grogan for [Zolima CityMag](#) – Link to article [here](#)  
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Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure postulated that language is a site of political struggle: words acquire meaning in relation to other words, not simply from what they represent in the world. So what does anything mean today when linked to the apparently loaded signifier of “Hong Kong”? And what is safe to say about it? Those questions are at the heart of *100% Hong Kong*, a live stage production in which 100 residents answered a series of polls about their beliefs, habits and lifestyle as Hongkongers. Created by the Berlin-based performance collective [Rimini Protokoll](#) with Hong Kong’s [On & On Theatre Workshop](#), the long anticipated production finished a brief run at the [Xiqu Centre in October](#), nearly two years after its premiere at West Kowloon’s Freespace was cancelled in December 2019 – a piece of Hong Kong trivia that is itself too meaningful to need explanation.

What defines a Hongkonger in 2021? Is it knowing the lyrics to “Hei Hei Yeung Yeung” (hei2 hei3 joeng4 joeng4 喜气洋洋)? Being able to argue the pros and cons of the Lantau Tomorrow Vision? Having experienced tear gas? Questions like these were posed to the cast of *100% Hong Kong*, which consisted of regular people from across the city and all walks of life: teachers, social workers, clerks, civil servants, housewives, entrepreneurs, students, pastors, retirees, a district councillor and even small children. As they reacted to the queries, new meanings accrued in a chain reaction, a bit like the one envisioned by Saussure, where each question and its responses build on those that came before. The result was a highly textured and nuanced portrait of the 7,394,700 Hongkongers these citizen performers represented.



*The cast of 100% Hong Kong poses for the audience to take photos – Photo by Ray@TR Concept and Visual Atelie*

“Represented” is not meant in the abstract here: every individual among the 100 carried the same demographical data as 73,947 other residents, based on five measurements: age, gender, ethnicity, type of housing and region of residence. How this is so was explained in the show’s opener by Robert Chung Ting-yiu, who introduced himself as the founder and executive director of the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute and a fascinated observer of his city. In essence, every person who took the stage is a microcosm of Hong Kong’s demographics. For example, reflecting the fact that 92 percent of Hongkongers are ethnically Chinese and eight percent are from other ethnic groups, 92 of the 100 participants were Chinese, two Filipino, two Caucasian and four South Asian, in keeping with current census data. Similarly, 25 cast members live in public housing, 16 in subsidised ownership housing, 54 in private homes and one in temporary lodgings, because those are Hong Kong’s current housing percentages.

Participants are identified through what statisticians call snowball sampling. The process starts with a single individual who has his or her particular profile of data points. (For example, Chung is for statistical purposes categorised as male, over 60, Chinese, and living in privately-owned housing on Hong Kong Island.) That person then suggests another person who carries another combination of data points, who suggests another, and so on until all of the categories are exhausted. Inevitably, putting the cast together this way required some creative problem-solving – or perhaps just dumb luck. The production’s two indefatigable researchers, Miu Law and Lai Sim-fong, located the 100th participant just days before the premiere, when it was discovered that the father of a four-year old boy already in the cast matched five remaining criteria.

This kind of fine-grained data is not only the concern of demographers and sociologists. It is also the bread and butter of Rimini Protokoll, which has been pioneering what is variously described as applied theatre, documentary theatre or theatre of the real, for two decades. Their prodigious body of work includes stage performances, performative installations and audio plays where the audience are also performers and the stages can be city streets, museums, abandoned government buildings, a phone call or even an annual shareholders meeting.



From left to right – clockwise

Pic 1. Remembering a cast member who passed away- Photo by Ray@ TR Concept and Visual Atelier

Pic 2. Questions projected on a prompter help the cast deliver their lines - Photo by Winnie Yeung@visual Voices, courtesy WKCD

Pic 3. Participants show where they live on a map of Hong Kong. Photo courtesy WKCD

The group's three founders, Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi and Daniel Wetzel, conduct exhaustive research on whatever subject is in their laser focus—labor outsourcing, artificial intelligence, utopian states, the international arms trade, social taboos—and then cast non-actors and non-experts to tell those stories. They have described their concerns as an exploration not to uncover facts but rather “atmospheres,” and their work has been internationally praised for “[staking] a claim for the particular, concrete person and against the politically generalised,” according to German dramaturge Florian Malzacher, who has written extensively about the company.

*100% Hong Kong* is the 41st iteration of *100% City*, a globetrotting project that has been teasing out how identities are shaped by place and how urban communities define themselves. The first ever *100%* premiered as an experiment at Berlin's Hebbel Theater in 2008 and immediately attracted attention. Succeeding shows have provided a glimpse into what life is like on the ground in places from Stellenbosch, Marseille and Vancouver to Yogyakarta, São Paulo, Brisbane and Kaohsiung.

The seeds of *100% Hong Kong* germinated in Singapore, when Low Kee-hong, who was then the artistic director of the Singapore Arts Festival, invited Rimini Protokoll to create *Cargo Singapore*. That show, which plays on the ubiquitous double-decker tourist bus found in cities like London and New York, shines a light on the overlooked streets and workers of major urban centres by exploring docklands and industrial zones from a glass-walled semi-trailer truck.

After becoming the head of the West Kowloon Cultural District's theatre division, Low invited Rimini Protokoll's Stefan Kaegi to collaborate with On & On's Artistic Director, Chan Ping-chiu, during the 2015 International Workshop Festival of Theatre. The three soon made plans to bring *100%* to Hong Kong, but the 2019 protests and the pandemic got in the way. When Low saw an opening in the Xiqu Centre's calendar for late 2021, he seized on it, even though only one Rimini Protokoll member, Daniel Wetzel, could be present.

But the timing was right. “We would not have stopped [even] if it was impossible for anybody to enter the city,” says Wetzel, who worked remotely in a two-week quarantine before joining his teammates. “It would have been a different process [but] everybody was ready to play. How can you say, ‘Let's not do it' just because some Germans can't come?”

The reasons for Low and Chan to bring “100%” to Hong Kong were more personal. “The extraordinary structure and the nature of the show, I think for me it is a very special chance for Hong Kong to introduce this kind of perspective on making theatre,” says Chan, who praises the “authenticity” of Rimini Protokoll's methods. For Low, “This is a show for us to really process and think and to reflect,” he says.



Low Kee-hong, Daniel Wetzel, Chan Ping-chiu, Lai Sim-fong, Miu Law – Photo by Winnie Yeung@Visual Voices, courtesy WKCD

Every 100% City adopts a similar format: brief introductions by the participants, followed by a series of creative polls on topics that test people's intimate experiences ("Do you know a victim of domestic violence?"), civic behaviours ("Have you ever cheated on your taxes?"), far-flung ideas ("Do you believe in aliens?"), exposure to current events ("Did you lose your job during the pandemic?"), financial health ("How much do you spend on rent or a mortgage?") and everything in between. Questions about local preferences and issues are crafted from extensive interviews with the cast, a process that Rimini Protokoll handles with enormous care not only for the 100% series but for all of its works that ask ordinary people to perform as themselves. The goal is to create a text that is as authentic as possible for the person delivering it.

The audience also gets a say, either by responding to questions posed by the cast or during an open mic session – although the latter was deemed too risky for Hong Kong, given the current political situation. At the two performances I attended, an overwhelming majority of the audience indicated by a show of hands that they believed the show's text had been censored. Wetzel insists there was "no censorship" in an official manner, saying that while the text changed from day to day right up until the premiere, he was surprised by how comfortable performers felt even with sensitive questions. "When you are in the [theatre] space with other people, something flows that builds confidence," he says. "The level of sensitivity tends to be lower than you think."

And politically risky questions such as "Who misses Apple Daily?" were asked in a segment—one shared with every 100% production—where the stage lights were dimmed and participants voted by shining their phone lights. Judging by the burst of beams that shot out from the darkness, the answer was a resounding yes. Their response launched a cathartic cascade of cheers from the audience.

As the team's sole outsider, Wetzel brings a unique perspective to the issue of freedom of expression in Hong Kong today. In this "really very specific walking-on-a-line moment here," he says, he has seen for himself that "there is quite a distinction between how the population defines itself and how the rules, regulations and laws are that are made for this population." He likens the situation to two boats travelling in different directions.

He says "maybe it's unfair" to describe the situation as dystopian because he trusts Hong Kong will be able to maintain what makes the city special. "So we just say, we get together, we can ask this, and we can celebrate to a certain extent that people exchange and also perform the diverse viewpoints that they have, and it's really important just on the simple levels of respect and trust that diversity is okay." But he also draws a firm line about what should be considered a baseline of free expression. "It's not dangerous to think anything," he says. "A diverse opinion is not dangerous and if you are pro this, pro that, this is not terrorist."

Conflicts inevitably emerged from 100 people expressing their opinions on a wide spectrum of issues. And big personalities couldn't resist stealing the spotlight. The 100% format includes time for improv, competitions and dancing, and Hongkongers who probably never dreamed they would one day perform to a sold-out audience in the Grand Theatre of the Xiqu Centre clearly took joy in hamming it up for the audience.

In one extended scene where participants are asked to pantomime their usual activities at different hours of the day, the scholarly Chung raced around the stage with arms flailing as if swimming laps, frowning children mimed desperate refusals to go to bed, and a group of men gathered around a whisky bottle, providing boisterous clues that they typically spend the hours of 10pm to 3am prowling Lan Kwai Fong. The second performance saw one cast member pointedly give the finger to another in full view of the audience: a "scandal," Wetzel explains almost apologetically, resulting from opposing positions on the Lantau Tomorrow Vision project. He dryly notes the level of engagement on stage. "In some cultures, it's just a bit more stiff, and apparently Hong Kong is not."

After one rehearsal, performers discussed how they felt about their novel experience. Two high school students of Nepalese and Pakistani heritage, Gurung and Shary, said they felt “amazing” and that the experience helped them make friends and learn more Cantonese. Three women who described themselves as “almost 60 years old” said the process was “exciting” and were grateful that it reintroduced them to old friends, apparently through a caprice of the snowball sampling.

One of the youngest members of the cast, Jodi, age six, was waiting with her father, Patrick, to go home after a long day, but both were eager to share. Jodi described herself as “happy and sleepy,” and Patrick filled in that she recently told him she finally understands what statistics are. For his part, Patrick was impressed that the show was coming together after so many postponements. “It’s a miracle we can still continue,” he said, venturing that in 2021 the show would have “a lot more impact” than if it had been performed earlier.



*From left to right – clockwise*

*Pic 1. A conga dance seen from an overhead camera - Photo by Ray@TR Concept and Visual Atelier*

*Pic.2 "life is like a game of Roulette - Photo by Ray@TR Concept and Visual Atelier, courtesy WKCDA*

*Pic. 3 The sold-out audience at "100% Hong Kong" takes photos of the cast - Photo by Daniel Wetzel*

It’s nearly impossible to compare *100% Hong Kong* in 2021 and the production that might have been in 2019. But a single statistic expresses a profound change in Hong Kong in the ensuing two years: of the 100 people cast in 2019, 50 of them were no longer available to do the show in 2021, for a variety of reasons owing to the pandemic, emigration and personal commitments, while one elderly cast member passed away. “The stories reflect our history,” said another participant, Ah Hei. Even the silent ones, one might venture.

Wetzel, Low and Chan all gave reasons to believe in a more generous, less conflictual future, where theatre can challenge assumptions and make room for dialogue. After 13 years of traveling with the 100% series, Wetzel shares his takeaway. "It's striking how often you meet somebody kind of similar no matter where you are in the world," he says. There are women "who survive it all and whose message is 'I do positive; I love everyday.' This is something that you basically can find around the world."

Chan says the thing that makes him proudest is that "[participants] have found a way to reach one another and listen to something that maybe two years ago, they wouldn't have the patience to." He also predicts that Rimini Protokoll's radical experimentation "will bring a really strong impact for the art scenes and also break the border between the so-called community art and serious art."

Low hammers home those sentiments. "In moments of conflict, you can find moments of harmony, and moments [where] I understand that you are different from me," he says. "We don't have to agree but I know that you exist and you know I exist. This is for me the magic of this piece and why, in my entire career, I insist on this, I fight for this because nobody else out there is interested in tending this space."

*100% Hong Kong* was live on stage for just 300 minutes. But in that time, you could almost feel a collective sigh that went deep into the neglected recesses of its 7,394,700 imaginations.