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# STAGE REVIVAL

One of Hong Kong's most revered actors, **Tony Leung Ka-fai** returns to the stage this fortnight in the highly anticipated, sold out drama *Tonnochy*. And as he prepares for his fourth theatrical production, the seasoned film star tells Arthur Tam about how the stage brings out the best in him. Photography by Calvin Sit. Art Direction by Jeroen Brulez. Special thanks to Le Boudoir



**C**omposed, confident and debonair are just a few words to describe one of Hong Kong's greatest actors, Tony Leung Ka-fai. Having been in the film industry for over 30 years and with more than 135 movies under his belt, he is truly 'the' actor's actor. His alluring charisma, presence and exceptional command on screen are undeniable – all qualities that have combined to see him win three Best Actor awards over three decades – 1983's *Reign Behind a Curtain*, 1992's *The Legendary la Rose Noire* and 2005's *Election*.

Yet, to think of the now 56-year-old as solely a screen star would be limiting. Ever since he debuted on stage in 1987's *Mischievous Love Birds*, Leung has proved that his talents translate just as well live, so much so that he attracted the attention of the godfather of stage directors, Frederick Mao Chun-fai, to star in his 2002's *Red Boat* and the immensely popular 2005's *Love in the Fallen City*, which took Leung to Broadway.

Now, Leung is busy preparing for his fourth theatre role, in the 70s set drama, *Tonnochy*, playing a savvy banker, opposite a dynamic cast of Carina Lau Kar-ling and Gardner Tse Kwan-ho, who get wrapped up in a complicated web of romance and deception at the once popular, thriving and iconic Tonnochy nightclub. ▶

## I FEEL LIKE THE STAGE GIVES MORE TO ME THAN I GIVE TO THE STAGE

Indeed, *Tonnochy*, since it was announced several months ago, has become the utmost-hyped, most sought-after ticket in town. Even before the start of rehearsals, tickets for the 20 shows running from July to September sold out, making it the highest profile play of the year. Six additional shows were recently announced, with dates yet to be confirmed.

This excitement has rubbed off on Leung as well, and as he sits in the retro French confines of Le Boudoir, the actor extraordinaire expresses delight at the interest this homegrown, original story has generated with audiences. Indeed, for Leung, *Tonnochy* represents what could well be the future for Hong Kong theatre...

**Hey Tony, thanks for sitting down with us. You must be excited about the response for *Tonnochy*. Why do you think there has been such a buzz? Is it because of the story?**

Yes, I am very excited and, no, it's not because of the story. We sold out the first batch of shows even before we had a chance to see the script. All we knew was the title, *Tonnochy*. At first, like most people, we thought the story would focus around the nightclub, but it really has very little to do with the actual club. *Tonnochy* is just the setting that allows the characters to meet up for their business dealings. I would say that *Tonnochy* is like a Chinese version of *The Wolf of Wall Street*. *The Wolf of Wall Street* had nothing to really do with Wall Street, it had more to do with the drama and stories of the characters.

I think the big response is due to the cast. Gardener Tse Kwan-ho is already deemed as the prince of the stage—there is almost no one better than him. And, of course, the return of Carina Lau Kar-ling to the stage has also drawn a lot of attention. Finally, there is director Fredric Mao. Even if you've never seen a stage play in Hong Kong, you would have heard of his name.

**Do you think there is a historical significance to *Tonnochy*'s storyline, though?**

Yes, especially in relation to the economy. Back then, everyone was involved in the stock market, even the street sweeps. The whole society



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was mad about buying and investing into real estate. It is the period of time that turned Hong Kong into a major financial trading hub and a lot of deals went on inside *Tonnochy*. So we look back and we are able to compare how circumstances are now. With *Tonnochy* we get to actually experience a nostalgia of a forgotten traditional Hong Kong, which is something truly special. The 70s was such an important commercial period for Hong Kong.

**It's been eight years since your last collaboration with Mao. Can you describe how your relationship has evolved this time around?**

This is my third time working with

Sir Mao. Mao is an extremely talented director and he is able to help actors rethink how to create a character, which, for an actor, is valuable experience. That's why, before I even read the script, I agreed to do this project. I actually only received the script about a month ago.

**So the primary reason you took on this project was because of Mao?**

Yes, but also because I've done far too many movies. I feel like I've gotten a little bit lazy when it comes to developing a character for film. Also, when you are involved in a movie, you become removed from society and you don't absorb anything new.

**Describe your relationship with the stage?**

I feel like the stage gives more to me than I give to the stage.

**What does it give you exactly?**

From the very get go, we had to do full dress rehearsals, so you can be fully involved and committed to your character. The minute the curtain rises, you have to be ready, because you command the stage. There is no camera for close ups or wide shots, and there is no post editing. On stage, you don't have any of that. The audience is the camera and they choose what they want to absorb. So what you have to do as an actor is really perform in a way that can capture their attention. This

is a process that has given me very valuable experience.

Also, the exciting part is you get to interact with the audience throughout the entire duration of the play. You can hear their breathing, laughter and you can see their expressions if something really shocking happens. And the reaction from the audience in turn will affect the way we act on stage. That is the magic of theatre.

Lastly, I get a sense of immense satisfaction. Every time a play ends, you get to hear the cheers and approval from the audience and that is something you just can't get with film. Right now things are getting down to the wire. We only have a couple of weeks left to practice.

**Tell us about your character...**

Simply put, I play a banking consultant at a boutique bank. It's a family-owned bank, run by my nephew, who is the son of my older brother. My older brother passed away, so my nephew took over, but he's far too young to understand the complexities of finance and he has made some serious mistakes that have jeopardised the future of the bank. This is where my character comes in to take over and clean up the mess. I end up meeting a wealthy entrepreneur at *Tonnochy*, who is played by Gardner. He's someone that has his hand in every type of business through investing. At the same time, we meet Carina Lau's character, who plays a ▶



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widow of a shoe manufacturer. Her husband died in a suspicious hotel fire.

**How would you describe your collaboration with Gardner and Carina?**

It has been a lot of fun. We are still just in the preliminary stages of the process, so there hasn't been anything particular that jumps to mind in terms of our chemistry. Gardner is very experienced and a very good actor. He is the master of the stage and this is an opportunity for me to learn from him.

It has been 14 years since I've worked with Carina on a play. I would say that we have a certain type of synergy. Before, there wasn't a lot of pressure before because we weren't playing the lead roles. This time, we are taking things more seriously because we are the main cast. We've been rehearsing from 2pm to 10pm, six days a week.

**Where do you find the stamina?**

There was a time when I worked every day for three years without

making money. If you talk to people about history here, you get blank stares. Hopefully that will change with the development of the West Kowloon Cultural District, so people can have more venues for cultural consumption. I would say theatre is an enriching form of entertainment – definitely moreso than mindlessly surfing the internet all day or going clubbing.

**What are your hopes for Hong Kong's theatre industry?**

We have a particular responsibility with this play because it is made in Hong Kong and it takes place in Hong Kong. I think I reflect the sentiments of the cast and the director when I say that we want to ensure that homegrown theatre will continue on. We need a 'treasure of the theatre', sort of like how Cantonese Opera is full of treasures, most notably the show *Never Say Goodbye*, which has been passed down and acted out by many different troupes. And each time there is a performance, audiences are still excited to see it. That's what we need.

## WE WANT TO ENSURE THAT HOMETOWN THEATRE CONTINUES ON

taking a single day off because we had films back-to-back-to-back. So by comparison, it's much easier to manage now because Hong Kong cinema is dead.

**Really?**

No, no, I'm just kidding [chuckles]. But if you compare it to before, we had like 300 films a year. Now we have about 40.

**Would you say that, with fewer films, the quality has improved?**

No, not in Hong Kong. Maybe somewhere else, but definitely not here. We don't captivate the audience anymore.

**Well, at least *Tonnochy* has sold out. Do you think the interest suggests a growing interest in theatre?**

Maybe. Actually, you can say that theatre has grown in the past two years, mostly with comedians like Jim Chim and Dayo Wong. But nothing has been as shocking as the sales for *Tonnochy*. People always criticise Hong Kong for being a cultural desert because people here are only into

**So there needs to be a legacy...**

Exactly. So you can say there is another type of motive behind this play, which has added a different kind of pressure for me. We want the audience to look forward to homegrown Hong Kong theatre. For film, we've had *Infernal Affairs*, which was adapted by Hollywood. That's what I mean by treasure.

**So what is left on Tony Leung's to do list – what do you really want?**

I'm not expecting anything. I just hope that I can continue to act in films until everyone loses interest in me or I just can't physically do it anymore. It will have to be those circumstances before I'll stop. I'll continue until I die. I guess after so many years as an actor you have this thought, that maybe if you die on stage that would be the perfect way to end your career.

**Like a true thespian. Hopefully not any time soon, though!**

People will remember you longer, though. [Smiles] ■

**Tonnochy** HKAPA, multiple dates from Jul 18-Sep 26. Tickets: \$1,200-\$180; hkticketing.com.