

LEARNING TO LAUGH

Hong Kong's iconic comedy group **Softward** are teaming up for their very first stage play, *Academy of Laughter* – and in their playful manner, they tell Arthur Tam about the challenges of adapting a popular Japanese play and getting kind of political



Eric Kot: (opposite page) Jan Lamb

After collaborating for a quarter of a century, **Softward**, the masters of tomfoolery and nonsense that are **Jan Lamb** and **Eric Kot**, are for the first time starring in a play, joining forces for *Academy of Laughter* – a highly anticipated adaptation of **Koki Mitani's** world-renowned work, *Warai no Daigaku*.

The play is set in Japan in 1940, during World War II, when media control and propaganda went into overdrive. It focuses on a censorship officer, played by Lamb, who is sent to monitor a comedic screenwriter, played by Kot. Artistic differences occur and hilarity ensues when the duo cannot agree on how to put the script together.

The original Mitani play was first performed in Tokyo in 1997 and has since been adapted worldwide, from Moscow to Beijing, Seoul to London, as well as being made into a film in 2004. And while the play relates specifically to WWII Japan, the subject matter is sure to resonate with Hong Kong audiences, given our city's current political dilemmas.

Ahead of the debut of *Academy of Laughter*, the duo sit down with *Time Out* to discuss taking to the stage, sticking to the script (a surprising difficulty for two renowned improvisatory jokesters) and how Hong Kong's air of political unrest relates to their latest outing...

This is the first stage play for the both of you. Why did you decide to take on the project and what makes it different from your previous collaborations?

Lamb: We needed a new challenge and adventure.

Kot: It's different because we have to stick to the exact script. It has to be 100 percent accurate. For our previous shows, we were able to adlib.

L: We're like a couple. After being together for so long, we have to find a new way of making love. We've worked together for over 25 years and this performance is a way for us to explore something fresh.

This sounds like a particularly difficult and different challenge, though...

L: We are so used to improvising on our radio show and our previous shows. I would have to say that this time it has been really interesting and fun, but it's also quite an arduous undertaking. For 25 years, we have just been ourselves on the radio or during live shows. This time, after such a long period, we are playing someone else. A little bit late, don't you think? [Laughs]

K: The flower that blooms from suffering is the most beautiful. [Chuckles]

Tell us a little bit about your roles.

L: My character is involved in censorship and often seems uptight, but there are moments where he reveals his tender side. The contradiction in his personality is very much like our own – there is a dark side and a bright side.

K: On the outside, my character seems to be the creative one. But actually, Jan's character, you will discover, is the soft-hearted creative despite what he might seem. We actually work well together and we make a better script.

L: It's like the relationship between master and servant, or the communist party drawing you in to make something that fits their ideals.

That's interesting you say that. Does this play relate to the political unrest happening here in Hong Kong at the moment?

L: Very much so. The plot is in sync with the current sentiments of what's going on in Hong Kong. There has been the release of the White Paper, people believe that their right to freedom is in jeopardy, which means when people watch this play, they are going to look into this story of censorship and find their own resonance.

K: You better take down everyone's address here, because soon you might not be able to find us. Our emails might already have been hacked. This might be the last time we meet.

L: This might even be your last interview.

This is getting intense. It's like we are going to be imprisoned...

L: Exactly, so you better ask the full details of our

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everyday lives, from what we like to eat to what we like to drink.

How would you describe the type of humour of the play?

L: It's based on sadness. It's quite a sad story. It's funny because there are laugh-out-loud moments but it's also funny because of how ridiculous the circumstances are.

This is your first play – would you say stage performances are becoming more popular in Hong Kong?

L: Absolutely. Last year, there were around 400 plays in Hong Kong. There were around 70 movies. I think that live shows are generally important. Though we appreciate everything like

YouTube, we believe that live experiences are different and bring something special that Hong Kong really needs.

And finally, what's next for Softward after this play?

L: We are looking for new experiences to stimulate old men like us. Routine work makes us lazy. What is important for us is giving people an experience.

K: We want to make the same love in a new and different way.

L: The sad thing is it's with the same guy.

K: Yeah, I'm pretty bad. [Laughs]

Academy of Laughter Hong Kong Arts Centre, Aug 1-17. Tickets: \$580, \$480, \$380; urbtix.hk.