

THEATER

# Kids at play

It's party time for Faust International Youth Theatre, where thousands of HK's young people have discovered they too could act. **Dara Wang** visits the school in the lead-up to its 17th anniversary.



Children rehearse for a show of *The Swiss Family Robinson Vacation* to be staged on June 15 at the Faust Festival.

Thousands of young people, including very small children, have walked through the doors of Faust International Youth Theatre in the last 17 years. This week, as the school puts up its annual children's theatre festival — a showcasing of 25 plays by its students — a few among its alumni, who went on to make a career of their love of the stage, will look back on their days spent in training with pride and affection.

Michael Lin, who joined Faust in 2004 and played the title role in *Peter Pan* in 2006, now performs in London's West End. He is on the cast of *Annie*, touring the UK in 2015-16. "I attended drama classes once a week, during my training period at Faust. The simple task of standing in front of a group of people helped break the ice. It enabled me to practice acting under the guidance of enthusiastic teachers," he recalled.

Another former Faust member, Jamie Hansen, joined the school at 5, attending it for the next 13 years until he went to university. He has since played various roles in a number of

independent films, in both the UK and US.

Then there is Daniel Barwell, who started training at Faust when he was 9 and continued for the next eight years. He came back to Faust as a group leader last September. It's his way of giving back to the school that had helped hone his acting skills.

Each term Faust offers training in different aspects of the theatre, including mime, musical theatre, storytelling, improvisation, directing, playwriting, etc. Barwell's job this term is to teach children how to be confident with using their voices so that the audiences can hear them distinctly. He also helps channel the imagination, energy and creative spirit of his students into the plays they eventually put together.

At the moment Barwell is adding the final touches to a production of *The Swiss Family Robinson Vacation*. Featuring a cast of 8 to 11-year-olds, the show debuts on June 15 at the Faust Festival, after eight weeks in rehearsal.

This is the first time Barwell is directing a play for the Faust

Festival. "I want to show the parents that this is what their kids can do. I hope to make the kids realize what they are capable of," he said.

Among Barwell's trainees is 10-year-old Julia Stenfort. In her two years with Faust, Julia was a part of seven performances. Her dream is to be eventually counted among the finest performers in Hong Kong. "I am just passionate about drama. That's my thing," Stenfort proudly said.

While not everybody who trains with Faust will become professional actors, most of them will emerge from the programs as more outgoing and confident individuals. Megan Hills, a former student at Faust is now a freelance writer, contributing to a range of Hong Kong publications. She feels her time spent at Faust would always be an important part of her life.

"I remember being a part of the big Faust showcase, *Over...*...The confidence of everyone in it completely knocked my socks off. I was still pretty shy at the time, but it felt like the experience really flipped a switch in me, and I knew I wanted to give it my best shot," she recalled.

**The pioneers**

Faust was founded with the idea of bringing theater to anybody in Hong Kong who was interested in learning the art and craft of the performance form.

There was an obvious void in the English-language theater training scene 17 years ago and that was where Matthew

Gregory, who has a postgraduate qualification in drama from Cambridge, UK, stepped in. "In Hong Kong people didn't even know this sort of thing until I created Faust. I think it gave a lot of people opportunities to participate in English drama performances," Gregory said.

Since its inception in 1999, the organization has increased in size, going from 54 trainees on its first batch to more than 2,000 students currently on its rolls.

The interest of non-native English speakers has grown considerably in the last few years. "When we started, only 20 percent of the total number of students were local (Chinese), but now the ratio between the local and inter-



**“Drama is for everyone and we are committed to bringing drama to every child in Hong Kong.”**

Keon Lee, general manager and group leader, Faust

Faust International Youth Theatre was founded with the idea of making the craft of performing in English-language plays accessible to all. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

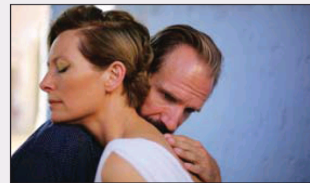
FILM



**Sing Street**



Written and directed by John Carney. Starring Ferdia Walsh-Peelo and Lucy Boynton. Ireland. 105 minutes. I.B. Opens June 9.



**A Bigger Splash**



Directed by Luca Guadagnino, written by David Kajganich. Starring Tilda Swinton and Ralph Fiennes. Italy. 125 minutes. I.B. Opens June 9.

## Of boy bands and rock stars

By ELIZABETH KERR

Who didn't want to be a rock star at some point in his/her life? The allure of rock stardom is the jumping-off point for two radically different, entirely welcome bits of summer counter-programming this season. Amid the clamor of CGI and mutant superheroes, room can be made for grown-up movies with grown-up content. Made on a combined budget likely less than that of *X-Men: Apocalypse's* craft services bill are John Carney's *Sing Street* and Luca Guadagnino's *A Bigger Splash*. The films are blessedly conventional and gonzo (respectively) tonics that will help most of us make it to September.

Irish filmmaker Carney has made his short career swimming in musical waters, starting with the Oscar-winning *Once*, followed by *Begin Again* in 2013. The aggressively charming *Sing Street* unfolds in early-1980s Dublin, where Cosmo (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo) starts a band with his dorky friends, in particular the droll rabbit-obsessed Eamon (Mark McKenna) and gawky redhead Darren (Ben Carolan), with a little help from his quippy pothead brother Brendan (Jack Reynor). Initially it's to win the affections of a mysterious girl, Raphina (Lucy Boynton), living across the street from his school.

At the other end of the tonal spectrum, *A Bigger Splash*, based on Jacques Dery's 1969 French drama *La Piscine*, relocates to the Italian vacation island of Pantelleria, and follows rock icon Marianne Lane (Tilda Swinton, proving she is in fact David Bowie's long lost gender-fluid sister) and her boyfriend Paul (Matthias Schoenaerts) as their holiday is interrupted by a mysterious producer and her former flame Harry (Ralph Fiennes) and his vixen of daughter, Penelope (Dakota Johnson).

Depending on your personal tolerance for weirdness or sentimentality, the European-style approach to casual nudity; and where on the scale your sense of humor lies, the films toggle between pretentious nonsense and manipulative nostalgia mining. Either way it's hard to deny the unrepentant sweetness of *Sing Street's* coming-of-age yarn, complete with flashback ready — and pitch perfect — recreations of the mid-1980s, when Duran Duran and The Cure ruled the airwaves (yes, airwaves). Tucked between some beautifully awkward band practice is a gentle story about a young man with enough brains to inspire ambition, stuck in a dead-end (at the time) town. Cosmo channels an unstable family (pitifully played by *Game of Thrones'* Aidan Gillen and *Orphan Black's* Maria Doyle Kennedy), complicated romance and restrictive social rules into song, coming out exactly where you expect him to at the end. And that's okay when the preceding action is this joyous and optimistic. There are no tortured souls here, not really.

Guadagnino's psychosexual quasi-thriller, however, has plenty of emotional drama — mostly unspoken in this darkly comic story that's only about unwanted guests on the surface. David Kajganich's screenplay departs ever so slightly from the original, but in far more alluring and ambiguous ways as he explores the difficulties of communication beyond petty mind games and passive-aggressive stabs at connection. Secrets abound and no one can be taken at face value. To Kajganich and the cast's credit, there are no explanations for the characters' behavior beyond the most fleeting of references. This is the kind of immersive, interpretive filmmaking last seen in the 1970s and though it's not for everyone, those who take the time to invest in the languid, almost palpable, Italian heat will be rewarded.

*A Bigger Splash* lives or dies by its interpersonal dynamic: the nearly silent Swinton and Schoenaerts are flawless as the lovers under attack as it were (and have a blazing chemistry) and Johnson proves she can play mysterious and not simply vapid. But it's really Fiennes' film, something tough to say when Swinton is involved. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* was the first indication of funnier, freer, late-career spirit in Fiennes — and his performance as Harry is brave, crazy and manic in all the right ways; his interpretation of The Rolling Stones' Emotional Rescue alone is worth the price of admission.

SKETCHES



**Snail Trail**

To sample more of Lorette E. Roberts' work visit [www.loretteroberts.com](http://www.loretteroberts.com). The sketch published here is by courtesy of Blacksmith Books [www.blacksmithbooks.com](http://www.blacksmithbooks.com)

Lorette E. Roberts



Along the Waterfront — Tourists, diners & drunks; school kids with assignments, Sampann Eaters; New Artists, Pupils & Brothers; & Home in Hellier!

