

# Song and dance A winning formula for musicals P9

# view



Mohamed Drissi is dedicated to making a song and dance about musicals, he tells **Sam Olliver**

# Again, with feeling



*If Again* (left), the second half of Mohamed Drissi's double bill, explores hindsight

Anyone old enough to remember Deborah Kerr whistling a happy tune or Julie Andrews being pressed to climb every mountain or Audrey Hepburn wanting to dance all night (and still asking for more) will probably agree with Mohamed Drissi's basic definition of a musical: good singing numbers, good dancing numbers and a nice story – the classic 1950s format.

Formerly director of the musical theatre dance programme at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (APA), Drissi's mission is to get the message across to local theatre-goers that this formula has changed significantly over the years. His platform for the task is the Hong Kong Musical Theatre Federation, an organisation he set up in 2003.

This week it will be staging a double bill to prove that musical theatre is alive and kicking in the city but in a less conventional form.

The first half of the production titled *Can't Help It ... My Feet Love to Dance* is a parade of entertaining footwork in song-and-dance numbers from the 1920s to current Broadway and Hollywood musicals.

The cast of 35 performers, however, includes names not normally associated with such physicality – rocker (and son of Canto-pop veteran Sam Hui Koon-kit) Ryan Hui, stage actor Pichead Amornsomboon and opera singer David Quah are set to contribute their individual styles.

"We invited some known artists in Hong Kong to take part to show people that musicals are a passion

for so many people," says Drissi. "Ryan's going to sing two numbers from *Grease*. Maybe people are going to see him doing a few things he hasn't done before.

"Pichead can sing, he can dance, he's a comedian – he's a really versatile artist. And David Quah's singing in three different styles shows the diversity of the contemporary artist."

Quah, one of Hong Kong's leading opera performers, approves of the crossover approach. "In Southeast Asia especially, viewers have this idea that opera is opera and musicals are musicals, and they don't mix, whereas, if you look at the US, many people can do both."

As for the numbers he'll be performing, "*It's De-Lovely* is a Cole Porter song. There's music from *Wicked*, and *You Can't Stop the Beat* from *Hairspray*. I get to be in drag in that – it's great fun."

Also lending Drissi a hand is Glen Chin, the show's musical director, who moved to Hong Kong from the US two years ago. His performances in films such as *East of A*, *Natural Born Killers* and *Hollywood Hong Kong* (for which he was a Golden Horse nominee for best actor) obscure his musical background. "I have my degree in music – I was a bass player and percussionist," says Chin. "I got into teaching acting because I was a music director and I had this problem with actors who can't sing, and singers who can't act. I couldn't figure out what to do so I went to Los Angeles to find out the classes and study the form, and I've been doing this ever since, for 30 years now."

Chin has appeared in many musicals, having worked with the East West Players in Los Angeles for 25 years as actor, director, producer and teacher. "Hopefully, I will bring a more dramatic feel to it," Chin says. "A lot of the dancers fulfil their obligation of dancing, but now they have some principles of acting to learn and storytelling to do."

Drissi, the artistic director, director and choreographer of the double bill, says musical theatre was not properly represented on the local performing arts scene until he set up the federation. Since then much of his passion for education has touched the younger generation – more than 50,000 students attended his 2005/2006 productions of *The Quest for Beauty* and *Bye Bye Cinderella* (the latter will be rerun in March). But he's also keen to widen the horizons of an older generation who may still be rooted in the Rodgers and Hammerstein canon. "The 'pure musical' refers to the classics of *The King and I* and *My Fair Lady* – the golden age of musicals – but the format has changed," says Drissi, who has followed the development every step of the way.

The French-Tunisian's career began in places that are well served by musical theatre – in Europe and the US. He initially studied at the Helena and Titus Pomsar ballet studio in France and with dancers and choreographers steeped in the Hollywood and

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Mohamed Drissi (below), artistic director and choreographer



Broadway traditions. Spells at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre School and the Broadway Dance Centre form part of a packed CV that brought him to the APA in 1991, where he taught for 14 years. With this experience, Drissi wants to reaffirm the importance of dance within musical theatre.

"Part of the federation's mission is to keep introducing the audience to different elements of the musical, and one of the elements is dance."

Dramatic edge – and dance – is central to the show's second half: *If Again* is a tragedy based on the controversial 1928 verse novel, *The Wild Party*, by American Joseph Moncure March. Narrative and recorded songs link dance sequences that describe the downfall of a group of people preying on each other's emotions. Originally based on low-life Manhattan characters, it's given a Mid-Level setting in this production.

Drissi first worked on the project while at the APA. "I always wanted to develop it. We've selected music where the lyrics of the songs are like the subtext of the characters." And the moral of *If Again*? "Most of us go through something and say, 'If only I knew, I would have done it differently'."

*Can't Help It ... My Feet Love to Dance/If Again*, Fri-Jan 27, 8pm; Sat, 3pm; Sai Wan Ho Civic Centre, HK\$120, HK\$180. Inquiries: 2268 7323