



YP celebrates
BROVENBER
All the news duties
you need to know

November 23, 2014

Young post

Well-earned curtain call

With the help of a local community theatre group, eight aspiring performers with Down syndrome are gearing up to put on their own show, writes Karly Cox



Back row (from left): William, producer Jenny Lun, Nathan, Pol, Hui-lam; front row (from left): Marie Jane, Evelyn, Alistair, Samuel
Photos: Albert Sheung

It takes a specific personality type to get up on stage in front of family, friends and strangers, and portray a character unlike your self. When you also have to remember a plot, dance moves and song lyrics, the task is tough. If you're a young person with Down syndrome, it becomes even trickier.

People with Down syndrome can have mild to moderate intellectual and developmental problems. This can have an impact on aspiring performers, as Karen Tse of Hong Kong Down Syndrome Association put it, "It can be really hard for people with Down syndrome to memorise and read a script." But eight theatre lovers have done just that, with some help from local community theatre group Hong Kong Players.

Today, Nathan Leung, Yau Hui-lam, Samuel Harries, William Russell, Evelyn Shih, Pol Sommarau, Alistair Faliso, and Marie Jane Manomaidom are performing a "mini panto", *Little Red Riding Hood*, at Grappas Cellar in Jardine House, Central. The show starts at 11.30am and tickets are HK\$150.

The Hong Kong Players' representatives working with the cast, Adam Walker, Candice Caalsen and Claire Johnson, are all performers themselves, and all teach

performing arts, but admit working with the group was a steep learning curve.

"Neither Candice, Claire nor myself are specialist teachers for people with special needs, so it has largely been trial and error. We started with an awards ceremony format and then changed to a story as it would be more engaging," says Walker, who is one of the producers of the Players' upcoming Christmas panto, *Puss in Boots*.

"The members have some quite profound needs, and struggle to remember specific movements and lyrics and apply themselves, but with repetition, and support from parents, they have developed their skills effectively," adds Walker.

Tse says that the things expected of a cast in other shows can be difficult for people with Down syndrome, adding that the age range of the cast - from six to 32 - makes it hard to hold everyone's attention at the same time. "All of them can be quite stubborn at times. The teachers needed to be especially patient with them," she says.

Tse says the fund-raising event should show the public how young people with

It can be really hard for people with Down syndrome to memorise and read a script

Down syndrome can take part in all sorts of events. "We believe all people with Down syndrome have all sorts of potential, especially in the arts. The panto training has helped develop their musical and dramatic sense, which in turn enhances their [coordination], self-expression and self-confidence."

But it's not all about the actors - the Players believe the project will help the public better understand the roughly 3,000 Hongkongers with Down syndrome. "Hong Kong Players have a strong commitment to theatre in the community and have often collaborated with organisations to help promote local causes ... This

is our first foray into working with people with special needs, and we feel that it is important to offer the skills of our members into the wider community in order to help raise awareness of other less represented members of society," says Walker.

Tse says events like this can help people understand Down syndrome, and help people with the condition integrate into the wider community.

"Down syndrome is not disease," she adds. "What we need is to understand the needs of people with Down syndrome. They want opportunities - not help. It may be that they are looking for a job - or it may just be that they want to make friends."

Top: Walker and Evelyn know that learning lines is tough for any actor. Below (l to r): Pol, William, Alistair get dramatic backstage



Samuel and Alistair's hard work will pay off in today's production



Plick! BOO