

# Text, lies and a stage

**Hong Kong's own Liars' League allows writers and actors to do what they do best: tell tales, writes Kate Whitehead**

**W**alk into the Fringe Dairy venue at the Fringe Club on the last Monday of the month and you'll know you've stepped into something special. The place is packed, standing room only at the bar, and the atmosphere electric. All eyes are on the performer on stage, hanging on to every word. Even the bar staff are mesmerised.

It's the monthly meeting of Liars' League. And like much about this storytelling group, the name is deliberately provocative and alludes to the fact that all fiction is a lie – and so is acting. "People are intrigued and they ask what Liars' League is. And all the actors love saying they are liars. It's a bit like *Fight Club*, but not. It's got this weird cult thing going on," says Ysabelle Cheung, founder of the Hong Kong branch of the league.

Established in London in 2007, the premise for Liars' League is simple: actors read out new short stories written by authors around the world. Fresh out of university, Cheung was interning at *Granta* magazine in London in 2011 when she got her first taste of the literary get-togethers and later that year, as an assistant at the short story magazine *Litro*, she met Katy Darby, one of the league's founders.

"Katy ... started Liars' League because she had gone to an awful event where writers had been trying to read out their stories and were shaking or mumbling or holding the page up to their face and she thought wouldn't it be great if an actor could read it for them," says Cheung, who is also arts, culture and clubbing editor at *Time Out Hong Kong* magazine.

The organisation soon spread to New York, Leeds and Leicester. In March, *The Guardian* listed it as one of the top 10 great storytelling nights in Britain.

Cheung arrived in Hong Kong in late 2011 and took to the city fast, but she missed Liars' League and tried to find something similar. There were a few events – but none were free, which for an intern on a budget was important. When she met a few people who liked the idea of Liars'



Photo: K.Y. Cheng

League, she asked Darby if she could set up an offshoot. Darby not only gave her blessing, but also the first four stories to get the ball rolling.

The first event, in February last year, was hosted with creative workspace provider Fill in the Blank. Despite having less than two weeks' notice to get the show on the road, it pulled in a crowd of more than 100. Cheung knew then she was onto a winner and was determined to make it a regular monthly event.

The 25-year-old is well cut out for her role organising a literary salon. Her parents were from Hong Kong and she was born and raised in London. Always an avid reader, she was going through two to three books a day by the age of 11.

"It was a terrible obsession. I would read until the early hours of the morning and my mother would come in and tell me, 'Go to sleep, you have school tomorrow'. And I would say, but I need to finish it!" says Cheung.

Boarding school in Oakham was followed by a degree in literature and creative writing at the University of East Anglia, so when she found herself amid the "literary geeks" at

London's Liar's League she knew she was with her people.

While the local group is structured along the same lines as the British leagues, Cheung has made one change to better cater for Hong Kong. Instead of stories of 800 to 2,000 words, the word limit is 800 to 1,200. "Hong Kong people are quite impatient, they want their stories and they want them quick."

Although the "flash fiction" format is more difficult for writers – it's a challenge to tell a good story so tightly – that hasn't put them off and the league receives 20 to 25 submissions each month; it has about 300 writers on its books. There's a specific theme each month: in August it's "Ying and Yang", in September, "Here and Queer". Neither writers nor actors are paid. The league is run on an entirely voluntary basis that makes it possible to make admission free.

Organising the event, sifting through the submissions, matching stories to actors, and coaching them all takes time, but Cheung is happy to spend her free time on the project. "It never feels like that much work. There's something really



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LIARS' LEAGUE HONG KONG

exciting about reading fiction for the first time and knowing someone else might not have read it."

Cheung has a team of volunteers: listed on the website as "liars – saving Hong Kong's arts and culture scene from extinction, one lie at a time", they include American writer Marshall Moore and Anderson Muth, a teaching assistant at City University, both writing judges, and acting judges standup comic Sean Hebert and actor Daniel Levia.

Each month six to eight actors are chosen from the pool of 30 and matched to the stories. Most are in their 20s and the Liars' League crowd is roughly that age too,

although everyone's welcome. Cheung hopes that with a solid team on board, Liars' League will set the bar high in Hong Kong. "We curate every single story and every second on stage, it gives people who want to write and act something to reach for," she says.

The Hong Kong chapter has something special for September: in addition to the regular league evening, there will be a one-off event on September 12. Writers are being asked to submit a 2,000-word story linked to the city. The top six will be read at the league gathering and the best will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 with a submission from the leagues in London and New York. The submission deadline is June 30.

Looking ahead, Cheung knows she has a formula that works, but in future she may look to get more involved in the local literary scene – the London Liar's League, for example, organises book readings and book launches, and participates in literary festivals. [thereview@scmp.com](mailto:thereview@scmp.com)

For more information, go to [liarsleaguehk.blogspot.hk](http://liarsleaguehk.blogspot.hk)