

# Queen *of* Arts

*She may be better known for her business achievements, but Pansy Ho has a deep-seated love for the performing arts. Ahead of the APA Ball, she tells Paul Kay why inspiring the next generation is atop her agenda*



PHOTOGRAPHY BY RED DOG STUDIO  
SPECIAL THANKS TO THE HONG KONG ACADEMY FOR  
PERFORMING ARTS



**SHOWTIME**  
Couleurs de  
Paradis necklace  
set in white gold  
with lapis lazulis,  
Fleurette earrings  
set in white gold  
with diamonds,  
Oiseaux de  
Paradis Volutes  
ring set in white  
gold with  
diamonds, and  
Charms timepiece  
set in white gold  
with diamonds, all  
by Van Cleef &  
Arpels; dress by  
Escada

**GREEN ROOM**

**THIS PAGE**

See following spread for details

**ON THE COVER**

Flying Butterfly necklace set in white gold with diamonds, Fleurette earrings set in white gold with diamonds, and Organdi bracelet set in white gold with diamonds, all by Van Cleef & Arpels; dress by Lanvin



T'S SATURDAY AFTERNOON, AND THE rain is lashing down on Gloucester Road. Gridlocked traffic stretches into the distance in both directions, windscreen wipers are working overtime, and a fanfare of horns erupts every few seconds as drivers vent their displeasure. A few metres away, but a far cry from the drizzle and blare, there's an oasis of relative calm in the APA's Studio Theatre, with a silence broken only by the rhythmic click of a camera. The 20 or so people in attendance – stylists, assistants, stage managers and security guards – stand in reverential silence around the edges of the space as Pansy Ho takes centre stage, quite literally, looking resplendent in a vibrant pink ball gown accentuated by the sparkle of diamonds and the glint of white gold on her ears, wrist and décolletagé.

As the managing director of Shun Tak Holdings and Hong Kong's richest woman (according to *Forbes*), Ho is used to being the centre of attention, but today's theatrical setting is a little different – yet particularly apt. Although better known for her keen business acumen, Ho has a deep-rooted love of the arts, one that she expresses through her patronage of worthy cultural institutions, initiatives and events including the Hong Kong Philharmonic, the Arts Centre, the Hong Kong Ballet, the Sinfonietta and the APA, for which she is this year the chairperson of the ball committee. It's a fascination, she says, that began when she was a young child, ever since she "knew how to hum to music."

Ho recalls being captivated by music as far back as kindergarten and taking the opportunity to dance whenever she could. But it was during her time at St Paul's Convent School in Causeway Bay that her blossoming interest was really given the platform to flourish. "I was very lucky because I went to a school with a lot of emphasis on the arts," reflects Ho, before telling tales of performing in the Sunday mass choir, singing carols to appreciative audiences at plush hotels and competing at music festivals with her school team.

"Even at a very young age, I was a bit of a performer – and I loved it," says Ho with a smile. "It's not just the chance to express yourself, but it's also the whole being together with the rest of the team. We were doing everything together. I loved that feeling."

The young Ho's interest soon grew to include drama, and by the age of 10 she was already following her teachers' suggestions that she visit the theatre to observe the professionals. "In those days we didn't have such a well-endowed facil-

ity as the APA," Ho recalls. "But we had various opportunities to watch local productions at City Hall. And then, when we started travelling, my parents encouraged me to go and watch more serious productions on Broadway. So as a teenager I started to take a keen interest, and every time we'd go travelling, I'd demand that I be taken to see the ballet, or musicals or Broadway shows."

Her cultural horizons suitably broadened by these performances, Ho was eager to put what she had seen into practice – and her school's annual stage musical competition provided the perfect opportunity. Drawing on her passion for performing, and employing the burgeoning organisational and management skills that would become her hallmark, Ho relished the yearly contest, variously taking on the role of actor, choreographer, director and producer. One of her fondest memories saw her being named best actress and winning the prize for staging the best show in her year for a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The acclaim was welcome, of course, but the experience of producing a show was ultimately worth much more.

"That's where I learned to put together an event," says Ho. "I think it gave me the opportunity to understand how you should do a lot of things that you normally wouldn't be exposed to. You need to work out your organisational planning. You need to have a lot of human skills, because you are trying to pull together maybe 20 students in your class, and to make them all try to act according to your direction. So at a very young age, you really learn to become a leader."

Ho stresses the importance of exposing the current generation of Hong Kong kids to similar activities, and says that it's vital parents realise that their children taking part in the arts is "not

*"At a very young age,  
you really learn to become a leader"*



**STAGE RIGHT**  
Charleston pendant set in white gold with diamonds, Lotus earrings set in white gold with diamonds, and Oiseaux de Paradis Volutes ring set in white gold with diamonds, all by Van Cleef & Arpels; dress by Lanvin

## TAKE A BOW

Oiseaux de Paradis Volutes necklace set in white gold with diamonds, Lotus earrings set in white gold with diamonds, and Lotus between-the-finger ring set in white gold with diamonds, all by Van Cleef & Arpels; dress by Escada



*“It’s not just loving arts as a source of entertainment, but rather believing that arts and culture can help society to grow”*



just a hobby, not just because they like singing, but as a way of learning a lot of social skills and understanding how to manage situations.”

Reflecting on the wider issue of support for the arts in Hong Kong, Ho admits there are several areas that can be improved, but is optimistic in her assessment of the current cultural landscape. “I think we have a lot of talent, and I think we already have a strong reputation in being able to attract really spectacular arts performances in the past,” says Ho. “We should keep that up, and we should work towards being able to demonstrate that it’s not just loving arts as a source of entertainment, but rather believing that arts and culture can help society to grow in other ways.”

The APA, of course, has a large role to play in that endeavour, not only in exposing people to quality performances, both local and international, but also by providing the pathway to a career for those who wish to follow their passion to the logical extreme. It’s a process that Ho believes can beget tangible cultural rewards. “We are trying to really groom our own professional artists,” says Ho, “but we need to be able to place them out as well – we need to show that this can be a gratifying career. So, when we can do that, and have more of our local talent becoming professionally acclaimed and successful, I believe then people will have a natural support and affinity to our own arts performances.”

A long-time supporter of the APA and a veteran organiser of countless high-profile events, Ho was initially hesitant to take on the chairperson duties for this year’s ball committee. But when she heard about the academy’s wish to reinvigorate the event and to think outside the box, she pledged to take on the role. It’s the kind of challenge that Ho invariably rises to. “Each year, the APA Ball is all about helping the graduating students to have the chance to perform, so that our society can realise and not forget

that we actually have very talented performers ourselves. Therefore, we ought to continue to support this initiative,” Ho explains. “On a few occasions, they invited celebrity performers, but this time we’re going to do something even more interesting – we’re going to put them together. So we won’t have individual celebrity performers and then the student acts. I want to come up with an idea to put the students and the celebrities in one musical.”

It’s an intriguing prospect, and an enterprise that Ho says she approaches just as she would a business venture. Drawing inspiration from the organically influenced, ultra-feminine jewellery of this year’s ball sponsor, Van Cleef & Arpels, Ho says that the event will boast “a romantic garden theme, but with a little bit of mischief.”

Turning her attention to Hong Kong’s cultural future, Ho believes the city should continue to look outward while developing a creative infrastructure. “I really think that Hong Kong has to maintain its international profile,” she states. “I understand that we are also interested in our own Chinese culture, and maybe utilising that to generate more creative art forms that merge East and West – that’s something we’ve done before, and we do well. But I think more importantly, we need to maintain the international context.”

Paramount for Ho, however, is that Hong Kong inspires in its denizens an affinity for the arts, one that will grow as the city’s cultural attractions do – and be passed on to future generations. “We are limited in terms of resources and also locations to be building larger and more up-to-date facilities, so we’re all hoping that West Kowloon is going to really take shape,” says Ho. “But Hong Kong has, in a sense, led Asia for some years in nurturing our own arts scene. What we need is to make sure the Hong Kong people do not ever stop wanting it.”