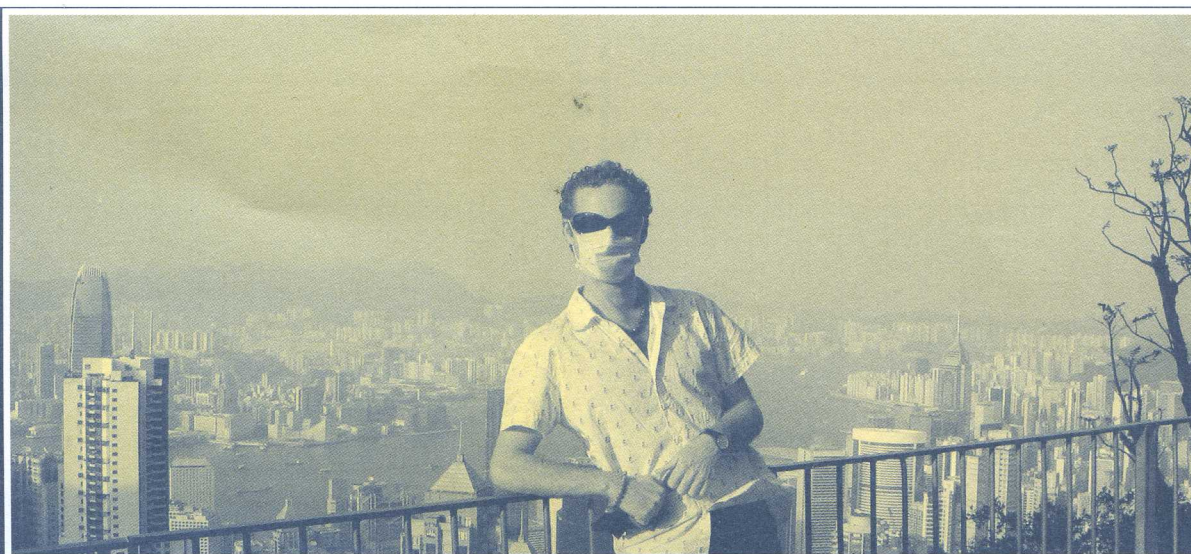


# STEPHEN NOONAN

Art as medicine

In 2003, Stephen Noonan was one of three South Australian artists selected for an Asialink program. He undertook a residency in Hong Kong at the height of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak.

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Artist, Stephen Noonan overlooking the Hong Kong skyline

'Hong Kong is a vibrant and fast-paced society where East meets West, consumerism reigns, and art and politics occasionally do battle,' says Stephen.

This proved an interesting environment for his residency based at the Hong Kong Art Centre. 'I worked with local artists and theatre/dance companies. I also spent time developing my work as an arts educator by combining my own teaching practice with the Hong Kong Art Centre Art School.

'My performance and teaching work in Hong Kong was dominated by SARS. I remember Stephen Page saying that the great medicine for humanity is art, and this certainly proved to be true in my experience,' he says.

When international tourism came to a halt in Hong Kong local artistic work flourished. 'Literally dozens of impromptu performances and exhibitions took place as a response to both SARS and the government's inability to deal with it. Through these events I saw many intimate and exciting artworks that explored human frailty while subtly questioning the government's handling of the crisis,' says Stephen.

He found it encouraging to see artists engaged in an optimistic and constructive debate and in turn provide a critical voice for people's concerns. They were the most uplifting performances and exhibitions he saw throughout his residency.

One of Stephen's major projects was as an actor in Hong Kong's NML Theatre Company's production of *Redset*. 'This new work examined the huge number of mainland Chinese moving to Hong Kong looking for work and wealth, and highlighted the massive problems of poverty and dislocation in one of the world's most rapidly changing countries.'

'I established a working dialogue with many artists in the region and was lucky enough to visit Hanoi, Vietnam and work at Peace Village, a centre for people suffering from the effects of agent orange used in the Vietnam War. I ran a series of workshops with a collective storytelling theme,' he says.

As each artist must define and monitor their own program, Asialink residencies require vision and discipline. 'A crucial aspect of my residency was that it was the beginning of a continuing working relationship. I was not interested in a one-off experience in another country,' says Stephen.

Asialink aims to enlarge the experiences available to Australians in the region, develop artistic projects related to the host country and encourage ongoing involvement between Australian and Asian artists and organisations.

Last year Stephen Noonan received the Centenary Medal for his service to the community through the performing arts.