



Above: Ms Angeline Cheong, the programme's volunteer manager. Left: Puppeteer Tan Beng Tian showing audience members a cat puppet that features in the performance. PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

# Puppets add light touch to heavy topics

## Group uses arts and theatre to normalise and spark conversations about death and dying

**Cheow Sue-Ann**

A puppet show about a thermos and a food container made the subjects of death and dying a conversation that needed no tears.

With its light touch on dementia, cancer and even needing to wear adult diapers, the 30-minute performance by Both Sides, Now even elicited laughs from its audience last night at an outdoor amphitheatre in Chong Pang.

Both Sides, Now makes use of arts and theatre – including craft workshops and film screenings – to normalise and spark conversations about death and dying, stripping the topics of their sense of taboo.

Artistic director Kok Heng Leun said the programme wants to bring conversations about death into the community, as a normal part of life and living. The programme, in its fourth year, has targeted the areas

of Chong Pang and Telok Blangah, where it has local partners.

Mr Kok said: “We hope to raise awareness, and help people start these conversations early and while they still can. After all, part of living well is knowing how to die well.”

The puppet show, created by Drama Box, tells of an aged couple – with the wife being depicted by a food container and the husband, a thermos. The two characters talk about the impending future, from what will happen to the remaining partner to their fears about dying. Performances are in English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, and are for audiences in all age groups.

Both Sides, Now is made up of partners from Drama Box, ArtsWok Collaborative, Lien Foundation and Ang Chin Moh Foundation, and supported by Khoo Teck Puat Hospital and Montfort Care.

The programme's volunteer manager Angeline Cheong, 42, said:

“This programme shows that theatre and community can be married. It allows us to use arts to cut across boundaries and take the participant beyond just the thinking into the feeling.”

She said participants have been very enthusiastic and share openly their own concerns, plans and fears about their deaths or the deaths of their loved ones.

Ms Kong Yat Chiu, 66, a retired business owner, said she has attended Both Sides, Now events for several years and takes her family and friends along if she can.

She said in Mandarin: “Everyone dies, so why should we fear talking about it? Is it not more important to ensure that the people around you know what your last wishes are?”

Student Phyllis Tan, 20, said she went to the show because she wanted to know better how to broach such topics with others.

“It is so important for us to know about death and dying, especially so we all know how to take care of our parents and grandparents.”

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