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A past NKF fund-raiser featuring actress Quan Yifeng in a stunt. Money aside, charity shows have reaped big returns in raising public profiles and creating awareness of issues. ST FILE PHOTO

# Charities less keen on TV fund-raisers

High cost of staging and downturn make such events less worthwhile

■ BY THERESA TAN

ONCE a regular fixture on television, charity shows – where celebrities sing, dance or perform stunts – appear to have lost their shine.

This year, there are likely to be only three televised fund-raisers, down from six or so a year in the glory days before the National Kidney Foundation (NKF) scandal erupted in 2005.

Charities which have held televised fund-raisers, such as the Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society and Singapore Heart Foundation, are staying away this year.

They say that with the high cost of staging – about \$1 million for each show – and given the gloomy economy, they are not confident of pulling in the millions in donations needed to make the event worthwhile.

And keeping fund-raising costs down is key, as charities have to abide by a rule stating that they cannot spend more than 30 per cent of the donations they collect on fund-raising expenses in a year.

Still, three groups are going ahead with such TV charity shows this year.

First up was the Tabung Amal Aidilfitri Trust Fund's annual TV fund-raiser on the Malay channel Suria in January.

The Fund, which collects donations for the poor during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, raised slightly over

\$450,000 this year. It cost close to \$100,000 to hold the two-hour show.

Its chairman, Mr Mohd Anuar Yusop, told The Straits Times that the show played an "instrumental role" in garnering support from the Malay-Muslim community and has proven to be a "very effective fund-raising tool".

For example, the amount raised this year was about \$150,000 more than it pulled in for its 2007 show.

Next Sunday, the Community Chest (ComChest) is bringing back its "True-Hearts" show on Channel 8 after a hiatus of four years.

ComChest, the fund-raising arm of the National Council of Social Service, said it is doing so to make more people aware of the plight of the less fortunate, especially in the recession.

It declined to reveal the cost of the show, which features popular drama "Little Nonya" stars such as Jeanette Aw and Dai Yang Tian, citing a "special arrangement" with MediaCorp.

On Oct 11, the President's Challenge, an annual campaign which raises funds for a variety of causes, will stage its President's Star Charity show on Channel 5.

These shows saw an average of \$5.2 million collected in each of the last three years. Its spokesman did not reveal the show's cost, but said MediaCorp "sponsors the bulk of the production cost".

TV charity shows – based on a format

of entertainment cum appeals to the public's heartstrings made popular by the NKF – are said to be big money-spinners, although some charities have found that it is not always so. The Heart Foundation show in 2005 pulled in only \$1.7 million, compared to the last Ren Ci Hospital and Medicare Centre show in 2007, which raised \$7.2 million.

Ren Ci's shows usually featured its former chief executive, Buddhist monk Ming Yi, performing heart-stopping feats such as abseiling down 45 storeys and walking across parallel beams placed 66 storeys high. Ren Ci declined to be interviewed, but earlier reports said it will hold a TV fund-raiser in January next year.

But money aside, charity shows have reaped big returns in raising public profiles and creating awareness of issues.

Society for the Physically Disabled executive director Ow Chee Chung said: "If NKF and Ren Ci had never held TV shows, do you think they will be so well-known? The outreach of TV shows is far superior to other forms of publicity."

The society, which raised about \$3.9 million from its first and only charity show in 2007, said it is exploring the possibility of staging a show this year if it can find corporate sponsors. Its last show cost about \$900,000 to hold.

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