

Poetic Reconstruction of “Self-Centered” in the Cross-Cultural Theatre

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In cross-cultural theaters of the drama field, it has become a universal trend to integrate tradition and modernity as well as China and the West in the cultural exchange between different nations. Such a normality brings some new opportunities to the dramatic creation of youth directors while posing greater challenges. As to opportunities, it can make the stage processing of directors more distinctive while enriching their aesthetic pursuits; the challenge lies in how to endow the work with contemporary expression without breaking away from tradition. Nowadays, more and more directors are seeking “poetic reconstruction” in cross-cultural theaters, and keen direction artists are exploring how to better express the connotation of their work, including the inner feelings of roles, their subconsciousness, and transmitting the unfinished meaningful words delicately at the special time and space offered by the stage, and make use of the unique vocabulary of directors to form new aesthetic experience and expressive effects, so as to enlighten the audience to make rational reflection in addition to having emotional consonance. Therefore, “poetic reconstruction of ‘self-centered’” is critical in cross-cultural theatrical creation. In view of this condition, I will take the creation of *Xi*, an experimental drama, as an example, and discuss how directors reconstruct “self-centered” poetry in the cross-cultural theaters to form distinctive and unique expressions, so as to accomplish beneficial exploration of the co-existence of philosophy and beauty in the combination of classicism and contemporaneity and the process of taking in everything.

Keywords: self-centered, poetic reconstruction, traditional symbols, the narration in both eastern and western

The art of directing, being an integral part of theatrical art, not only serves as a most important driving force in its progress, but also impacts many other sister art forms. Rigid theoretical approaches have gradually been sealed and retired to the shelf like a statue for people to worship as the contemporary theatre finds itself against a different social backdrop. In consequence, new-generation directors have no choice but to undertake the task alone, contemplating on and exploring the best presentation approach and truly needed theatre form in our current life.

As the main creator of performance, a director primarily takes responsibility for enlivening stage performances with a state of life. However, in recent years, in order to exchange for something fresh and new in cross-cultural theaters, traditional Chinese operas have been frequently deconstructed, pieced up, and misappropriated, which seems to make the operas elegant, but actually destroys the poetic quality or aesthetics of traditional opera. Even worse, this is a random dismemberment of the cultural and aesthetic characteristics of the nation, deprived of unique value and causing homogeneity of cultural forms taken on by different nations.

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Therefore, the “self-centered” remodeling of poetic quality or aesthetics has become the first pressing issue to be studied faced by artists in their creative work.

Therefore, in this paper, I will take my theatrical work *Xi*¹ as the object of research. To begin with, it gathers both ancient and modern times as an organic whole, and has definite research significance from the cross-cultural perspective; in the second place, it discusses the poetic remodeling of bodies of Chinese imagery in the cross-cultural theater from the point that the director is the creator of performance, so as to help today’s theatre practitioners to tap deeper into the theatrical treasure of our times. In the meantime, the paper aims to provide valuable references for creative practitioners to reflect on the creation of contemporary in the cross-cultural theatre.

The Body of Chinese Imagery

Xi was adapted from a traditional opera named *Kill Xi in the Room Upstairs*². It tells a story about Yan Xijiao who was killed by Song Jiang for threatening Song Jiang to write a letter announcing their divorce and asking permission to marry Zhang Wenyuan. In order to excavate the depth of the characters’ desires and highlight the diversification and different sides of human nature, in its presentation, I make a dramatic construction of this traditional story, getting rid of excessively complex relationship between the characters, retaining only the relationship of three pairs of characters and strengthening it.

Reshaping of Poetic Quality by Classical Body Rhyme

As far as I am concerned, in the cross-cultural theatre, unique aesthetic expression can be created and poetic pursuits of performing subjects can be shown through the remodeling of the body. The remodeling of poetic quality or aesthetics is mainly reflected in the remodeling of the performers’ bodies for they are the most intuitive visual presentation for the audience from the East to the West to understand the plot and the characters.

The body movements of *Xi*, therefore, is the most important part of the whole opera. They serve as not only a means of depicting the exterior appearance of characters, but also an indispensable element in transmitting conception and aesthetics. The sitting, lying, walking, and running of characters all stress as sense of modeling as if they were to be painted. Reshaping the classical body rhyme is to make the characters clear to the audience at the first sight on the one hand, for example, showing Yan Xijiao’s gentleness and loveliness through the woman’s bent body; and on the other hand, reshaping aims to not only immerse the audience in the drama rapidly, but also create a certain unique poetic conception, a trait of the drama where aesthetics and philosophy coexist.

Combination of Props and Bodies

In 2017, it was lucky that I took part in The 10th APB Theatre School Directors’ Conference and Theatre Festival held in Shanghai Theater Academy, and I observed Ann Borg’s method of “viewpoint training” in a workshop. One exercise required learners to choose anything in the classroom for improvisation on the premise of not employing the property of the object itself. For instance, the performer could not perform drinking with a bottle of water, instead, he can do weightlifting or design other actions by giving rein to his imagination. I

¹ The experimental drama *Xi*, which was adapted from the traditional opera *Kill Xi in the Room Upstairs*, was shortlisted in the special invited unit of Beijing Nanluoguxiang Drama Festival in 2018 and the First Prism MINI Drama Festival in 2019. Director: Jiexiang Rao.

² *Kill Xi in the Room Upstairs* is a Peking opera drama adapted from the traditional Chinese legend, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, in which Song Jiang killed his wife—Yan Xijiao.

remember that a student took off one of his shoes and covered it upside down on top of his head. This action was not comprehended by the audience at present and triggered a lot of laughter until the learner explained that he was the First Emperor of Qin³. That laughter might be meaningless in the first place, it, however, left a deep impression on me. The imagery use of props is universal on traditional Chinese stages. For example, in Peking Opera, raising a whip means that the character in the drama is riding horses, paddling means rowing a boat, and so on. In the process of creating *Xi*, there were also many thorny issues, such as how to show that Yan Xijiao brought disasters to herself while ensuring both audio and visual effects, bringing to me the example mentioned above. As a result, I choose “strings” of “Erhu”, from a multitude of traditional Chinese music instruments, as it was similar to strings of western violins, whose sound in the theatrical space can strike a chord with the audience.

I required the actors to turn their back to the audience, and took their bodies as the music instrument of “Erhu”. When the actress was pulling the strings, the swinging of her body seemed to be sending out enticing signals in a solitary and tranquil deep recess... It was just with such strings like the “probe” of doctors in diagnosis that Song Jiang “detected” the dubious relationship between Yan Xijiao and Zhang Wenyuan, and it was just the irritating tonality that stirred up his desire of murdering. When Song Jiang strove to wring the string, it symbolized “Yan Xijiao’s life”.

Traditional Symbols and Western Expressions

After the deconstruction of the familiar moral pattern that lasts for tens of thousands of years, I keep contemplating on how to infuse the emotion with the same frequency and resonance with contemporary audiences and create a stylized poetic space throughout the whole creation process of the performance. So to speak, it is a very beneficial attempt to interpret “lust is hell” by applying the body language of Chinese imagery combined with the creation method of “viewpoint method training”.

The Logic of Poetry

Xi conforms to the logic of “poetry”, in other words, it is different from realism which shows the true face of life. Instead, it is created on the principle of lithographing life, or imagining the symbolic meaning of life. As the conception of Chinese “guqin” arouses the association with musical instruments like piano and it is stylish, a desk of “guqin” and two pieces of long voile constitute the main vision of the stage. Therefore, these three props are combined to create changeable scenes and highlight the aesthetic pursuits of the stage to the maximum extent.

For example, the symbolic meaning of the use of both “guqin” desk and the voile is expressed by virtual performance of actors, signifying different meanings through different combinations, the plot, and bodily expression. Sometimes, it symbolizes a bed, or a coffin, sometimes, it symbolizes the territory of Song Jiang, or murderous battlefield, slaughtering field, and even an open gate leading to hell, producing rich imagination in the audience, while completing the “self-centered” poetic remodeling.

The Combination of Narration in Both Eastern and Western Languages

The difficulty in showing “killing Yan Xijiao” lies in “how to kill”. As for the dramatic action of “killing Yan Xijiao”, starting from the relationship of the three characters, I take advantage of the structure of Rashomon and present different levels of killing in three different ways and three different body shapes, which differentiates *Xi* from other dramas adopting traditional linear narration.

³ An emperor in the Qin Dynasty of China.

For example, “dream” is a channel to explore the subconsciousness of characters and to build their psychological space-time. I take Song Jiang’s killing Yan Xijiao in the form of “dream” as the opening scene, which is to intentionally present the characters’ subconsciousness and psychological changing process directly on the stage. In the corresponding presentation, I make the most of the symbolic principle of management that is ubiquitous in the traditional Chinese operas, which is the combination of symbols of space, the stylized action of the performers, and the training methods of modern Western dramas. I also make some modifications and transformations of this “dream”, such as turning the stage space into a “Tai Chi” circle with traditional Chinese symbolic meaning, using Ann Borg’s method of “viewpoint training”, so that the dissociated characters can “enter” this “vicious circle”. At this time, the space is symbolizing the vicious circle of human nature, and it also looks like the vicious circle of moral ethics. While reflecting the special relationship of the three characters, the buzz of the Chinese classical musical instrument “bowl” helps to render the keynote of the whole “dream” and highlight the innermost activities of the characters, so as to explore the hidden deep consciousness of the characters and endow them again with a sense of reality after remodeling (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Stage photo of *Xi* performance.

Yan Xijiao has been killed by three men throughout her life. In the second scene of her “being murdered”, I arranged “committing suicide” to symbolize the prevention of Zhang Wenyan from assassinating Song Jiang. On the stage, correspondingly, the actor weaves “a piece of white silk” around her neck, a means of committing suicide by maids in the imperial palace of the ancient times. With the concrete actions, the little conscience of Yan Xijiao hidden beneath human nature that still remained and otherwise would be neglected, is pointed out, “paying a debt of gratitude”, or “exchange one life for another”, “returning one’s kindness with one’s own life”. In the moment when Zhang Wenyan lost control and raised his sword to stab at Song Jiang, Yan Xijiao’s inner conscience was aroused.

And “three times of being killed” penetrated the whole drama, since Yan Xijiao had already “died” on the day she sold her body to bury her dead father. To display the fate of women in a patriarchal society, the suppressing tone of the stage lasts from the design of “lying” at the opening scene to “standing” at the end of the drama.

It can be stated that killing “Yan Xijiao” in three different contexts is also an experimental way of expression in the pursuit of the Eastern spontaneous principle in the Western theatre space.

Style Is Culture: Remodeling of Poetic Quality or Flavor

The culture taking root in national soil is the foundation to form individual style. That is to say, everyone's creation personality, formation of style, and aesthetic pursuit are deeply influenced by their national culture.

About the Ways of Expressing “Sex” on the Stage

Traditional appeal can be seen everywhere in the creation of *Xi*. Besides the design of “circle” for the stage originating from the “Tai Chi” of Chinese Taoism, compared with the Western straightforwardness, the Eastern narration of “sex” tends to be presented as euphemistic and implicit.

Normally speaking, we can barely see scenes directly showing sex on traditional stages, which was presented through other measures. In the scene of illicit sexual relationship between Zhang Wenyuan and Yan Xijiao, I start with the traditional elements of Chinese wedding ceremonies and choose a “veil of the bride”, then make corresponding modification of the element and convert it into a long strip of voile. As the relationship was illicit, the red color couldn't represent the other layer of meaning. I add black color through a long strip of black and red voile, symbolizing a sexual affair that is too obscene to be exposed. The colors and the texture of the voile could transmit the mysterious colluding between the two, and the audience can see two overlapping bodies through the voile. There is also the sound of water in the fields at nighttime, interweaving coolness and heat. The scorch in the darkness highlights the two persons' blending in the open air, or the inseparable relationship in the quilt in a distorted resonance.

“Mourning Without Distress”

“Mourning without distress” is another aesthetic experience of Oriental appeal, which is also a unique way of emotion expression in the poetic remodeling of the drama *Xi*. The love and enmity between characters in the play is never as plain as if simply piercing the chest of each other. Even if death ends all troubles, compared with murdering to vent hatred in the West, Yan Xijiao's interwoven love and hatred seemed more delicate. After Yan Xijiao's death, she still missed Zhang Wenyuan, therefore, the classic “Catching Zhang Wenyuan's Soul” in ancient legends is a presentation hardest to be subverted.

Chinese Confucian philosophy underlines the Golden Mean, banning “going too far” or “not going far enough”. Therefore, the emotional expression of “hatred without anger”, “sorrow without rue”, and “mourning without distress” is most appropriate to end the story.

The long white silk floating in the air and a body in a red dress produce certain associations. In the weaving, breaking free, capturing and pulling process between the white silk and bodies, a series of polysemous expressions and symbolic meanings are slowly released, until the white silk slowly fades away in darkness when light is out... like the untouchable and uncontrolled heart in “a vicious cycle”, like two overlapping souls? Or like a girl, who wants to get rid of the gloomy prison, grab the last straw which is, however, illusory, dropping a hint to the world that Yan Xijiao was only a “ghost” to Song Jiang when she was alive, and became Song Jiang's woman when she died? Maybe, all these interpretations are reasonable.

Conclusions

As cross-cultural international communications become more and more frequent, cross-culture expression plays an increasingly prominent role under the theatrical spotlight among scholars. The existing cross-cultural researches, however, tend to focus on the artistic creation of Western directors, overlooking the rich theatrical treasure that rests in the findings of Oriental cross-cultural communications.

“Self-centered” actually gives priority to traditional touches, and is described as “a holistic creative concept built on the basis of the elements, techniques, visions and aesthetics of traditional Chinese culture and arts”⁴.

The remodeling of poetic quality or flavor in the cross-cultural theatre is always a process that is worth being exploring. Carrying out stylized remodeling of poetic quality or flavor through the body vocabulary of Chinese imagery, adhering to the “self-centered” artistic pursuits and taking in some artistic concepts and methods of Western dramas in a dialectical way, so as to form a kind of new and unique worldwide expression, which is not only filled with the aesthetic charm of traditional Chinese operas, but also permeates a global expression of modern consciousness and contemporary thinking.

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⁴ “The Modern Expression of Chinese Imagery” in Plays, by Xiaoying Wang, *People's Daily: Literature and Art*.