

Beyond the Binary Gaze: A Study of Leonie Böhm's Practice in Classical Cross-Cultural Adaptation

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German contemporary theatre director Leonie Böhm adapts three canonical dramas: *Medea*, *Three Sisters*, and *A Doll's House*, breaking away from the binary framework of conventional feminist adaptation that merely “opposes the male gaze and asserts the female gaze.” Rather than restoring source plots or reproducing canonical characters, she employs adaptive tactics including excerpting textual fragments from originals, simplifying character archetypes, stripping away extrinsic dramatic conflicts, and centering protagonists’ internal spiritual predicaments. Meanwhile, she capitalizes on theatre’s inherent medial attributes—live temporal synchronicity and autonomous spectator reception—to dismantle the power hierarchy of “seeing and being seen,” thereby forging an innovative paradigmatic theatrical gaze beyond biological sex and predicated on reflexive performer-audience interaction. Taking these three adapted productions as research cases, this paper pinpoints the intrinsic limitations of binary gaze theory as well as theatre’s innate medial strengths to transcend such constraints. It further delivers an in-depth textual analysis across three dimensions: textual adaptation, gender performativity, and scenic audiovisual symbolism. The study elucidates how Böhm’s deplotted and degendered theatrical praxis extricates female figures from the objectified position of representation and spectatorship, granting them subjective agency for internal emotional articulation. Ultimately, this paper distills the inspirational implications of her oeuvre for cross-cultural canonical adaptation, feminine theatrical articulation, and the contemporary theoretical extension of gaze studies.

Keywords: Leonie Böhm, classical drama, gaze theory, theatrical adaptation, gender performativity

Introduction

In the development of contemporary theatrical art, classical adaptation has always been a vital and vibrant topic, as well as a crucial path for literary classics to achieve cross-era and cross-cultural communication. *Medea* by Euripides, *Three Sisters* by Chekhov, and *A Doll's House* by Ibsen are landmarks in Western dramatic history, continuously restaged, rewritten and reconstructed in global theatres for over a century. Though these three works portray female characters with unprecedented depth for their times and offer unique depictions of women’s existential predicaments, it is undeniable that their female images are created by male playwrights. Whether remaining faithful to the original works or carrying out creative adaptation, they have long been confined to the binary gaze framework. Most traditional classical adaptations fall into two creative and adaptive inertia: One is to faithfully reproduce original plots and character destinies, perpetuating the existing gender narrative and gaze order; the other is to stage simple confrontation from a feminist standpoint

by deliberately reversing male-female power relations, yet are still trapped in the ideological cage of binary opposition.

The practice of classical cross-cultural adaptation by German female director Leonie Böhm breaks through the above two paradigms. The core originality of her creation lies neither in superficial cross-cultural reconstruction nor labeled declaration of feminist stance, but in refusing the binary confrontational logic of “male gaze vs. female gaze.” She reconstructs classics from multiple dimensions including narrative structure, stage presentation, and performer-audience relationship. On the one hand, she abandons the goal of restoring original storylines, shifting the focus to characters’ inner spiritual dilemmas, emotional rifts and identity confusion. She reconstructs the narrative perspective and connotation of classical works via minimalist stage design, restrained performance, fluid gender interpretation, and symbolic stage audiovisual symbols. On the other hand, she deconstructs the inherent gender solidified presuppositions of the gaze itself through adaptive strategies, constantly breaking the audience’s inherent expectations of classical plots and characters. In the interactive viewing experience with the audience, she generates playful aesthetic experience, guiding the audience to shift from passively accepting the plot to examining their own viewing behaviors and becoming subjects of reflexive gaze. Relying on its live nature, theatre constructs a new non-gendered, reflexive performer-audience gaze relationship. Taking Böhm’s three adapted works—*Medea**, *Schwestern*, and *Noorrrraaaaaa* as research objects, this paper systematically explores her theatrical creative philosophy, narrative strategies and the in-depth cultural connotations of classical cross-cultural adaptation.

Theoretical Limitations of the Binary Gaze and the Inherent Subversive Potentials of Theatrical Media

In 1975, Laura Mulvey put forward the male gaze theory in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. She pointed out that in patriarchal culture, “The female has always existed as a signatory to the male other, confined within established symbolic order: the male can use the power of language to project his fantasies and obsessions onto the silent image of the female; Women have become bearers of meaning, not creators” (Mulvey, 1975). This assertion laid the core cornerstone of feminist visual criticism.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Mulvey (1975) revealed that in traditional narrative imagery, men naturally occupy the dominant position of viewing, possessing perspective control, and meaning interpretation power; women are reduced to viewed and defined objects, with their bodies and images incorporated into the aesthetic and power order of patriarchal discourse. However, with the evolution of theory and the diversification of contemporary gender concepts, the inherent limitations of Mulvey’s gaze theory have become increasingly prominent. Dividing the subject and object of gaze, males and females by the boundary of biological gender ignores the fluidity and hybridity of contemporary gender identity, and fails to cover the complex performer-audience perception of multi-perspective and autonomous selective viewing in theatrical space. At the same time, the continuous improvement of women’s participation in literary creation and the rising enthusiasm for feminist theatrical creation have provided a temporal context for creators to reflect on traditional gender order and break the solidified gaze structure through classical adaptation. Nevertheless, merely reversing the gaze power and simply constructing a “female gaze” only replaces the original binary structure without fundamentally dismantling the rigid power logic underpinning the gaze.

Furthermore, we should acknowledge both the binary constraints of gaze theory and the unique mediality of theatre. Theatre differs intrinsically from film, granting it an inherent advantage in evading the dichotomous gaze. Cinema uses editing and shot composition to manipulate spectator perspective; confined within a sealed, unidirectional viewing space, audience readily slip into a passive, voyeuristic mode of monolinear looking. Theatre, by contrast, is inherently synchronous by virtue of its liveness: performers and spectators occupy a shared physical space, with no preconfigured camera angles dictating a fixed viewpoint. Spectators are free to select their focal points and adopt their own perspectives, unbound by the single narrative viewpoint imposed in film. This potential for free looking endows theatre with an innate aesthetic power to dismantle unilateral spectatorship, loosen rigid hierarchical relations, and foster pluralistic, dialogic interaction between performers and audiences.

Leonie Böhm's theatrical creation is precisely grounded in this theoretical bottleneck and medial disparities. On the one hand, she draws on the critical core of Mulvey's theory to deconstruct patriarchal narratives and gender conventions; on the other hand, she fully leverages theatre's liveness to dissolve the prerequisite of binary gaze opposition across textual, performative and audiovisual layers, constructing an equal, reflexive, and interactive dialogic relationship between seeing and being seen.

Deplotted Adaptation: From Visual Gaze to Spiritual Empathy

Leonie Böhm consistently applies a deplotted adaptation strategy to classical texts: excerpting original fragments, trimming character lineups, weakening external dramatic conflicts, and actively dissolving audience preconceptions of classical plots and character destinies. She shifts creative focus away from tangled external events toward characters' inner spiritual dilemmas and emotional rifts. This adaptive approach essentially untangles the inertial visual gaze driven by conventional plot-driven narration.

In *Medea**, Böhm discards the outer plot threads of Iason's betrayal, romantic entanglement, and filicidal revenge from the source text and deliberately downplays Medea's fiery, impassioned tragic disposition. The stage is fashioned as a minimalist space draped in white curtains, featuring just two roles: Medea and a musician. At the opening, *Medea* confesses plainly to the audience in a calm, restrained tone that "I plan to kill my children today," departing from the ferocious temperament Euripides attributes to the tragic heroine. The actress portraying Medea repeatedly addresses the audience as "friends," inviting spectators to witness her inner confessions and spiritual struggles and guiding them past mere curiosity about plot outcomes to immerse themselves in her spiritual torment ahead of her fatal choice. Onstage, Medea articulates her inner state largely through monologue, frequently retreating into secluded corners to process her emotions. Böhm strips away all extraneous dramatic action to center women's inner loneliness and spiritual fragmentation, recasting traditional tragic plot narration as lyrical spiritual expression and opening fresh interpretive ground for the classic.

Schwester, adapted from Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, adopts a comparable dramaturgical strategy. In this work as well, Böhm eliminates the original choral arrangement and condenses the expansive cast into a single male performer. He embodies the elder brother Andrey while simultaneously voicing the three sisters' lines and inner sentiments. Rather than maintaining rigid divides between roles, Böhm blurs character boundaries: She transposes the protagonists's unfulfilled longing to return to Moscow and their pervasive existential emptiness into a broader reflection on modern alienation and spiritual nihilism. Notably, the production was devised amid COVID-19 theatre shutdowns as a 56-minute live-streamed piece. Performing directly to camera, the actor

delivers a soliloquy on mundane futility. This monologue draws a parallel between the sisters' stifled lives as provincial women and the claustrophobia of lockdown alongside individual disorientation. His delivery is quiet and mournful, free of melodrama or farce, evoking a restrained, understated pathos. Closing his eyes in nostalgia for happier days shared with his siblings, he utters: "Your absence leaves me with an uncannily empty space," encapsulating rootless spiritual wandering.

Stripped of plot-driven conflict, the work frees audiences from plot-based judgment to engage with shared existential predicament, substituting spiritual empathy for plot-watching as the core of performer-audience exchange.

Noorrrraaaaaa, adapted from *A Doll's House*, follows the same deplotted logic. Böhm minimizes canonical narrative threads surrounding marital strife, financial dispute and Nora's final exit from her domestic cage. Since its 1879 Copenhagen premiere, iconic moments including Nora's Christmas-tree decorating and Helmer's tarantella coaching, alongside established performance tropes and physical blocking, have solidified an entrenched stage tradition for the play. Rejecting this convention, Böhm casts two female actors as Nora and Helmer, clad in neutral everyday costume for understated, playful interaction. Rather than fixating on grand debates over marital ethics and female emancipation, she centers intimate spiritual estrangement, self-erasure and identity confusion, cultivating gentle melancholy tinged with quiet warmth and prompting audiences to shed stereotyped readings to reconsider gender dynamics and individual existence.

Overall, Böhm's deplotted adaptation does not dilute classical depth. By suspending external conflicts and eliminating narrative suspense, she strips conventional theatre of the visually captivating pull of high-stakes plotting, redirecting spectator focus from plot twists and character fates toward inner psyche and spiritual being and laying textual groundwork to undo the binary gendered gaze.

Deconstruction of Binary Gaze in Stage Performance: Gender Fluidity and Audiovisual Imagery

If deplotted adaptation loosens the inertia of gaze at the textual level, then gender-fluid performance and stage audiovisual imagery further dismantle the inherent logic of gaze bound to biological gender from within theatrical media, strengthening the thematic expression of the work. Instead of deliberately advocating female confrontation, Böhm dissolves the discipline of gender labels on characters through cross-gender performance, neutral costumes and blurred role attribution, breaking the inherent cognition that biological gender determines viewing power and expression.

Schwestern is performed entirely by a single male actor, who bears multiple spiritual perspectives of Andrey and the three sisters. The dissonance between the actor's biological gender and the character's spiritual identity dissolves the stereotype that "Women's stories can only be performed by women," proving that spiritual nihilism and confusion are universal propositions transcending gender. The audience no longer defines characters by biological gender labels, naturally stepping out of the binary gaze framework.

Noorrrraaaaaa features two female actors performing the heterosexual marital relationship of Nora and Helmer, with neutral costumes and degendered physical expression weakening the temperament and behavioral paradigms of male and female roles. The two actresses alternately simulate daily marital life and break away from roles to deliver monologues, with identity and gender always in a fluid state. This performance approach deconstructs the gender power paradigm in traditional marriage narratives; the female body is no longer a visual object to be watched and defined, but a spiritual carrier for exploring the self and interpreting relationships.

Notably, the original texts of Böhm's three adapted works are all written by male playwrights. As stated in *Women's Drama in Cross-Cultural Contexts*, the core of women's drama "lies not in taking women as the focus in form, but in whether the script embodies female consciousness" (SU, 2016, p. 21) as research objects. Male playwrights' lack of experience and perception of female life inevitably affects their subtle and profound expression of female psychology. Meanwhile, fixed scheduling and performance logic adopted by classical works for a long time have severely restricted creative space. Completely breaking away from this inertia, Böhm adopts a restrained, introverted and quiet improvisational creative style, refusing to shape the female body into visual spectacle and aesthetic consumer goods, and returning performance to spiritual expression itself, realizing the decoupling of gaze power from biological gender.

At the same time, Böhm visualizes characters' repressed inner personality, spiritual trauma and identity confusion through minimalist blank stage imagery and symbolic props. John Berger pointed out in *Ways of Seeing*: "This has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself" (Berger, 1972, p. 46). This split is often manifested as "She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others...as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman" (Berger, 1972, p. 46).

Böhm materializes women's inner division and struggle with stage imagery, enabling the audience's intuitive perception and reconstructing the spiritual focus of viewing. She regularly sets a secluded curling space for each character on stage, such as the bull headgear in *Medea**, the snake puppet in *A Doll's House*, and the black leopard in *Three Sisters*. These props are external symbolic representations of characters' inner worlds, forming Böhm's unique theatrical language and helping the audience better understand characters' spiritual states.

In *Medea**, the bull imagery derived from the original work is reinterpreted by Böhm as a spiritual symbiotic symbol of Medea. In the original opening, the nanny describes Medea with "Her eyes are like a bull's," portraying her as a wild and dangerous outsider. In Böhm's adaptation, this imagery is transformed into a symbol of Medea's self-identity. She confesses in monologue about how she "becomes like a bull." At the finale lasting nearly twenty minutes, Medea takes off her wig, walks slowly to the center of the stage along the edge, puts on the bull-themed robe, and dances in a lion-dance-like posture. She internalizes the outsider label imposed by external gaze into a self-spiritual identity symbol. The audience's viewing focus shifts from women's external physical form to in-depth spiritual metaphor, completing the subjective transformation of *Medea* from being defined by others to self-expression.

In *Schwester*, the silent standing black leopard mechanical puppet inspired by Rilke's *The Leopard* forms an independent other-gaze dimension on stage. The leopard's alienation, aloofness and silence mirror the three sisters' displaced spiritual wandering, and also form the interweaving of multiple gazes within the stage: the actor's self-expression, the leopard's silent gaze, and the audience's spectator scrutiny. This breaks the monopoly of single dominant gaze and forms a multi-directional and equal network of viewing perspectives. It further diverts the audience's gaze from watching characters and plots to appreciating imagery, symbols and metaphors, bypassing the discipline of patriarchal aesthetics on the female body.

Constructing a Reflexive Theatrical Gaze Beyond Binary Opposition

Through the practical analysis of textual adaptation, gender performance and stage imagery, the core of Leonie Böhm's creation is clear: She neither reproduces the patriarchal gaze order of traditional classics nor deliberately creates a simple oppositional reverse female gaze. Instead, she deconstructs the gender binary logic

of gaze fundamentally, constructing a reflexive gaze paradigm adapted to theatrical media and transcending biological gender boundaries.

Stage roles are no longer passive objects to be watched, represented and disciplined, but independent subjects with complete inner spiritual worlds capable of self-disclosure and autonomous expression. The audience is no longer passive viewers guided by plots and camera lenses; relying on the free perspective of theatre, they reflect on their own viewing stance and gaze inertia while watching the performance, completing the reflexive sublimation from “observing others” to “reflecting on the self.” For classical cross-cultural adaptation, Böhm offers a brand-new creative path: There is no need to adhere to plot reproduction and positional confrontation; creators can cut into characters’ inner spiritual worlds inwardly and release the polysemous interpretive space of classics through deplotted and degendered creation. For female theatrical creation, her practice further proves that the construction of female subjectivity does not lie in deliberate gender confrontation, but in breaking the discipline of gender power and granting every individual’s inner spirit the right to be listened to and seen.

Leonie Böhm’s classical cross-cultural adaptation based on *Medea*, *Three Sisters* and *A Doll’s House* is an important exploration for contemporary theatre to break the shackles of binary gaze and reconstruct performer-audience relations. She strips off the inertia of plot gaze through deplotted textual adaptation, dismantles the biological gender foundation of gaze through gender-fluid performance, realizes the visualization of inner spirit via symbolic stage imagery, and ultimately breaks through the binary limitations of Mulvey’s gaze theory by virtue of theatre’s live synchronicity and autonomous perspective media attributes. She establishes a new paradigmatic theatrical gaze featuring spiritual empathy and performer-audience reflexivity beyond gender opposition.

Conclusion

In all three of these works, Böhm dismantles long-standing conventional staging conventions and rigid binary modes of gendered gazing, granting dramatic heroines autonomous subjectivity and a voice of their own. Her theatrical practice expands the scope of Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory and carves out new directions for the intercultural adaptation of classical theatre, offering tangible practical illustrations of how subjectivity may be constructed and beauty reimagined within contemporary female theatre. While such traditions endure via classical inheritance and a wide spectrum of modern theatrical practices, Böhm’s adaptive methodology reveals an important lesson: the longevity of classical adaptation hinges not on faithful replication of canonical templates, but on subverting inherited aesthetic frameworks and power hierarchies through authentic dramatic utterance rooted in modern lived experience. Likewise, the merit of female theatre does not reside in confrontational gender positioning. Instead, it consists in dismantling restrictive categorizations, amplifying suppressed inner subjectivity, confronting hegemonic spectatorship, and fostering a democratic, plural space for interspiritual dialogue within the liveness of shared, real-time performance. This process allows canonical texts to retain renewed critical resonance across cultural contexts in the present day.

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