

The Return of Actors' Body Essence in Theaters

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Abstract. Experimental theaters of dance and drama are gaining international attention for finding unique aesthetics core of Chinese traditional philosophy. Via actors' body to embody mans' inner world without lines artists had been seeking more primitive and sheer forms of artistic expression like the ancients. From the perspective of Somaesthetics, this paper discusses the Chinese traditional somaesthetic consciousness embodied in Dance Theater and Physical Theater. Then we recapitulate viewpoints of body in Chinese traditional philosophy that found expression in Somaesthetics proposed by Richard Schusterman. A type of new relationship of actors and spectators will be the field that is worth to develop further in dramatic aesthetics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Freshly being rewarded the Silver Lion in The 2023 Lions For Dance at February 8 , The company TAO Dance Theater blending the traditional dance of China and modern dance has been dedicated to the propaganda of modern dance for public. Focusing on body more intently can be found in more types of arts of Physical Theater, like Theater SanTuoQi, who has been promoted physical theater, a post-modern style of drama. Aside from their novel forms of performance, their focuses on human body intricate actors' cognition towards bodies connected with minds, emotions and sensations of the world. What being mentioned above are the novel examinations in two separated field of arts, dance and drama, and overturn the tradition in their art forms that include the pursue of skillful body and emphasis on lines. As two independent art forms derived from the same source, dance and drama are inner hearts or minds embodiment of people through human bodies, thus in these innovation of their shapes in theater, artists are detecting ways to re-define actors' bodies for a more pure purpose like the ancients. In this research, we analyse the current novelty of body theaters from a body aesthetic perspective to explore the common awareness of modern and ancient human on their bodies and to contrast gaps of body nature between the primitive art and post-modern art for the goal of using our bodies to better engage and perceive the world, and to effectively express our inner minds and emotions through more natural and sheer ways .

2. THE NOVEL EXAMINATION OF ACTORS' BODY IN THEATERS

2.1 Physical Theater Created By Zhao Miao

One of the most representative explorations of physical theater is founded by Zhao Miao who established Theater SanTuoQi in 1996, and began to perform physical theaters since 2003. At the early stage of the introduction of physical theater into China, artists are still followers of western forms of non-verbal performance. The turnaround from followers to creators has emerged along with the integration of traditional Chinese aesthetic culture. Differing from traditional drama originated from the west, Physical Theater pursue the symbolic expression via actors' bodies rather than realistic techniques, which is highly similar to Chinese Opera in aesthetic pursuit. In the Traditional Chinese Opera, whatever actors' performance, costumes and scenes all present in freehand manners, a kind of virtualized means of artistic expression in almost all kinds of Chinese traditional culture. Actors performing through abstract body actions requires audiences mobilize their abundant imaginations to understand and extend meanings of the whole manifestation. As a non-verbal physical performing form, Physical Theater also unfold people inner worlds in the same abstract and exaggerated body motions. With the thoroughly extensive and profound aesthetic tradition of ancient Chinese, the Physical Theater in China have found its own way to set off an original path. The Chinese original physical theater, Shui Sheng came from the classical novel Strange Tales from LiaoZhai in Qing Dynasty, integrates elements of Nuo opera breeding in Guizhou province into its' performance. "Nuo dance is a kind of dance to offer sacrifices to the gods, which is

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effectively integrated into the drama. In spite of exaggerated with it, Nuo dance remains its sense of beauty. At the beginning of the plot, with the aid of background music, the energy information conveyed on the stage feels like watching a sacrifice ceremony, which it is not actually a sacrifice, but the confrontation between the devil and the water ghost in the play." [1] For the parallel purpose, the ancient Chinese dance in ritual ceremonies for sacrifice and worship resembling as the Greeks did at Bacchanalia. The director uses masks to cover actors' faces, allows actors' physical movements to communicate directly with spectators via amplified and freehand body languages, which makes actors' bodies representations of souls, characters, even components in the scenery. As to the mysterious meanings conveyed by these abstract somatic actions, they also leave spaces to spectators to envision thoroughly for catching the implications. Realistic performance and true-life stage are these dramatists' pursuits not any more instead of stylized theatrics and more primitive physical expression of collective human minds.

2.2 Tao Dance Theater In China

Professional dance has promoted the development of dance theater during the last centuries, while, as to other forms of arts, dance was born out of early human experiences, which embodied intrinsic desires of early humans. Established in 2008, Tao Dance Theater is dedicated to the public promotion of modern dance and researches of the theory of "yuan (circular or circling) movement system", a motion that turns dance back to general public to focus more on their own bodies. The original purpose of Tao Dance Theater to establish the public welfare workshop is to let more people understand the real meanings of the modern dance through teaching engagement rather than rigidifying dance. One of founders of Tao Dance Theater, Tao Ye, said that "Dance is inherently a kind of primitive art and fully interlinked with former poem, music and dance." He continued that "It used to be a whole, which could be without gesture, melody or narrative, so it has never been a boundary. For the creator, it had no limits and the only connection between the three was rhythm, but now it is all separate. Therefore, we try to find a correlation between dance and the public at present, which is of course the dream of all dancers in this era, which is relatively distant." [2] "13" "14" are the newly created "Numerical series" dance pieces, and will soon greet our eyes on stages at home and abroad.

"Yuan movement system" is enlightened by the body charm in Chinese classical dance, which is inseparable with Chinese Opera body movement. Featuring the eastern somaesthetics, "Yuan movement system" assimilating styles of Chinese classical dance and Chinese Opera into modern dance have reconstructed physical languages of modern dance in the Orient. "We found that the movements in Chinese Opera make up overall language system. They are not separated into isolated pieces but connected, they align with one

circle, one breath which are successive." said by Tao Ye. In the meantime, more participants engaged in the teaching workshop have found their new forms of life, where they cannot unfold in real life, some where individuals are free to move their bodies, and from moving via their bodies to moving from souls. Dancers in the theater were able to find ways to communicate with each other and, more importantly, their own bodies in ways they never had before, just as our ancients attempted to communicate with nature and God through sacrificial rituals at the dawn of dance. "There is no exceptions that the primitive motion everyone came this place are pure, just moving their bodies, but then touching their souls." [3]

3. SOMAESTHETICS EMBODIED IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE AESTHETICS

3.1 Symbiotic Soma

Different from the isolation between sensibility and reason featured traditional aesthetics in the west, the Chinese traditional aesthetics of body put emphasis on the integration of body and mind. "Chinese classical aesthetics derives from the body and fully affirms the rational desire of the body. In a sense, Chinese classical aesthetics is not only a kind of aesthetics of the body, but also a kind of aesthetics of the desire" [4] Richard Schusterman has proposed "somaesthetics" blended traditional aesthetics of west and east in his book "Pragmatic Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art", which dissolved the tradition of dividing spirit and corpus. Schusterman's exploration on Chinese traditional philosophy came from the preface writing for the Chinese translation of his book, Pragmatic Aesthetics. After in-depth studies of Confucianism and Taoism, Schusterman put consistency of body and mind in Chinese traditional philosophy in the core of Somaesthetics. Symbiotic soma highlights an interactional, transactional entity contained physical and social environment. Relational and interactional soma should be contextualized, which is defined by our conversations with ourselves, each others, and the world. "The self is relational and symbiotic. This idea inspires a broader idea of body reformism -- the idea that we are responsible for caring for and reconciling the environmental characteristics of our physical selves rather than just our own body parts." Said by Schusterman in his book: Body Consciousness And Somaesthetics, "Such a universal model of body self-cultivation expresses the Chinese Confucian ideal of body cultivation: 'being one with all things in heaven and earth'." [5] Schusterman believes that artistic creation has been seen as a tool of self-cultivation and communication, which reveals the ultimate goal of arts—a constant improvement of individuals and his life and arts.

3.2 Plastic Soma

The controversial Somaesthetics Schusterman promoted in the west had received encouragements and supports in China. One of the reasons is that the plasticity of body in Somaesthetics identify with Self-cultivation theory in Confucianism and Noble Body of Taoism. In other words, body in both Somaesthetic and traditional Chinese aesthetics highlight a learned body which is called "Born and Made" body that means nurturant body follows naturally born soma. "Traditional Chinese philosophy is more than just observation and cognition based on pure theory, but also in the form of a body and mind can be applied practicing the personal experience of spiritual practice, and on the basis of this experience, which obtain the super higher level knowledge of everyday experience." [6] This plasticity embodied in Somaesthetics is body consciousness through numbers of types of somatic education and therapies. These emphases on the soma not only consider body as a way of communication to human themselves and community, but put body on the starting point for shaping and cultivating oneself inner world. The other consistency in Confucianism and Taoism on discussions of body is all shapes of artistic cultivation. Bodily representation in Confucianist thought displaying one's virtue which is directly linked to political reconstruction values Propriety for refined and elegant art, and practical art and techniques are mainly concerned by Taoist thought. Despite the differences, they are the embodiment of Chinese philosophical pragmatism.

4. A NEW SPACE IN THEATERS BETWEEN ACTORS AND SPECTATORS IN DRAMATIC AESTHETICS LENS

As a form of art with the body as the material, drama is the essential embodiment of human life consciousness, and this kind of performance of human body is by no means the body image, it is an unity of physical and mental, which is closely connected with consciousness and emotion. And this uniformity is just ignored by the contemporary drama teaching and drama stage. Fortunately, theater artists have been rediscovering the original essence of the human body in experimental theater. If body movements are objective symbols used to express subjective consciousness in dance, then in physical drama, the body is a complete carrier that organically integrates the body language of the actor and the inner language of the audience's imagination. Contemporary drama pays more attention to the inner level of human beings. In the school of physical drama, restoring the body's expression of life consciousness and diluting the social attributes of human beings is not so much a pioneering exploration of postmodern drama as a return to the nature of the body in primitive drama. On the basis of showing the essence of human spirit, contemporary drama gradually attaches importance to the narrative expression of the body, intending to convey more philosophical and rational content through the

actors' bodies. In all kinds of explorations, the essence of "body" is not limited to the human body itself, but integrates the objective and subjective space, the imagination and philosophy of the audience.

The exploration of somaesthetics in drama field in China is still at the primary stage. Hu Penglin, the earliest scholar who discussed drama from the perspective of body aesthetics, connected the body aesthetics with Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, traced the development of the "unity of body and mind" body view reflected in Artaud's drama, and analyzed that the unprecedented attention of cruel drama to the body level was due to its breakthrough in the traditional western philosophy of the body view. Integrate the aesthetics of western drama and Eastern drama and put them into practice, Xiao Ying, professor at Shanghai Theatre Academy, further interprets the body aesthetics in traditional Chinese aesthetics directly from the body aesthetics in opera performances. She believes that Taoist culture directly influences the body aesthetic ideal in Chinese opera, directly appeals to the body aesthetics in traditional Chinese culture and the relationship between body and mind, and builds a different body aesthetics discourse system from the West. In the newly published article from Applied Drama to Dramatic Body Aesthetics, which focuses on Somaesthetics, Hu Xuyue formally discusses applied drama, namely a drama form with more practical significance, and introduces foreign practical cases of applied drama. They present the healing and educational significance of drama through the medium of the body, and applied drama can treat individuals and groups. And even the political implications of social change. It shows us the greater potential of drama development.

Under the influence of defamiliarization effect, Physical Theater had set up a kind of new relationship between actors and spectators reflected on post-modern drama. Expressive body movement had replaced locutionary act, which reserve more expansive margins for reasonable judgment and emotional imagination of audiences. Thus connotations actor's had not literally performed gain more possibility for audiences to interpret it. One of the signs that primitive drama was separated from original dance, narrativity of human body, has showed a trend of gradual weakening. It is a breakthrough to the stereotype of passive reception for audiences' habits. The thinking process draw people closer to the essence of things. Actors' bodies became semiotic existence leave spectators isolate from dramatic plots. This characteristic of abstraction is also one of Chinese aesthetic pursuits.

5. Conclusion

As the most ancient language of humanity, physical movement has been embodied people pure spirits and minds until the appearance of the characters. Expressed in highly sociable persons, words had already dwarfed body languages. Fortunately, the encouraging signs had showed that experimental theaters of dance and drama in both original forms of arts are re-finding the primitive essence

of human body. The presentation of Somaesthetics by Schusterman draws our attention to soma as the source of conscious activity, which is valuable in whatever philosophy, aesthetics, sociology or art. Attention on man's emotional, sensorial and interactional bodies has been witnessing a return in theaters. With more researches about Somaesthetics, the new horizon of Drama Aesthetics of body needs our values to be explored further.

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