

Drama "Heroic Age": Exploration and Innovation

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Abstract: NTLive is a pioneering project initiated by the National Theatre of the United Kingdom in 2009, aiming to present outstanding works on the world stage to global audiences through high-definition screenings. In 2021, the National Theatre of China completed the production of the Chinese version of the high-definition video drama "Heroic Times". This work is a bold attempt and has received a relatively good social response. Although its form far outweighs its content, it has, after all, blazed a trail for China in this field. Of course, there is still a long way to go for the production and promotion of NTLive in China.

Keywords: China National Theatre Company, "Heroic Times", NTLive

1. Introduction

In December 2024, I was honored to be selected as a participant in the National Art Fund's Young Drama Criticism Talent Training Program at the National Theatre of China. During the training period, the teachers from the Art Research Center showed us the National Theatre's drama production "Heroic Times".

The play tells the story of a shopping mall in the city of Deep Sea being rigged with a bomb by a ruthless criminal, posing a serious threat to the lives of thousands of people in the mall. The police of Deep Sea City sprang into action, with the criminal police, traffic police, community police, and bomb disposal experts working closely together. They successfully captured the criminal Wei Haishan with their advanced professional skills and rich experience in handling cases, thus averting a potential disaster [1, 2].

2. The Characteristics of "Heroic Times"

2.1 Stage Characteristics

As the National Theatre's first high-definition video drama, "Heroic Times" strives for breakthroughs in stage design and filming. It employs the artistic technique of synchronizing real time with stage time and uses multiple camera angles and shot sizes to combine the theatrical language of the stage with the filming vocabulary of film and television (as stated by director Bai Haotian of "Heroic Times").

In the production record, Liu Kedong, the stage director and designer, wrote that they exposed all the theater's structural elements that were previously hidden by curtains on the stage, including the rigging system, the

lift stage, and the motors, channels, and ceiling beneath the lift stage, allowing the audience to clearly see the real structure of the theater. The stage designer created a huge symbolic space on the stage, with the entire structure resembling a nine-square grid Rubik's Cube. By using a turntable, this cube transforms into different scenes, including a shopping mall, a police station, a boxing ring, an equipment room, and a street. The theater's architectural structure and the stage design form a huge combination, providing a broader creative and dramatic space for the theatrical work [3,4].

2.2 Visual Features

The version we saw and the one played on iQIYI does not have an audience scene, but according to the video I found online, there were audiences on the scene. However, there is no live audience sound in the film and television version, which indicates that the sound in the common film and television version was not recorded live but was done through internal recording, unlike the stage version. Wang Zichun, the sound designer of the play, wrote in the production record that the sound production of this play was based on the logic of film and television sound rather than that of stage plays.

In addition, in the film and television version, we see a large number of medium shots, close-ups, even extreme close-ups and extreme close-ups, as well as a few moving shots and even the use of whip pans, and sharp editing, including cross-cutting and parallel montage. All these indicate that the stage version and the film and television version of this play are quite different.

Although there are few full-stage shots in the film and television version, from the production photos in the "Heroic Era" production record, it can be seen that the stage presentation is quite impressive, full of a sense of technology and modernity, and even has a cyberpunk

style. The nine-square grid steel structure divides the performance space of the characters, and through the use of a turntable, it can display the spaces where different groups of characters are located on the same plane at specific times, and achieve depth presentation of the stage at other times. Coupled with the use of lighting and ice screens, a film and television montage effect is presented on the stage.

The performance spaces include the command headquarters with Zheng Ju (played by Han Tongsheng) as the main character, the bomb disposal scene with Meng Ping (played by Xin Baiqing), the leader of the bomb disposal police team, as the main character, the kidnapping scene with Wang Erda (played by Li Guangjie), the deputy director of Nanhu Police Station, and Wei Haishan (played by Ni Dahuang), the kidnapper, as the main characters, the traffic command headquarters with Hu Xiaoya (played by Liu Jingjing), the traffic police commander, as the main character, and the boxing ring, cake shop, police station, and various floors of the shopping mall that Hu Anquan (played by Liu Peiqi) passes through. This "nine-square grid magic cube" arranges so many characters and spaces in an orderly manner, which is truly amazing and exquisite [5-7].

In the end credits of the film, there is a position called "director". This play is not a live broadcast, so the video signal provided by the "director" is obviously not output to TV or the Internet in real time, but to 24 ice screens. Instant shooting, instant editing, and instant projection provide the most direct viewing experience for the audience on the spot. However, this stage arrangement and the real-time presentation of the ice screen video signal, although they give equal attention to each performance space and have a strong sense of presence, also bring the problem that there is no main performance area in the play. Therefore, I guess the on-site viewing experience is not perfect. Of course, this also indicates from another aspect that "Heroic Era" is not a play created for the "stage", but one suitable for the "screen" of all sizes.

3. Characterization and Suspense

3.1 Characterization

This is a work that prioritizes form over content, and the essential attribute of 'Age of Heroes' is definitely a play, not a film or television drama. The plot is still propelled forward by dialogue and actors' performances, rather than by editing and action. The play is also relatively simple, with a straight and single line structure. Perhaps due to the short length and too many characters, most of the characters are depicted in a relatively flat manner. Except for Wang Erda, the other characters have no arc light. Although Wang Erda has experienced some growth, the driving force comes from external factors, and he himself is relatively passive. All positive characters exhibit high spiritual attributes, insufficient internal drive, low physical desires, and difficulty in empathizing with the audience. On the villain's side, Wei Haishan's criminal motive is even somewhat inexplicable,

clearly exhibiting an 'antisocial personality'. Of course, with the excellent acting skills of veteran actors such as Liu Peiqi, Ni Dahong, Han Tongsheng, Li Guangjie, and Xin Baiqing, the shortcomings of the characters have been maximally compensated for, achieving the goal of "protecting the audience". Therefore, the overall impression is still good. The drama conveys the spirit and heroic deeds of the people's police in the new era to the audience through vivid artistic images and exciting plot, promotes the spirit of heroism, allows the audience to feel the greatness and nobility of public security officers, and inspires people's admiration for heroes and pursuit of social justice.

3.2 Suspense

In addition, in terms of creating suspense, I think this play does a good job, especially in its multiple brilliant uses of the "last-minute rescue" and "Hitchcock's bomb" techniques from film narrative methods. Moreover, in each suspenseful setup, it provides sufficient unknowns, possibilities, and a sense of pressure. The police characters and the audience simultaneously experience the loss of control over the situation, achieving complete empathy. Of course, to create suspense, mere unknowns are not enough. This play also offers sufficient possibilities each time a crisis emerges. Finally, there is the sense of pressure. The screenwriter and director have their own ingenious ideas, such as setting up "time locks" and "space locks" for bomb detonation. These methods effectively enhance the sense of pressure the plot brings to the audience. Regarding "defusing bombs", compared to films, stage plays are indeed less adept at handling such events. The theme of "defusing bombs" has been well-represented in many Hollywood films and Hong Kong movies, such as Jan de Bont's "Speed", Kathryn Bigelow's "The Hurt Locker", and Chen Musheng's "New Police Story", as well as the "Deactivation Expert" series directed by Qiu Lita. For instance, in the Hong Kong film "Deactivation Expert", when Zhang Zai Shan (played by Andy Lau) defuses the bomb on police officer Huang Tian Nuo (played by Choi Hang Yee), the actor Choi Hang Yee presents the character's despair, helplessness, strength, and bravery all at once, with warmth and depth, touching the audience. Coupled with the reactions of everyone in front of the police station's large screen, a sense of sadness is pushed to a climax. Another example is in "New Police Story", when Sun Keyi (played by Cecilia Cheung) is strapped with a bomb and cuts the fuse herself when her boyfriend, police team leader Chen Guorong (played by Jackie Chan), leaves to seek help. The audience's emotions rise and fall with the actor's performance. These are all excellent examples of "defusing bombs", "explosive disposal", and "last-minute rescue".

4. NT Live

4.1 UK

Let's now focus on NT Live. The full name of NT Live is National Theatre Live, which means the live broadcast of the National Theatre of the UK. The theatre uses high-tech means to shoot and broadcast live performances in high definition. The project was officially launched in 2009, with Helen Mirren's play "Hippolyta" as the first production, which was first screened on June 25, 2009. It broadcasts live stage plays to cinemas and art venues in the UK and other parts of the world via satellite, including both live broadcasts and rebroadcasts. The content mainly consists of stage plays produced by the National Theatre of the UK, as well as outstanding works from other theatres, such as those from the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. It covers various art forms including drama, musicals, dance, and opera. Initially, it was only shown in 70 theatres in the UK, but now it has reached over 3,500 theatres in 75 countries. As Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan once said, "The medium is the message." The emergence of new media has led to the birth of new art forms. The National Theatre of the UK was worried that its glory would fade in the new media era and thus came up with the idea of NT Live to attract audiences. Although I think this worry is somewhat unnecessary for this world-class theatre, this forward-thinking mindset is truly admirable. However, for most theatre workers around the world, this predicament must be faced. Nevertheless, new opportunities are also emerging, such as the attempt to combine theatre with new media. NT Live is undoubtedly a revolution in the form of stage play viewing. Moreover, it is an effective way to bring the ancient art of theatre to the masses. But no matter what, the essence of NT Live is still theatre and should remain so. I have watched several NT Live performances before, including "Hamlet" directed by Lindsay Turner and starring Benedict Cumberbatch, and "King Lear" directed by Jonathan Munby and starring Ian McKellen. I have also watched the London West End version of "Uncle Vanya", and seen some clips of "War Horse" on short video platforms.

On February 28th this year, the National Theatre's NT Live production of "The Burial at Thebes", starring international star Jodie Comer, was scheduled for release in cinemas across China. This marked the first time an NT Live production was distributed nationwide in Chinese cinemas. The release of "The Burial at Thebes" signified a new breakthrough for overseas theatrical films in the Chinese market. It expanded new revenue sources for NT Live's distribution and also demonstrated that niche works can unlock greater market potential through meticulous operation, bringing additional income to cinemas and further broadening channel resources. This was indeed a high-quality production. On Douban, over 200,000 people gave the play a high score of 9.5. Such a high score reflects the audience's high recognition of the film's quality. Its topicality and accessible expression resonated with mainstream

audiences, allowing viewers to deeply feel the strong impact of the themes conveyed by the work, such as women's "sexual consent rights". The production was of high quality and the actors' performances were excellent, but the play's monologue format was difficult for Chinese audiences to accept when presented in cinemas. After 56 days of screening, it grossed 35.383 million yuan, performing poorly in cinemas and failing to achieve success. This outcome indicates that introducing NT Live in this way may not be the best approach. China truly needs its own NT Live.

4.2 China

Overall, I feel that the film and television versions of our plays have a different atmosphere and purpose from the NT Live of the National Theatre of the UK. The purpose of the UK's NT Live seems to be to provide the best video presentation for audiences who cannot be present at the scene, while our high-definition theatre images are more like shooting a TV drama, with the aim of "getting more young people into the theatre" and "making more people pay attention to Chinese theatre and bringing Chinese theatre to a broader stage" (as stated by Bai Haotian, the director of "Heroic Times").

5. Conclusion

Dramatists extend their reach through NT Live, striving to attract young people into the theater. Our NT Live serves as a promotional video for drama, just as television dramas were born to serve television commercials. In the behind the scenes short film of the NT Live version of "Skylight" at the National Theatre in the UK, screenwriter David Hale revealed in an interview with the host that he would be happy to see his work filmed by NT Live, as the result would be more people around the world watching the work.

"Heroic Age" is the first NT Live produced by the National Theatre of China. Although there are still some flaws in its positioning, script, and filming methods, such as some shortcomings in the film and television presentation, such as too many forward and backward shots and very few panoramic views during online broadcasting, which cannot see the theatrical effect and affect the overall viewing experience. Some people also feel that the script lacks some programmatic expression and there are some unreasonable logical motivations for the characters. Overall, the advantages of 'Age of Heroes' are quite prominent, as it is a work of high artistic level and social value. This is a brave attempt. Compared to the UK's NT Live works, "The Age of Heroes" is more complex and cutting-edge. In the words of Song Cheng, the film director of "The Age of Heroes", this work is somewhat groundbreaking, forward-looking, and interactive. The filming of "The Age of Heroes" will be a new exploration and innovation in the development history of Chinese drama.

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