

Embodied theatricality: Abstract narrative and spatial composition in TAO dance theater

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Abstract. TAO Dance Theater stands out internationally for its unique choreographic approach characterized by of minimalism and abstract narrative in his choreography. However, the minimalist choreographic language and the spatial composition have received relatively little scholarly attention. By looking at selected works from TAO Dance Theater's Numerical Series, this paper considers how theatrical meaning and emotional resonance can emerge in the absence of conventional narrative or symbolic content. Through careful performance analysis, case studies, and theoretical explorations which rooted in phenomenology, Taoism, and postmodern theater, the paper asks how repetition, spatial dynamics and physical constraints congeal around audience perception. From these findings, it appears that TAO Dance Theater subverts the sense of theatricality by placing emphasis on bodily presence and prescribed rhythm, creating contemplative as well as emotional experience.

1 Introduction

In recent years, the trend that blends contemporary dance and theater in performance is popping up everywhere in performing arts. In the thriving arts and culture environment, TAO Dance Theater has shown an extraordinary presence, drawing international acclaim for its distinct choreographic approaches and significant artistic contributions. While most studies zoom in TAO Dance Theater's minimal aesthetics and signature body language, research on its dramatic expressiveness is still quite scant. Systematic studies of how the company uses the dancers' bodies to compose theatrical narratives and atmospheres remain relatively scarce.

While current academic conversations around this company mainly focus on its choreographic style and minimalist aesthetics, they miss the key point that its unique and distinctive physical language also has a big impact on theatrical expression with several aspects. Moreover, there has been little analysis of the ways in which the company builds stage space and dramatic ambiance within such Non-Traditional narrative.

Therefore, this research will explore: Theatrical meaning isn't always expressed in a dramatic format, as seen in TAO Dance Theater's ultra-minimalist dance style. How do TAO Dance Theater's performances create dramatic spaces and atmospheres without traditional

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storytelling? How does the physical aesthetic of TAO Dance Theater shape audience perception and emotional reception?

Furthermore, The following techniques will be used: These distinctions show how the artists uniquely constructed the competitive landscape for themselves. Case Studies: Close readings of representative works of the *Numerical Series* from TAO Dance Theater, especially 6, 9, 10 and 13. Through looking to audience reactions, choreography reviews, circuit videos for insights on how these works translate human experience.

TAO Dance Theater, led by artistic director Tao Ye, one of the leading lights of contemporary dance, gained international renown for seeking new ways for the human body to communicate other than with stories. Deeply steeped in minimalism, recurrence and physical discipline, TAO Dance Theater calling international audiences with works of the philosophical depth. At the core of TAO Dance Theater's artistic creation is the *Numerical Series*, a collection of numbered and choreographed works weaning away from traditional narrative and character-driven storytelling and moving toward a stricter consideration of the body's physicality and expressive potential.

Tao Ye regards dance not as a means of narratives or symbols but as an occasion for the dancers' bodies to express presence and natural rhythm. Devoid of conventional theatrical commodities like narrative and symbolically charged movements, the work foregrounds the body as both the vessel and the vessel's contents, stretching the limits of how far we can stimulate the human form concert with environment. In the work 6, the dancers are mostly still, with the focus on expressive through contained spinal and torso movements. 10 includes repetitive spinning movements that metaphorically express the infinite nature of time, encouraging audiences to note subtle difference and rhythmic beauty.

However, in addition to its visual beauty, TAO Dance Theater's work raises profound philosophical and existential questions about what it means to be human, inviting audiences to rethink their assumptions about movement, time and existence. These performances are active and embodied encounters with the art, and push audiences from passive observers to being an emotionally and physically engaged participants, even be a part of the performance. Dancers in identical costumes emphasize collective expression, conveying complex ideas through simple, repetitive gestures. These performances take on meditative qualities, pedestrian and kinetic, silent and audible, tight and released, reinterpreting what we might mean by theatricality in the modern choreographic context.

The use of immersive themes, music, and choreography serve to unite audiences and performers across cultural and linguistic barriers in the shared exploration of those themes. Its singular embrace of theatricality reveal the basic principle of experience, creating a path toward shared introspection and collective. The reach of TAO Dance Theater's exploration of choreographic innovation resonates within these ongoing global conversations about art, identity, and the human experience.

2 Performance versions

2.1 The Numerical Series and TAO Dance Theater's repertoire

The most famous and representative works is *Numerical Series*—a sequence of choreographic creations titled by number, such as 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13. These works emphasize minimalist, and forces on the repetition and limitation of movement and explore the possibility of human's body.[1] It express their theme : Instead of metaphor, symbolism and narrative, the focus is returned to the choreography and the movement of the body itself.

Tao Ye, the artistic director of TAO Dance Theater, has emphasized that not interested in expressing something through dance, but allowed body to become an expression of presence [2]. This aligns with [3] articulation of the "Method of Physical Action" (MPA), where bodily repetition and control serve as expressive mechanisms, not representations. Shen likens this approach to Grotowski's idea of the body as a transformative vessel, capable of emotional transference without narrative.

According to Jiang (2019), the *Numerical Series* are not only an aesthetic strategy but also a explore of metaphysical into the body as both material and concept. He said that the works of the *Numerical Series* can be interpreted as a passage from the physical to the meta-physical, where the visible labor of the flesh is transformed into an invisible presence of energy[4]. From the early works to recent compositions, the *Numerical Series* maintains certain elements: repetition, minimalist, physical limitation, and abstraction. However, as the work developed, Tao's choreographic concepts of spatial layout, group relationships, and the dramatic construction of Non-traditional narratives evolved.

Formal Constraints were used in the earlier works of TAO Dance Theatre, such as 2, 4, 6, and 7, are often described as "movement lab" in which Tao Ye and the dancers try the limits of physical limitation and compositional repetition. For example, in 6, dancers are required to keep their feet fixed on the ground for the duration of the piece. All movement must be initiated from the spine and torso, producing an upright, undulating wave of motion that limit freedom but enhance the precision of movements [5].

Although similar physical limitations are applied in 7, the piece features one additional dancer along with different lighting and costume design. The work 6 uses a black tonality and horizontal spatial emphasis, 7 introduces white costumes and a vertical of posture, subtly shifting the emotional tone despite nearly choreographic structures. As Qian observes, by employing repetition and maintaining fixed postures, the dancers let go of narrative and character, allowing them to focus instead on the fundamental logic of the body itself.

These works pursue uniformity, not only in costume and movement but also in effort and emotion. Dancers do not emote, gesture, or make eye contact. However, the reason why the pieces resonate deeply with audiences, is that the constraints sharpen the viewer's perception of subtle differences—tiny changes in time, shape, or alignment become profoundly in imitation. According to Qing (2013), reflect Tao Ye's aesthetic of limitation s an approach that characteristic reveals eliminating conventional methods of expression can helps the body's profound expressive potential to be awakened.[6]

In TAO Dance Theater's works, it shows an evolution toward complex structures. As the series progresses into such as 9, 10, and 13, the choreography begins to open up—spatial, dynamic and emotion. Although the core of minimalism, repetition, and abstraction remain, the density and layering of movement become more complex. Spatial formations grow more intricate, transitions less predictable, and group interactions more dynamically.

For example, In 9, The dancers form ever-changing clusters, shifting between symmetry and asymmetry. The use of lines and diagonals begins to replace the static front-facing rows of earlier works. In 10, this complexity deepens into full spatial spirals and rotational pathways. In 13, the group dynamic reaches its most volatile situation, with dancers split into groups. Reorganized in a chaotic manner, producing a breathing rhythm like that of a living entity.

This evolution is not only an extension of aesthetic but also an exploration of philosophical. As TaoYe's understanding of the body deepens, his sense of choreography as metaphysical inquiry. The later works become less about proving a concept and further about reflect on a question—how can a group of bodies move not as individuals, nor as a collective, but as a multi-limbed entity that breathes and breaks apart as one? According to Qian (2018),

these later works embody the contradiction between cohesion and collapse, the drama not derived from emotion but from structural instability.[5]

TAO Dance Theater are exploring theatrical innovation without narrative. Although Tao consistently avoids narrative in a traditional sense, his later works gesture toward dramaturgy in more complex ways. The movement becomes a form of storytelling—not in terms of characters or plot, but through architecture, rhythm and space. Mu (2012) refers them as the non-verbal dramaturgy of contemporary Chinese dance theater, the meaning not arises from action but from duration, accumulation, and internal structure[7].

The *Numerical Series* can be conceived not only as a sequence of choreographic experiments but also as a collection of philosophical propositions. Each number is a variation on a theme, a question asked through the body, and a ritual performed in real time. TaoYe's creative system, which Jiang (2019) said it as an alternative path from physical movement to metaphysical presence, positions TAO Dance Theater as a pioneer voice in contemporary performance. Not because it breaks rules, but because it re-imagines the very purpose of performance.[4]

2.2 Analysis of selected works in Numerical Series: 10 and 13

2.2.1 Circular choreography and the spiral of time

10 is one of the most representative pieces in the *Numerical Series*, marking a shift in TAO Dance Theater's choreographic focus on circularity, fluidity, and spatial recursion. In this work, ten dancers execute continuous circular movements, sometimes in concentric circles, sometimes in overlapping spirals to create a visual field of constant motion. The stage becomes a symbolize of time's cyclical nature and the body's unending move.

The circle's shape is both compositional and philosophical. It dismisses the linear development of narrative theater in favor of return, rotation and echo. The dancers rotate around invisible focal points, frequently in perpetual motion, their bodies describing arcs and loops with mathematical accuracy. As Tao Ye observes, the goal is not to express a theme but to embody the duration, to permit the audience to traverse a temporal spiral that cannot be described in terms of beginning, middle, and end[2]. The black bodysuits anonymize the dancers, turning them into moving components in a greater choreographic system. Music is ambient or minimalist, emphasizing tone and texture rather than rhythm and melody. What sounds dull at first is attractive later. The micro-variations, such as one dancer stepping a little ahead of the pack, a hesitancy in rotation, a shift in spacing are all have dramatic. In this sense, the choreography generates theatricality not through action, but through the shifting relation of the viewer to sameness.

It can reflects Maurice Merleau-Ponty's argument that perception is embodied, and that meaning is grown out of the way that the body positions in space, not symbols [8]. *10* is a kind of phenomenological work which express the drama is not what is or is not represented, but how time and space are experienced.

Another importance of *10* is a sense of ritual. The circle, the unison, the cyclical rhythms all relate to ceremonial forms. This ritualization is accentuated by the absence of personal identity. No dancer emerges from the group, no solos, no personalized gestures. In this way, *10* becomes not a performance about something but an event as a temporal sculpture made of human motion, a living event of continuity and change.

2.2.2 13: Group tension, fracture, and reassembly

Compared to *10* which offers a vision of cohesion through circular motion, *13* shifts the focus toward disruption, fragmentation, and tension within the collective body. Described as the TAO Dance Theater's most extensive spatial work both in terms of quantity and in the moving dynamic of the groups and energies in space, the second piece was performed with ears on the ground. In *13*, the stage change into an explosive field of emergence and dissolution. Collective patterns, such as straight lines, diagonal blocks, radial pathway are constantly formed and unformed, only to collapse or restructure moments later. These changing formations suggest structure, the expanding and contracting of natural forms. The work as a kind of breathing organism made up of many parts, temporarily synchronized and then breaking apart into new parts.

Qian (2018) describes *13* as a living diagram of relational instability, where the meaning of motion arises not only from symbolism or character but also from the relationship dancers move to one another[5]. There is a choreography of tension which are presented between symmetry and asymmetry, unity and dissonance, repetition and rupture.

As Jiang (2019) notes, Tao's choreography often replaces what happens with how relation emerges[4]. *13* exemplifies this principle which is it does not depict conflict, but it embodies it. The group's movements are so closely tied to each other that when one dancer falls out of sync, the entire configuration feels the impact—akin to a domino effect in a relational web.

Unlike the uniform light of *10*, *13*'s lighting design is more narrative. The lighting in *13* is adjusted to emphasize fragmentation. Particular dancers are isolated by spotlight or shadow, change the remix as rupture. The overall palette is characteristic, monochrome costumes, dark floors, but lighting shifts serve as emotional punctuation, marking moments of dissonance or reformation.

The soundscape is similarly simple, often using ambient voice or silence. This musical design can enhance the visibility of microscopic movements such as the drag of skin on floor, the breath of exertion, the weight of a body in collapse. As Qing (2013) said, Tao Dance Theater's theatricality is not the view of visual but the attention of kinesthetic, the viewer is drawn into the physicality of presence, not the illusion of action[6].

A defining feature of *13* is the absence of fixed rhythm. While earlier works often followed a consistent structure, *13* fluctuates in timing and flow. Some sequences erupt in sudden changing, Others slink slowly over extend lengths. This variation of rhythm produces an emotional fluctuation which generated by tension and release, it is a dramatic progression devoid of narrative.

This tension is not just formal, it is ontological. The dancers are always navigating who they are as a collective or as individuals. When a dancer breaks traditional and steps out of formation, It shows a question which is it an act of rebellion, confusion or innovation?

According to Mu (2013), a useful point has regard, theatricality is often generated not by narrative but by the expressive paradox between control and collapse[9]. This core is evident in *13*'s fragmented formation and cocooned members, the formation never settles, but constantly remakes as *13* does.

It is also worth in considering *13* as a reflection of broader social or philosophical. The instability of the group may suggest themes of modern identity, collective belonging. Tao avoids any messaging. Instead, as he explains the goal that is not to represent but to provoke sensation[2]. The piece is more of an inking on an image of a moving body than a proposition. As some reviewers said that during the piece's performance, it felt like watching tectonic plates shifting—unpredictable, slow, immense [6]. The metaphor beautifully reflects the

piece's balance of scale and restraint. Though *13* is spare in its staging, it resonates powerfully.

In summary, *13* demonstrates TAO Dance Theater's mastery of abstract drama. The work avoids character, gesture, and narrative, it builds a dramatic through spatial design, collective movement and bodily proximity. It's a work that moves literally and emotionally but not by evoking something else.

3 The analysis of theatricality

3.1 Abstract narrative

Tao Dance Theater's work is conventionally at odds with narrative, building theatricality through structure, rhythm and embodiment rather than through characters or plot. Such rejection of signification does not suggest evading meaning, it points toward presence and process. According to Tao Ye, he is not concerned about delivering something; his concern is what comes into being when the body is in place and in motion[2]. Markula and Frantsi (2024) shows that such embodied processes are not merely performative but also epistemological: the body becomes a way of knowing, interpreting, and co-creating meaning[10].

Repetition is a fundamental vehicle of theatricality. In pieces like *10*, the temporality plays out in the circular movement sustained over time, pulling the viewer into a temporal reverie. The avoidance of climactic or dramatic turns underscores duration, enabling emotional tension to build, through nuanced physical continuity. Qian (2018) terms this psychological time, the condition in which the viewer's perception matches the dancer's labor[5]. Hung (2023) emphasizes how East Asian philosophical frameworks—particularly those that value stillness, repetition, and attunement with natural rhythms—inform embodied aesthetics in contemporary performance[11].

13 creates a theatrical effect via rupture and reassembly. Instead of composing emotional arcs through characters, it generates dynamic tension through spatial disruption and regrouping. Mu (2012) calls this non-verbal dramaturgy, in which theatrical meaning emerges through duration, accumulation, and spatial metamorphosis rather than symbolic narrative[6].

Tao's works resonate because they bring audiences into a meditative space. Meaning is not decoded by viewers, meaning is inhabited by viewers. The predominance of actual body and corporeal sensitivity makes sensing and not so much narration out of the drama. In this manner, Tao Ye's choreography sits squarely in the center of postmodern performance traditions, yet is also deeply grounded by Taoist and Chan Buddhist aesthetics.

3.2 Spatiality and atmosphere

Brannigan (2021) explores how choreography can operate as both a conceptual and material practice, emphasizing the spatial and intermedial dynamics created by the body in performance[12]. Minimalist staging is a core idea of TAO Dance Theater's aesthetic. In a bare black-box space with neutral lighting and the same costumes, the company more often performs. Such restraint strips away theatrical distraction and helps render the space itself a pocket for energy, rhythm and transformation.

In *6*, the dancers stay in place, and the stage forms a frame that invites vertical motion. The lighting gently exposes the tension of muscles and the curves of spines, creating a

hushed intensity. Lighting is used dramaturgically in *I3*, whether to create isolation or cohesion by contrast. The dancers are sometimes highlighted solo, and then blended into the background, reflecting the mutable architecture of the group.

Sound design props up the immersive quality of Tao's spaces. Often ambient, sometimes silent, the soundscape amplifies the natural rhythm of the body. The sound of breath, of foot sliding across floor, enters into the composition. Having no music also heightens audience awareness. Deprived of melodic cues, the viewer becomes sensitive to nuance, the density of a pause, the quickening of a rotation.

According to Jiang (2019), TaoYe's treatment of emptiness is a spiritual, not aesthetic, one[4]. The stage is an arena of meditation. By stripping away narrative and spectacle, Tao exposes the work and control of the body itself. Theatricality comes not from illusion, but wakefulness — from the concentrated experience of being.

3.3 Body as expressive medium

The body in TAO Dance Theater is not a vehicle for meaning — it is the meaning. Expression is not accomplished through gesture or facial clues but through prolonged movement work. These dancers do not act, they endure. Their dedication, rigor and routine transform into the drama.

This perception of the body is both subject and object. In *I0*, the circularity comes to feel like an expression of breath and time. Collective disintegration in *I3* shows how tenuous and sturdy connection can be. Symbols are not for the audience; they see process.

Costume and affect are uniform and individual lives disappear but not individual humanity. Instead, it generalizes experience. As Qing (2013) observes, Tao's dancers sweat and breathe and strain proleptically[6]. The openness offers a shared corporeal empathy. The veil of identity paradoxically enhances viewers' connection to the performers.

The metaphysical body Jiang (2019) describes, is not body characterized by disposition or context, but by presence[4]. It is not a body of representation, but a body of becoming. By way of repetition and restraint, it gestures beyond itself which toward endurance, temporality and the conditions of being.

4 The analysis of theatricality

4.1 Diaphanous in motion

TAO Dance Theater's work is minimalist; it relies on repetition, restriction and internal coherence. From simple spinal articulation guides, symmetrical group or corners of the frame patterns, less locomotion/movement the vocabulary is developed from small rules.

In *6*, dancers keep feet planted and work from the torso. In *I0*, circular motion is the organizing spatial logic. Constraint is the starting point for everything, and variation is what happens in between those bar codes. Austerity in Sun (2019) [8]iteration could be both an Eastern ascetic ambition and a Western postmodernistic dance inheritance.

Tao's compositions eschew dramatic arcs in favor of micro-differences. A change in tempo, an aberration in alignment, a slight alteration in spacing—each one is significant. It's a cumulative effect, but not of spectacle, of presence. It requires an ethics of attention, Qing (2013) argues for the viewer[6].

The effect is not ornamental but meditative. The choreography in this show does not distract; it beckons. The simplicity is not a void; it's full of potential, of sensation, of time.

4.2 Spatial relations and inter-bodily tension

Tao Ye's choreography creates space as a kind of active dramaturgical terrain. In *13*, dancers enter, break and re-enter spatial formations. Lines contract into clusters; formations break into chaos. Those spatial behaviors are imbued with emotional and conceptual weight.

Dancers seldom touch, or make eye contact, but their relationships are deeply choreographed. Distance and alignment become tools of expression. Without touch, a more heightened spacial awareness which is a distance being connection.

Light is a great factor in creating the sense of space. In *13*, light either segregates dancers or integrates them into the whole. These spatial clues create sweeping transitions with no change in story. Tao embraces relational geometry as emotional arcs, writes Qian (2018)[5].

This spatial architecture suggests both unity and alienation. The ensemble is a single body, and many bodies. We see a system, and it's sometimes harmonious, sometimes out of whack. The field transforms a momentary point in space, an "Ego", that is both inextricably formed by and forming its surrounding environment.

4.3 The metaphysical body

The most profound thing about TAO Dance Theater is its articulation of the metaphysical body. This is a body outside of role, outside of story, a body simply as energy, structure and presence. It is not symbolic; it is ontological.

In *10*, the dancer's bodies trace time itself. In *13*, the splintering of the group is a meditation on cohesion and impermanence. Tao's choreography reveals the body not as a tool of expression but as a site of being — a space through which labor, rhythm and discipline intersect. As Brandstetter (2021) explained that performative bodies act as sculptural elements in space, shaping emotional landscapes through the interplay of stillness and collective rhythm[13].

This metaphysical turn is informed by Taoist and Zen concepts, most prominently those of Wu Wei (non-action) and Wu Xin (no-mind). The dancers of Tao Ye move without the effort to mean. They move to be. But the repetition becomes ritual. The body becomes presence.

The metaphysical body likewise resists commodification. It's not molded for entertainment or narrative. It's a thing shaped by gravity, breath, fatigue. In a world crowded with image and spectacle, returning to the basics of effort, of attention, of existence is such an honor. Tao Dance Theater reminds us how clearly we can see without formula, without attaching and opening and filling.

5 Conclusion

TAO Dance Theater represents a significant step forward in contemporary performance, showing the profound expressive that emerges from minimalist purity to proposed bodily and presentational discipline. The company's distinctly repetitive gestures, alongside improvise of shifting group configurations and purposeful spatial patterns, theatricality with minimal tool-boxing. Focusing on bodily aesthetics, TAO Dance Theater emphasizes the purity of physical expression while exploring the relationships between human beings, space, and temporality.

Subverting narrative conventions, the company ranges through emotional, philosophical and existential territory, using the suggestive language of physicality to achieve deeply com-

municative artistic states. The company's *Numerical Series* illustrates their pioneering exploration of movement as a phenomenon of expression, both physical and metaphysical. By cultivating precisely repetition and enforced limits, their performances demonstrate how, with finesse, one can transform simple actions into deeply evocative artistic events.

TAO Dance Theater's performances' emotional resonance does not arise from conventional narrative structure or character arc, it is the explosive result of the dancers' authentic physical effort and collaborative investment. That emotional authenticity flows organically out of their commitment and synchronicity. Their tamed rhetoric denoting integrity and exposure, coaxes us to put ourselves into their humanity, and reveals the fragility of man. The dancers' keen physical awareness — expressed through their synchronized breathing, their subtle alignments, their constant muscular tension — establishes an unvoiced conversation with the went-out groups, provoking visceral and deeply human responses.

Also, the TAO Dance Theater performances also have this kind of interplay that is contemplative and meditative, which engages audiences through the sharp increase of sensory awareness. Tao Ye's use of choreographic language purposefully channels audience focus into subtle textures of movement, such as changing tempos, rhythms and spaces, revealing the innate drama and beauty in minimal gesture. This immersive sensory experience defeats audiences to question larger existential ideas such as unity and division, transience and the significance of human life.

TAO Dance Theater challenges conventional ideas about theatricality by balancing the spiritual and physical aspects of dance. Their focus on minimalist aesthetic and repetition is not just the canvas but the painting too, a visualization of philosophical ideas which resonant with Taoist and Zen ideas (Wu Xin and Wu Wei) Through disciplined looping and disciplined creation, Tao Ye's choreographic works present as reflective rituals that fundamental philosophical questions about existence, stability, change and reality to the audience.

TAO Dance Theater presents a revolution into the contemporary performance which challenge preconceived concept of what dance should look like for audiences. When narrative complexity and visual overload impact on our senses, Their unremitting devotion to simplicity, discipline and corporeal investigation encourage dance's communicative nature by breaking through cultural confines. This study makes an innovative contribution on contemporary dance by using extensive analysis of the aesthetic on a body to expound how it shapes audiences' modes of seeing and interpreting.

However, the current study has some limitations and future research directions. Further research may investigate more such as how TAO Dance Theater's choreographic techniques promote emotional resonance for performer and audience. Furthermore, a more depth exploration on the dancers' training may enhance our understanding of how the dancers learned their specific language system with their bodies.

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