

An Exploration of Narrative Strategies in Intercultural Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Amid the advancing tide of globalization, intercultural theatre, as a distinctive form of artistic expression, has garnered significant interest from numerous art enthusiasts and scholars. It not only transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, but also integrates stories, emotions and values from different cultural backgrounds onto the stage. Through unique narrative strategies, It stimulates the audience's reflection and resonance on cultural differences. By delving deeply into the narrative value expression and narrative characteristics of intercultural theatre, this paper proposes corresponding strategies, aiming to provide practical theoretical guidance for the creation and dissemination of intercultural theatre.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural; Theatre; Narrative strategy

1 Introduction

Intercultural theatre is an important field in current international theatre research. Its study can promote the innovation of theatre and expand the artistic boundaries of theatre. On the basis, the article conducts an in-depth exploration of the narrative strategies of intercultural theatre, which holds considerable significance for understanding the communication and integration mechanisms among different cultures and promoting the innovation and development of theatrical art.

2 The Narrative Value Expression of Intercultural Theatre

2.1 Aesthetic Value

As an artistic expression form, intercultural theatre is distinguished by its adoption of unique formal strategies. By integrating diverse cultural or artistic elements, such as knowledge systems from literature, costume, sociology and other fields, it creates novel and distinctive aesthetic experiences for the audience ^[1]. Such integration not only enriches the expressive forms of theatre, but also broadens the aesthetic vision of the audience, enabling them to experience the collision and integration of different cultures while appreciating the theatre, thereby enhancing their aesthetic literacy.

2.2 Cultural Value

From a cross-cultural perspective, cultural hybridity is the core concern of theatrical practice. Therefore, intercultural theatre is gradually becoming an important carrier for cultural exchange and integration ^[2]. Through theatrical performance, emotions, values, and other elements rooted in different cultural backgrounds are presented to the audience. This not only promotes mutual understanding and respect among different cultures, but also helps bridge cultural divides, enabling the audience to accept and appreciate different cultures with a more open and inclusive mindset, thereby reducing misunderstandings and conflicts arising from cultural differences.

2.3 Dissemination Value

In the context of globalization, intercultural theatre exhibits a strong communicative power. On the one hand, it can transcend the geographical and cultural boundaries to spread the essence of diverse cultures to all corners of the world and promote global sharing, mutual learning and exchange of cultures. On the other hand, the dissemination of intercultural theatre also helps to showcase the pride of different ethnic cultures in their own time-honored histories and enhance the country's cultural soft power.

3 The Narrative Characteristics of Intercultural Theatre

Intercultural theatre exhibits distinct characteristics at the narrative level.

The first is the narrative mode of intercultural theatre. Intercultural theatre transcends the traditional single linear

narrative model and adopts a non-linear, multi-threaded, and circular narrative mode. Focusing on the collision and interweaving of different plot lines, it not only creates a dramatic world full of tension for the audience, but also leaves them space for plot interpretation and reflection. For instance, the stage play *"A Dream Like a Dream"* directed by Stan Lai is presented in the form of a circular theatre. Moreover, inspired by Jan Bruegel the Elder's "painting-within-a-painting" works, Lai uses multiple narrative presentations such as the doctor's investigation, the count's memories, and his own monologues to jointly point to the simple theme of the cycle of life.

The second is the application of narrative language in intercultural theatre. Intercultural narrative not only integrates multiple language elements, but also ingeniously employs multimodal languages such as music, costumes and body language. Centered on the interweaving of multiple narrative languages, it creates a narrative effect of $1+1 > 2$, and greatly enhances the expressiveness and appeal of theatre. Taking *"The Orphan of Zhao"* as an example, the adaptations of this classic play in different cultural contexts fully demonstrate the narrative characteristics of intercultural theatre. This play has made bold innovations and integrations in narrative language, and presented the "notability" and "virtue" of Princess Zhuang Ji through music. In this play, *"My Child, What Shall We Do?"* serves as a metaphor for Princess Zhuang Ji's fear, despair, helplessness and frustration in the face of Tu Anjia's pursuit, further enriching the layers and dimensions of the narrative^[3].

The third is the choice of narrative perspectives for intercultural theatre. Traditional cultural dramas usually takes their own cultural perspective as the narrative center and treat other cultures as the background or foil. In contrast, intercultural theatre is no longer confined to a single and specific cultural perspective, it narrates through the perspectives of characters from different cultures or backgrounds, and emphasizes the multi-level and multi-dimensional presentation of the same theme or practice, prompting the audience to examine and understand different cultures from a more comprehensive perspective. For instance, in *"Mahabharata"*, Peter Brook utilizes the improvisation of an international cast to incorporate the Indian epic into the fourfold narrative framework, and interprets the story's connotations across different cultural backgrounds from the actors' perspectives. As a result, the final work presented is neither an "Indian version" nor a "European version"^[4].

4 Narrative Strategies of Intercultural Theatre

4.1 Anchor "Commonalities" and "Differences" : Conduct Cultural Screening

The foundation of intercultural theatrical narrative lies in the precise capture and refinement, as well as ingenious integration of different cultures. Therefore, in order to overcome the problem of superficial cultural interpretation in intercultural theatre, the intercultural theatrical narrative should construct a narrative framework that is both understandable and profound by screening cultural elements with universal resonance and retaining their cultural specificity^[5].

Firstly, it relies on the unique historical details of intercultural theatre to explore the common emotional experiences and spiritual pursuits of humans in intercultural theatre, such as family affection, friendship, and love. These emotions can transcend cultural boundaries, evoke inner resonances among audiences from different cultural backgrounds, and build a bridge for emotional communication in theatrical narrative, thus effectively avoiding the understanding gap among audiences caused by differences in cultural backgrounds. Taking the 80-minute five-act English poetic drama *"Dreamy Love in the Peony Pavilion"*, an overseas adaptation of Tang Xianzu's *"The Peony Pavilion"*, as an example, it is directed by the renowned international dramatist and stage artist Emily Sinder, created in Shakespearean English and verse style, and presented to the British audience in the form of stage reading. It introduces to the audience the cultural compatibility between Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare in eight aspects, abandons the historical background familiar to Chinese audiences such as "feudal ethics" in the original play and delves deeply into the core theme of "love beyond life and death", enabling Western audiences to enter the theatrical narrative through the theme of "love" without prior knowledge of Chinese culture. This strategy of "emotion first, culture following" can construct a theatrical narrative that is both universally valuable and culturally profound, lowering the cognitive threshold and laying the foundation for the subsequent transmission of cultural elements.

Secondly, for those symbols, rituals and stories with distinct cultural characteristics, it can use delicate narrative techniques to preserve their unique charm and endow them with new contemporary connotations and interpretation spaces, thus showcasing the diversity and richness of world culture and avoiding the tendency towards cultural homogenization resulting from "commonality". At the same time, it can leverage "differences" to stimulate the audience's curiosity and desire to explore, creating a theatrical narrative that can not only evoke emotional resonance among global audiences but also showcase the charm of diverse cultures. Taking *"Orphan of Zhao: the Seed of Vengeance"*, one of the representative works of the National Theatre Company of Korea, as an example, it has made bold innovations on the basis of *"The Orphan of Zhao"*, incorporating the perspective of "family ethics" from Republic of

Korea and expressing doubts and reflections on revenge from a modern stance. This adaptation not only retains the core theme of “rescue”, but also makes the narrative present a different emotional tension from the Chinese and Western adaptations, facilitating a stronger cultural resonance among Korean audiences^[6].

4.2 Enhance “Distinctiveness” and “Adaptability”: Conduct Symbol Translation

Intercultural theatrical narrative also needs to reconstruct and translate the symbolic elements of different cultures to form a dramatic symbol system with distinctiveness and strong adaptability.

Firstly, conducting translation through visual symbols such as costumes, intercultural theatre can form a strong “distinctiveness”. Specifically, costumes, as a visual symbol that is intuitive and rich in cultural connotations, can quickly convey the styles of different cultures. Especially in the narrative of intercultural theatre, through meticulous design and selection of costumes, it can achieve the personalized definition of gender identity, and enable the audience to perceive cultural characteristics and differences at the first moment^[7]. For instance, when presenting Eastern culture, representative traditional costumes can be selected such as Chinese cheongsams or Hanfu, so as to showcase the implicitness and elegance of Eastern culture through details like costume colors and tailoring. This method enhances the distinctiveness of intercultural theatre and is conducive to the narrative of intercultural theatre. Taking Lin Zhaohua’s “Hamlet” as an example, rather than directly replicating the “singing, recitation, acting and martial arts” of Peking Opera, it ingeniously incorporates the traditional Chinese opera element of “water sleeves” into the narrative. The amplitude of the water sleeves’ movements mirrors the characters’ emotions, while the drooping water sleeves imply the characters’ spiritual despondency. This interpretation breaks away from the original expression of water sleeves in Peking Opera, achieves the cross-cultural transfer of visual symbol functions, and makes visual symbols intuitive annotations for intercultural theatrical narratives.

Secondly, in order to promote intercultural theatrical narratives more effectively, it is also necessary to rely on auditory symbols such as music for translation. It focuses on advancing the plot through the changes in rhythm intensity and tempo to make intercultural theatre have a strong “adaptability” and become the “adhesive” of cross-cultural narratives, thereby enhancing the appeal and expressiveness of intercultural theatre. The Sino-French co-produced musical drama “The Little Prince” prioritizes music as the ontology of the narrative rather than an auxiliary element. The creative team invites three Chinese musicians and one instrumentalist to participate in the music improvisation together. The music in the play not only serves as the Little prince’s psychological monologues and emotional expressions, but also promotes the development of the plot. Meanwhile, the play also quotes many Chinese and French poems. For instance, “The Moon over the River on a Spring Night” is used in the scene where the Little Prince watches “forty-four sunsets”, creating a resonance between “sunsets” and “the moon” to convey a sense of sadness. The collision among Western opera, Chinese folk songs and improvisational music can convey cross-cultural emotions through melodies, achieving the narrative effect of “co-creating stories through the shared ‘breath’ of music and the human body”.

4.3 Emphasize “Diversity” and “Intersectionality”: Implement a Multimodal Narrative Structure

Adopting dual-line narrative is an innovative approach in intercultural theatrical narrative, which can break the cultural boundaries of linear narrative, enrich the narrative layers of intercultural theatre, and thereby form an open and inclusive narrative system.

The first is to adopt a diverse and non-linear narrative structure. The parallel development or integration of local cultural narrative threads with those of other countries or ethnic groups can provide assistance for the effective narrative of intercultural theatre. By setting up three or more narrative threads, and interspersing independent narratives within two of them, the interconnection and mutual influence among these threads jointly promote the plot development of intercultural theatre. Therefore, it improves the three-dimensionality of characters, and enriches the richness and layering of the intercultural theatrical narrative^[8]. This diverse and non-linear narrative structure not only enables the audience to understand and experience stories from different cultural backgrounds from multiple perspectives, but also stimulates in-depth thinking among the audience about cultural differences and commonalities. The second is to adopt a trans-temporal and trans-spatial narrative structure. To highlight the unique charm of intercultural theatrical narrative, when creating intercultural theatre, it can break through the limitations of time and space, ingeniously integrate and juxtapose elements from different eras, regions, and cultural backgrounds on the same stage, thereby creating a strong visual impact and cognitive contrast. It should be noted that trans-temporal and trans-spatial narrative is not merely a simple splicing, but rather requires the establishment of an inherent emotional logic chain. It also needs to achieve creative transformation through the folding of time and space, thereby deepening the theme of intercultural theatre and injecting fresh vitality and a sense of the times into the intercultural theatrical narrative.

In the part of “ANTHROPOLIS-Marathon”, entitled “Laius”, due to the scarcity of classical works about Oedipus’ father, Laius, the screenwriter pieces together historical materials and incorporates contemporary realities into the creation.

Instead of following a timeline, it adopts a non-linear and multi-perspective narrative structure, presenting on stage both scenes of power struggles in ancient Greek courts and images of Laius and Iocaste (Oedipus's mother), riding motorcycles to buy hamburgers at a fast food restaurant. This achieves a deep connection between ancient Greece and modern society, and allows the audience to perceive the theme of intercultural theatre more profoundly within the diverse narrative structure.

5 Conclusion

This article deeply analyzes the narrative value expression, characteristics and value strategies of intercultural theatre, providing theoretical reference for the creation of intercultural theatre. Meanwhile, the exploration of its narrative strategies can unearth the inherent laws and unique charm of intercultural theatre, promoting its development from artistic exploration to cultural innovation.

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