

# Review of the 1st International Symposium on Contemporary Asian Theater (ISCAT) in Göttingen

**Author / Yumin AO**

On December 8 and 9, 2022, the first International Symposium on Contemporary Asian Theater was successfully held at the Conference Center of the University of Göttingen. Since the winter semester of 2020, the East Asian Department has launched a series of academic lectures on "Contemporary Theater Art." Dr. Yumin AO, the host of the series, invited 18 experts, scholars, and creators in the field of theater from different countries and regions to deliver special lectures. Their talks covered many different topics: from script creation to drama translation, from theoretical research to classroom teaching, from art festival curation to performance market, and even social participation and artistic intervention. The sessions were held in an online conference mode and were open to the world, with the audience's participation extending to Europe, Asia, America, Oceania, and other continents. The "Contemporary Theater Art" series contributed to the international dissemination of Asian Theater Arts, expanded the international influence of Asian artists, and promoted creative exchange and academic dialogue between Asian and European theater circles. Under this opportunity, the first symposium determined the theme as "Between Asia and Europe, Between Local Specificity and Global Recognition," and set one of the most important goals of this conference as "achieving cross-border dialogue."

Since its foundation in October 2019, the Journal of Ying Ming Theatre has published 20 consecutive issues. In the past three years, the editorial department has interviewed more than 20 artists, producers, and museum directors. The journal has published more than 100 research papers, character manuscripts, drama reviews, script translations, and other articles. Through conversations, interviews, and text analysis, the chief editor found that some issues surrounding creators from different backgrounds have been neglected for a long time. These problems line across arts, ethnic groups, and even cultures, and are universal. In the European context, they are directly related to the inherent and structural barriers to the social mobility of Asian artists. Therefore, creators urgently need a public space that can accommodate their individual and group characteristics to be able to adjust their perspective of considering problems, clearly express their demands, and receive the necessary support in the process of finding ways and solutions. This is another important reason for holding this symposium, as well as forming the theoretical basis of the "Forum of Young Artists," one of the sections of the conference.

In the past three years, the Theater Project of the East Asian Department of Göttingen University has established formal and informal partnerships with the Department of Theater, Film and Television Arts of Nanjing University, the School of Arts of Hong Kong Metropolitan University, and the International Theater Institute. As exchanges with major academic and cultural institutions at different levels gradually spread out, the organizers wished to hold a symposium to invite experts and creators in the field of Asian Theater to focus on the current global crises and opportunities to exchange opinions. Under the premise of reaching a consensus, the East Asian Theater Project looks forward to further strengthening and promoting in-depth cooperation with institutions in the future.

The organizers of the first seminar invited three outstanding internationally renowned playwrights, famous directors, and critics as keynote speakers. After the conference opened at 9 a.m. on December 8th, Mr. Rongjun YU, Artistic Director of Shanghai Drama Art Center, Vice President of Shanghai Performing Arts Group, and one of the most famous contemporary Chinese playwrights, first delivered a keynote speech. The title of his speech was "Beyond Words: the Macro Health Crisis Has Shaped Us into Micro Isolated Islands." Rongjun YU believes that the medical crisis, the de-globalization movement, ideological differences, and the development of science and technology have had a huge impact on the creative environment. The overall development of the drama industry is full of uncertainty. In the face of challenges, drama creators and practitioners should rethink the question of "what is theater" and re-understand the development direction and practical significance of drama in the post-epidemic era, and then uphold a more open attitude in future creations, embracing different theater forms, theatrical traditions, and local experiences.

Professor Deepan Sivaraman of Ambedkar University in Delhi is one of the most popular theater directors and stage designers in India recently, and he is also the main promoter of Contemporary Indian Theater Innovation. He founded the Oxygen Theatre Company and has served as the artistic director of the International Theatre Festival of Kerala many times. At 9 o'clock in the morning on December 9th, Professor Sivaraman delivered a keynote speech headlined as "Theatre of Hybrid: Bridging Cultures, Aesthetics and Disciplines". Professor Sivaraman believes that although modern Indian drama has developed with the evolution of cultural situations in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Integrating a variety of theatrical forms and aesthetics, it is still based on traditional routines focused on text, reproduction as a means, and viewing as the purpose. Combining production practice, Professor Sivaraman used multiple works as an example to explain what a mixed model of Contemporary Theater is, and pointed out that the concept of contemporary hybrid art originated from the Indian culture itself, reflecting the characteristics of local cultures mixed into one.

At 4 pm on December 9th, Dr. Octavian Saiu, a professor at Hong Kong Metropolitan University, President of the International Theater Leadership Association, and Secretary-General of the International Association of Performing Arts Critics, delivered a keynote speech before the closing of the conference. The title of his speech was "From the Silk Road to the Bridges of Culture and Back: Theatre Festivals, Artistic Exchanges, and Cultural Diplomacy in Post-Pandemic Times." Taking the two major drama festivals in Wuzhen, China, and Sibiu, Romania as examples, Professor Saiu discussed how drama opened up new possibilities for a true dialogue between the East and the West. He believes that the power of theater lies in its diversity and inclusiveness, and its wide acceptance of others can produce extraordinary cultural and economic capital. He emphasized that in a period of continued isolationism and social anxiety, in the context of collective fear and radical prejudice, it may be more important than ever to highlight the superiority of theatrical art. Professor Octavian Saiu presided over the first session of speeches.

Ms. Amelie Deulhard, the winner of the Lifetime Achievement Award of the 2022 Berliner Theatertreffen and the artistic director of the Kampnagel Theater in Hamburg, first introduced her theater's previous cooperation with Asian Theater groups and artists. After this, she foresaw from the perspective of international theater producers which forms, aesthetics, and themes may become the core of future theater creation, and how it can jointly open up a new field of avant-garde drama between continents.

The second speaker was a Japanese performance artist Aine Nakamura, who introduced her performance at the Venice Biennale. Sounds, spoken language, unmarked melodies, and body movements were used in this artwork to connect multiple stories in the body with memory through gestures and objects. Nakamura also shared how she started to engage in artistic practice that crosses the boundaries of music, drama, and dance and talked about her artistic themes and specific issues that inspire her to think constantly in her creation.

Nurkan Erpulat is a director and artistic consultant at the Gorki Theater in Berlin. Taking Berlin as an example, he discussed how most people in German society understand and treat cultural products, especially the dramas of the Turks, immigrants, descendants of immigrants, and even the changes that occurred in the mid-2000s. Berlin-based choreographer Ming Poon started by questioning the notion of "globalization (recognition)" as an artist of Asian descent in Europe and discussed how these issues shaped his work "Exotic Animals." He also shared his desire to use performances to respond to how to deal with exoticism in the European art market and cultural scene.

The fifth speaker of this group was Director ZHAO Miao, the founder of SanTuoQi Theater Troupe and an important pioneer in the field of Chinese physical theater creation and research. ZHAO Miao took his work "Aquatic" as an example to introduce the application of traditional Chinese Nuo masks in contemporary dramas. He explained how he was inspired by the neutral mask theory of Jacques Lecoq, the founder of French physical theater, in the principle and method of mask-wearing. Focusing on the theme of "Globalization (recognition)," ZHAO Miao also raised two important questions: how do Chinese directors create for a wide-ranging world audience? Can Oriental drama be integrated with contemporary theater? After discussing these topics, he shared his ingenious way of thinking, experiments, and creative process in combination with his works.

On the morning of December 9th, the second group speech revolved around "Local features," with Professor Xavier Le Roy, Dean of the School of Applied Drama Studies at the University of Giessen, as the moderator. The first speaker was Kyoko Iwaki, a professor of drama at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. Professor Iwaki is one of the organizers of the 16th Frankfurt World Drama Festival in 2023. She compared the selected works for the next year with the works of the Drama Festival held in the same city in 1985 and believed that there was a certain potential "hesitation" among creators today, which faces the discourse hegemony of the art world with a decentralized attitude to maintain marginal positioning. Professor Iwaki put forward two questions that need further thinking. How can "hesitation" be used as a theatrical tool to resolve the controversy caused by the "legibility" and "visibility" of queer theory, and how can the theatrical creation of "hesitation" become a part of the queer political movement in Japan?

The second spokesperson, Dan Thy Nguyen, introduced the motivation behind the creation of "Sunflower House" and emphasized that art creation should be closely related to social politics. As a director and producer, he hopes to use this work to alert ordinary people to the fact that the worst violent xenophobic event in Rostock, Germany, has not yet undergone real political discussions and judicial trials, which may be one of the important reasons why systematic extremism still exists. Dan Thy Nguyen believes that "racial discrimination" is continuing in Germany, as we can see in the drama "Lichtenhagen," which he started writing in 2011. He pointed out that with the influx of a large number of refugees into Germany in

2015, a new wave of anti-immigrant sentiment was triggered. On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Rostock violence, it is of far-reaching significance to reflect on the issue of extremism.

Director Xiaoyi LIU from Singapore reviewed his creative process for more than ten years, from which a clear thread shone through—in addition to being a creator, he has always been thinking about how to find new possibilities to promote cultural exchanges in Asia. From focusing on the creative possibilities brought about by the exchange of culture and art forms in the early days to finding the possibility of “Contemporary Asia” through the intersection of culture and form; to facing a larger systematic reality than the exchange between artists and art forms; to how to actively interact and conduct a dialogue with the cultural environment. In the end, he summed it up in one sentence: from the body to the stage, from the institution to the environment. Currently, he is reimagining how crossover becomes a strategy to face and challenge the existing cultural framework.

With regard to cross-border creations, Director WANG Chong, the founder of New Wave Drama, believes that with the continuous development of digital technology, the in-depth research of artificial intelligence, and the continuous exploration of online theaters, there will be many possibilities for performing arts in the future. Independent artist Meihua YU traced her cross-cultural art practice trajectory and extended her thoughts on "temporary locals" and how to generate support networks. She gave examples of how artists use different local systems and infrastructures to create art.

The "Young Artists Forum" was a special section of this symposium's plan. After submitting text and video application materials, 20 artists from Germany, France, Portugal, Greece, the United Kingdom, Austria, China, India, and South Korea were invited to participate in this online forum open to young Asian art creators. The forum wished that creators would put aside the institutional hierarchical relationship and discourse centralism and would be able to start from individual experience, exchange practical problems encountered in the process of creation and discuss effective ways to solve them. Three weeks before the meeting, the forum host opened up a special online space for artists where they were able to display their photos, personal text statements, and videos of their works. Three of the presenters held a warm-up session with the artists one week before the formal meeting and answered the participant's questions about the preparation of the forum. In the last week, the host invited each artist to submit five of the most concerning issues and collect them into a database. Then, he classified nearly 100 issues, made an in-depth analysis, conducted a discussion on this basis, and finally sorted out five topics, which include structural obstacles in cooperation, the Asian artist community, research-oriented art creation, thoughts about the motif of creation, project application, and so on. They had been handed over to 20 artists to vote on which three issues would be discussed in the formal forum. The forum hopes to promote the establishment of a co-construction platform that will facilitate cooperation between Asian artists and exchanges with the outside world.

Isabel, Carlos, and Zixuan NI were recruited as actors and applied to participate in the script reading session. The three actors came from different cities in Germany and worked together in Göttingen for the first time. After two rounds of online and one round of offline rehearsals, they read and performed Guo Shixing's one-act play "The Will" live at 2:30 pm on December 9. In 2006, "The Will" was first performed at the 100th anniversary of the death of Henrik Ibsen in Oslo, the capital of Norway. This is the first time the English version of the play has been read aloud in Germany. Guo Shixing is a screenwriter for the National Drama Theater and one of the most important contemporary playwrights in China. He is known as the “Dylan Matt of China”. Masterpieces include the "Idler Trilogy", "Birdman", "Chess Man", "Fisherman" and the "Dignity Trilogy", "Toilet", "Crematorium" and "Going Home". His plays have been translated into French, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, and many other languages.

This symposium also launched three workshops. At 3:30 pm on December 8th, the workshop “Virtual Space and Theater: Online Drama "Copenhagen"” was hosted by Jing WANG, a graduate student in art and technology at the University of Cambridge. Seven doctors and two masters from Göttingen and Cambridge participated in the online script reading. The workshop designed a unique virtual space that combined games, speeches, and performances with the technological experience of online virtual reality, bringing participants a new and interesting experience of digital drama. Xiaoxin WANG from Heidelberg University hosted the second workshop at 4:30 pm that day called “Theater Archives and Materiality: Digital Restoration and Visual Rebirth of Chinese Theatrical Art in the 1980s”. She introduced the recent progress of the project in the digital restoration of the Chinese drama video collection, especially the visual work “Director Lin Zhaohua's Film Laboratory” created in cooperation with Heidelberg performing arts scholars. In addition, some of the latest research results and technical methods in the collation of theater audiovisual archives such as image capture and audio-visual restoration were also introduced to the public. If there was cooperation between theater workers, digital humanities scholars, computer scientists, and image file administrators, they would benefit from this workshop. At 3:30 pm on December 9th, Aine Nakamura, a graduate student majoring in composition at the University of California, Berkeley, hosted a workshop on “Sound, body, and Narrative: Finding Community through Cross-border Creation”. Nakamura led the participants to use themes, poetry, and memory for voice, body, and language exercises. By deconstructing and then reconstructing a person's way of listening, he guided everyone to observe how to integrate physical expressions such as “self-evident” and “silent” in daily life into the creation of art.

At 5:30 pm on December 9th, the first two-day International Symposium on Contemporary Asian Theater in Göttingen was successfully concluded. The conference was hosted by the Department of East Asian Studies. It was strongly supported by the Academic Confucius Institute of Göttingen and the Center for Modern East Asian Studies of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The editorial department of the journal of Ying Ming Theater was responsible for coordinating and implementing specific meeting arrangements. The seminar achieved the set goals and achieved the expected results. The diverse cultural backgrounds of the speakers and young artists sent a clear and positive signal. The organizers of this seminar held an open and inclusive attitude toward theatrical art exchanges. Mikhail Bakhtin emphasized the inevitability of the dialogue, arguing that human consistency “is not an innate single voice, but a dialectical consensus reached by two or more parties that are not in harmony.” Further, Martin Buber proposed the equality of the dialogue, Bohm David emphasized its ingenuity, and Paulo Freire believed in the need for critical dialogue. The participants kept asking questions and getting responses in their speeches. While forming a consensus, they also demonstrated the equality, creativity, and criticism of this cultural interchange. It is hoped that the above review and summary will motivate the participating parties to further expand the dimension and significance of the dialogue in their future work and think about how to continue the newly established multilateral dialogue under the current complex and changeable situation in the world. (End)

Translated by Iuliia Baturu