

Dramaturgy in Germany: Interview with the Dramaturge of the Berliner Ringtheater Dandan LIU

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Ohne Ende Gegenwart, Director Lars Werner, Dramaturg
Dandan LIU,TD Berlin, image © Toni Petraschk

Editor's notes/Yumin AO: The whole of German dramaturgy has to be examined in relation to the history of "civic theatre", which emerged during the Enlightenment. This line of enquiry can be traced back to Lessing with his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, and the existence of dramaturgy continues to this day. German theatre has long promoted a "social functional view of theatre", with theatres funded by the state and developing in a different direction to London's West End and Broadway in the USA, as an important place to reflect on and discuss current social issues. The theatre is also abstracted as a discursive field with a nature of public space, or a field of art. The actors and participants in this field include artists and audiences, cultural and art institutions, critics and theorists circles, the press and the media, etc. So, in considering how a theatre performance is conceived at the beginning of its creation, to anticipating what impact it might have, what controversies it might provoke, what discussions it might lead, and many other issues, the creators would rely on dramaturges, expecting them to complete research and give advice. This is the definition of dramaturgy from its origins. But in contemporary times, as theatre art is redefined, the concept of dramaturgy is also being expanded and changed. Out of a desire to find out what theatre dramaturgy is in Germany, we contacted Dandan LIU, who works as a dramaturge in Berlin, to introduce it.

In his 1939 Stockholm lecture "On The Experimental Theatre", Bertolt Brecht asked the changing world: "How can the theatre be both entertaining and instructive at the same time?", "How can it be drawn away from this intellectual narcotics' traffic and be changed from a place of illusion to a place of practical experience?"[1] In theatre productions, the dramaturgy is an essential but often ignored role for the creative team. In the director's visualisation process of text, the dramaturgy becomes a behind-the-scenes link that helps the director and the actors to find paths of performance and expression, creating more layers of meaningful connections to the presentation of the work. Curious about the profession of dramaturge, which was born during the German Enlightenment, *the Journal of Yingming Theatre* contacted Dandan LIU, an artist working as a dramaturge in Germany, for a discussion around her practical experience.

Find an identity and position

Identity narrative carries strong self-signification, as life experiences internalise our understanding of the world, and subconsciously influence future choices. When asked "Why did you choose theatre art?", "What experiences have influenced your self positioning and career in artistic creation?" Dandan sketched out her journey for us: "I actually started to get involved in theatre in high school at the age of 15 in a drama club. Although I studied pharmacy as an undergraduate, I continued my duties as an actor and director in the Zongdian Drama Club at Wuhan University. When I felt my life in theatre was not yet complete, I chose the study of theatre and theatre history again."

In 2012, Dandan came to Germany to study theatre at the Free University of Berlin. After studying theatre history, philosophy and aesthetics, she found interest in experimental theatre and began working on it. What is interesting in experimental theatre? Experimental theatre is seen as a rebellion against traditional theatre, focusing on the "effective study and exploration of connotations and boundaries". Dandan is involved in a collective theater.[2] In collective creation, there is no clear division of roles between playwright, director, stage designer, etc. In 2021, when she participated as a dramaturge in the work of director Mengting ZHUO on *If you would play again*, a more experimental attempt in the narrative structure of immersive and interactive theatre could be seen. This work no longer offers a linear plot. Instead of providing a linearly developed plot structure, it only gives the audience a game-like framework to operate in, allowing them to shift from their own space to different scenes and to engage in a more active and positive state of mind. In such a semi-immersive and semi-participatory theatre, performer-audience relationships are subverted, and the performance space is redefined and reconstructed.

Erwin Piscator once mentioned that he wasn't content with performances to create a life experience for the audience but wanted to prompt a discussion. Not just to get applause from the audience but to provoke a debate. "It's not just about meeting the audience's expectations for theatre," Dandan said in the interview.

What are the most valued qualities of theatre works in the performing arts? In German theatre, a director takes center stage, and a dramaturge is an aid to the creative concepts in the director's secondary creation process. As a dramaturge, Dandan LIU certainly has her tastes. She properly minimizes her personal preferences and instead thinks about what the artists are after, what the audience wants, and whether she can help artists find and sort out what they want to say through extensive research, meticulous logic, and effective communication. She promotes "multiple value systems" and "never-ending" efforts, and repeatedly stresses that, out of her professionalism in theatre composition, she does not cling to an absolute value but prefers to tell the artists, "we have to find what you want together."

Focus on marginalised groups

How do artists view their roles and incorporate their roles into a collective creation? This is a question that many artists will ponder. Dandan is aware of her social identity and reflects on how it shapes her views and experiences. As a Chinese living in Germany, she has worked with more than thirty artists and she knows the common problems faced by the artist community. She often wonders what value art can bring to the artists themselves. As one of them, Dandan feels responsible for her community. She needs to delve into the experiences of that community. She says: "Our background, culture, and life experiences are all important factors in shaping our artistic vision and understanding of the world. I was born in China, grew up in a state-capitalist country, and have lived in Germany for almost ten years. All these life experiences have left a deep mark on my upbringing. And it will continue to influence the way I think and act."

In 2020, from December 3rd to 5th, Dandan worked as a dramaturge together with Ming Poon on the first online performances for Exotic Animal. They devised a performance in which the audience acted as jurors who gave vocal instructions to the performer, Ming Poon, in a dance audition. To satisfy the judges' quest for exoticism, Ming Poon used dance movements based on the audience's instructions to show the stereotypical image of China in their minds, such as qigong, angry dragons, and stiff limbs like chopsticks. After watching the show, one of the audience said, "This has been one of the most intense cultural experiences I have ever had in my life." The experience may not have been pleasant, and the social environment has shaped a person in a way that requires a lifetime of reflection. In this work, Dandan and Ming Poon brought to the fore the negative experiences that Asian immigrants and their descendants encounter in new societies and cultures.

Women's issues must be priority

Another intriguing topic of discussion is the identity of women. Some of Dandan's work reflects her interest in the experiences of Chinese women's groups and the feminist movement. As a dramaturge, Dandan participated in Ming Poon's "S. O. A. R. Queen" project. Within the theoretical framework of post-colonialism, this project is dedicated to exploring the possibility of identity expression and artistic presentation of non-white queer groups. The project, which is supported by the Berlin Art Research Fund

Grant Program, began in 2021 and will continue until 2023. In this project, Ming Poon and other artists challenge the predominantly white queer culture of the West. They approach the issue from a decolonial and feminist standpoint, with the intention of developing a performative strategy that resists the aphasia of ethnic queer groups in Western society caused by cultural appropriation and explores the possibility of challenging the influence of "heterosexual patriarchy" in Chinese culture. Compared to the drag culture in Europe and the United States, Dandan and Ming Poon turned to traditional Chinese operas and the male-to-female impersonation called Nan Dan, for inspiration. Dandan stated that after six months of research, she found Mulan's image to be intriguing. Mulan was originally a powerful woman with exceptional literary and martial arts skills, but after winning a battle, she decided to renounce her position and return to her hometown as a peasant. Mulan joined the army because she wanted to fight for her father and brother, not for herself. In ancient Chinese folktales, women are portrayed as pure tools that are discarded once they have served their purpose. This self-sacrificing behavior of women is praised everywhere, which reflects an implicit reality of cruelty towards women. In terms of performance strategies and costumes, "S.O.A.R. Queen," inspired by the image of Mulan, focuses on deconstructing the idealized and instrumentalized presentation of women, such as so called Dao Ma Dan's (a female character type versed in shadowboxing) "valiant and heroic in bearing", "dignified and fluent", and "joyous but not indecent".



Exotic Animal, Choreographer and Director Ming Poon, Dramaturg Dandan Liu, English Theatre Berlin
Image © Sarnt Utamachote

"I have faced criticism and obstacles since I was a child, as an artist and as a Chinese woman, so I naturally care about women." Dandan believes that Chinese women's lack of political participation is a significant factor impeding their unity. To address this issue, she proposes expanding opportunities for political participation. In her current line of work, she has collaborated, fought, and negotiated for common goals with numerous women of diverse backgrounds and identities. Dandan also believes that some women should be aware of their own privilege as well as the existence of other women who may not be as fortunate. "It is important for women to consider their own privileges, but also think of those who may not have the same," she said. "For example, I have a higher level of education than some other women. My experiences as a female of Han nationality differ from those of ethnic minorities in China. To achieve unity, it is critical to recognize these differences and work toward a more equitable society. Equal rights and unity do not happen overnight; they necessitate a long-term commitment to political engagement and a sense of privilege. We can create a more united community of women in China by working together, listening to one another, and giving voice to those who may not have one."

Attitude towards art

When asked what process the audience must undergo to break the existence of society and how drama intervenes in this process, Dandan responded bluntly, "My drama is not to satisfy ; it is to challenge." Dandan values the audience's response to her works and considers her relationship with the audience to be equal. She said: "My goal is not to cater to their expectations or desires, but to push them to think beyond their comfort zone and see the world from a different perspective. This can be a long and difficult process, as people are often resistant to change, but I believe that it is important for art to play this role in society."

As an artist, Dandan places a great deal of value on audience response. She believes that true individual aesthetic perception and spiritual development can be achieved through interaction and the exchange of ideas. She believes that the audience will have their own interpretation of art, and she hopes that her artistic creation will arouse people's emotions and thoughts, as opposed to simply conveying political messages. Even if the audience does not change as a result of art, art retains value and significance.

In addition, Dandan is of the opinion that in order for artists to be successful, they must first comprehend and value the complexities of life. "Suffering makes poets." It is only after we have endured the trials and tribulations of life that we are able to have a deeper understanding and sympathy for the experiences of others. Artists are able to produce works of art that have profound influence and significance if they incorporate this understanding and compassion into the works they create.(End)

Notes

[1] Brecht, Bertolt, and Carl Richard Mueller. "On the Experimental Theatre." *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1961, pp. 3–17. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1125000>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2023.

[2] Collective Creation is an exploration of community collaboration, where team members rehearse and create in a collective improvisation. See Gao Zewen. 共同体探索——欧美先锋戏剧的“集体剧场”与“表演性转向”[Community Exploration: The "Collective Theatre" and the "Performative Turn" in European and American Pioneer Theatre]. *Studies in Literary and Artistic Theory* 42.03(2022):152-161.

[3] Inky Lee has written a review of Exotic Animal's performance. See Lee." Be More Chinese". Available from: <https://tanzschreiber.de/en/be-more-chinese/> [Accessed 9. December 2020]