

Beyond Words: the Macro Health Crisis Has Shaped Us into Micro Isolated Islands

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Abstract: The “global village” is collapsing in times of health crisis, de-globalization movement, ideological conflicts, and technological development. In this case, all cultures are desperate to find an exclusive “air-raid shelter” of its own. However, we also began to reflect on the building of the cultural fortification: is it too radical in its defense of “tradition” against “integration”? On the contemporary theater landscape, how can we effectively integrate our own “traditions” into theater-making? Why should we embrace diverse artistic forms, traditions and experiences in this process? Today we cannot refrain from perceiving these changes: societies are insulating from each other, cultures are closing to each other, theatrical arts are hollowed, for they have all been kept in quarantine at home. Therefore, we need to return to the original, if not ultimate, question of “what is theater”. In this way, we can consider how to conduct this ritual that encounters and fights against the secular, the habits the memories, and the time.

Beyond Words is the title of my recent theatre piece which I wrote during the pandemic in 2020. It was inspired by Buddha’s discourse: “Truth cannot be explained, for it’s wrong once it’s said”. The pandemic has been sweeping the world. We are experiencing a period of extreme isolation in spatial, physical and psychological dimensions. We are confounded by the sea of information flowing into our life, because it is dangerous to swim in the sea of knowledge and information without a compass. Here we are, not only a lonely inhabitant in a skyscraper, but also Nemo, the clownfish on its adventure to home, who was pounded by the torrents of information, out of breath, constantly proceeding without a clear direction. Excited, perverse, and even alienated, we are losing the capacity of thinking and perception. myriads of things in this world can only be perceived rather than said, and the truth is to be perceived in the heart rather than be taught and announced. Yet today the gloom of the pandemic has not taken its leave. In this shadow, people seem to return to a normal life, whereas certain parts of us have been re-written or transformed. The legacy of the pandemic imposed a strong impact on the development of theatre as we have been building walls, digging for shelters and becoming the ostrich hiding in our own cultural territories, in a zone of numerous isolated islands.

It is hardly doubted that in the contemporary globalised context, the communication and integration of theatres are undergoing profound changes, effected by the epidemics, politics, technology and culture itself. Some changes can be perceived, while others remaining in the dark. The old means and habits of communication are disappearing, and we seem to step into a brand new era.

Uncertainty is dwelling in our daily life and constraining our lifestyle. At the outbreak of pandemic, the theatres all over the world were closed down. Though our auditoriums were empty, the lights on the stage stayed on, for we had always been hoping to welcome spectators into the theatre. As Peter Brook has said, all that is needed for an action of performance is someone walks across an empty space, whilst the other watches. That is to say, spectators are the indispensable part of our theatre. We see nowadays online streaming performances become a worldwide trend. Nevertheless, theatre is born to be presented in person. Certainly, some may question the necessity for a playhouse to exist in our city, or in our whole society. What would happen? There might be no consequences, no change at all. In the current social system, theatre is the margin of margins. But it is hard to imagine a life without theatre.

Not before long, the technological development facilitates the transportation, and so we benefited from a period where intercultural communication became frequent, and our planet was no bigger than a close-knit village. The process of transculturation broadened the horizons of citizens in all places. And theatre used to benefit from this process as well. For quite a long time, we have adhered to the principle of “neither self-deprecating, nor arrogant” in the intercultural communications. We should have a broad perspective in order to observe a broader horizon, and then we may succeed in understanding another culture before trying to learn its essence and enrich our own culture. However, if we are obsessed with an excessive emphasis on cultural specificities or “national confidence”; if we talk all the time nothing more than our own cultural identities or features, and refraining from encountering or embracing differences; then how do cultures really integrate with each other? Sometimes the integration may end as a non-constructive comparison in which people only approve of their own culture. In reality, the eastern and western cultures have been so mutually blended that we see one’s heritage enlightening the other’s culture. In practice, it is ignorant to attempt to dismiss each other’s influences, especially for us who are engaged in performing arts. The key issue lies in how to put thoughts into action immediately. Sometimes we talk in the framework of academics, while at other times, we talk in the framework of the theatrical productions. But nowadays, we should come to a point where the theories, the academia, education, technology and practical know-how should be on one table for our discussion. We should enhance the communications and collaborations of different cultures and arts in order to build a solid ground for a “guarantee” against the upcoming “uncertainties”.

For a long time, we often stressed on our own traditions in cultural communications. Nevertheless, tradition has no linear relation with the real quality of performing arts, neither can it be a monopoly factor of conquering contemporary theatres and spectators. Sometimes, the name tag “tradition” might act as a trap which made the creators satisfied with copying and pasting traditional elements on stage, and made the spectators narrow-minded about other brilliant and reformative theatre. For theatrical art, the purpose of studying the “traditions” lies in the possibilities of applying them to creation effectively, of enlightening the theatre today, of activating and engaging the spectators of today, and of creating an art vivid and alive for us today. In fact, a piece becomes a classic because the efforts made to adjust to the time. The spectators have changed, and so should the artwork. Theatre cannot be static and stagnant in face of constantly changing social circumstances. Instead, it should be adaptable to social transformations without moving away from its origin. Chinese huaju was imported from the Western theatre only about one hundred years ago. Certainly it has always been experimenting within the framework of nationalization, and there had been progress. It borrows, inherits, and develops from *xiqu* (traditional Chinese theatre, also known as

Chinese Opera), but the two work in different ways. In *xiqus*, what exactly are worthy of inheriting and developing *huaju*: the aesthetics, artistic expressivity and values unique to *xiqus*? Are they the space, poetry, plot? Or the body, music, dance of the opera? Or the imagination, the way of thinking, the tension, the thought and the literary and cultural background? For the two styles of stage performance that have developed together in Chinese cultural context for more than a hundred years, this process of integration and development has already met so many challenges. No doubt that when our Chinese opera faces the Western theatre, it will be such a scene: shocks, mis-interpretation, and alienation—a complete catastrophe.

In China, the entire performing arts industry has changed a lot since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is the one that has experienced the biggest earthquake apart from talk shows, immersive performances, and musicals. Because of the pandemic, many foreign musicals cannot tour in China. And after many years of cultivation, notably by importing the foreign original musicals, China has gradually formed a domestic market for musicals. But now all of a sudden, these companies cannot travel to China. We see a huge demand-supply gap in the market which in turn became an opportunity for Chinese original musicals. The market needs good musicals, and the spectators have a good appetite for this type of shows. That's why producing musicals, especially new original musicals, became a blowout. In 2021, there were 148 musicals put on stage in Shanghai city, not taking into account of other locations. This was beyond imagination before the pandemic.

Certainly we have been hoping to welcome such a large group of spectators. It was once the volume of spectators in China from villages, towns and metropolitans. And these are the contemporary spectators: those who were born in the 1990s grew up in a digital era and those from the 2000s, for me they are as fresh as aliens. The pandemic has in parallel changed spectators. Why would a spectator come to the theatre and watch a play? Being at theatre is in many ways a ritual to share an event with others in a given time and space. Theatre becomes a place to socialise and a place where ideas are exchanged. But today, going to theatre becomes such an extravagant act. You need to invest great efforts in studying the repertoire, to book the tickets in advance, to pin the time onto your calendar, and the tickets are often dearly priced. When it finally comes to that evening of performance, you need to prepare yourself properly and work hard to figure out the nearest route to the theatre, in order to bring yourself to theatre on time. And then eventually you enter the theatre before the show starts. Then you start to sit straight up on your seat and survive the performance, to be attentive, to keep the etiquettes, and not to disturb your neighbours. There are a bunch of rules for being a good spectator: for example, no drinks in the auditorium, no noise, no sneezing, no yawning, and of course no snoring. You are forbidden to fall asleep even when the performance was literally a nightmare, because if, if you close your eyes for more than three seconds in front of an opaque or badly created performance, you will receive your neighbour's sharpest disdain. Sometimes you really don't get what is going on on the stage, but you are too scared to tell your confusion, because you are worried if people would despise you. But, after all, what is this all about to be at theatre? It is to share with the characters how they face themselves in extreme situations, in return for cultivating and shaping our own personality and identity. Theatre can take us briefly away from the daily life, thus we enter another situation or another dimension. No matter it is a gesture of avoiding, evading, going into a trance, evaluating or contemplating, we are opening up our imagination, with a relaxed state of mind, for being attentively alone. From there, we may see the inner self and thus see more of this world, and we may improve our appreciation for aesthetics. And more often, theatre gives us an opportunity to be accompanied by those creators on the way to experiencing, feeling, imagining, taking risks and discovering; therefore, we may rediscover our own self and reach a horizon unknown to us before. Theatre broadens our horizons. How open we are for unknown possibilities determines how far we can reach. We start an expedition and complete it together at theatre, from which we discover where our own boundaries are. This is what happens every time at theatre. Human life demands material enjoyment, spiritual cultivation, and soul

agitation. Perhaps this is the most fundamental difference between human beings and animals. We need the exchange of ideas and the communication of souls, and theatre clearly opens the door for us.

The pandemic has a profound impact on the spectators. We have cherished ever more the chance of watching a performance. In the past spectators could purchase their tickets at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center one year in advance, whereas now they can only book at most one month before the show for fear of possible cancellation. The new generation of our spectators, who grew up in the Internet age, are skilled at using computers, the Internet, and new media. They are interested not only in online performances but also in communicating with each other in person, alive, in theatre. They are more likely to live in solitude, so they actually long for conversations on the spot. In the case of the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, our female audience now accounts for about 76% of all audience groups, which shows a big difference from the past, when fifteen years ago the ratio stayed basically 50%. The large increase in the proportion of female spectators also affects the actual production of our repertoire, including the choice of subject matter, content, form, etc. Some female spectators are starstruck, so the fandom culture and the traffic stars of film and television industries are gradually influencing the stage industry as well.

However, every disaster in human history takes human to the other shore where we evaluate, create and re-create, which is the legacy of the catastrophe. It brings us to the poem of Zhao Yi, a writer from Qing dynasty, which, if we try to interpret in English, says, “a nation’s misfortune can be a fortune for poets, as the vicissitudes gave birth to flowers in their work.” The pandemic has dramatically transformed the ecology and paradigm of China’s performing arts industry. Industry reshuffling and the capital has the final call in our creation and production, in case of either state-owned or private theatre companies. The former focus on propaganda to promote, while the latter focus on taking up the market shares, with those in both cases with no abundant funds are swept out of the industry.

In China, we have an old joke to mock ourselves: the actor is a lunatic, the spectator is a fool, and the playwright is a liar. This is a matter of giving and receiving. If the theatre is to change the world, it will need to touch the sensitive souls and to resonate with the wise mind. Real theatre is always finding ways to change the inbuilt inertia inevitably caused by the society, the inertia that always attempts to reject change or pains. What we are familiar with is the known world, and what we have no clue about is the unknown world. How much we know actually indicates how much we are to know, as they shape the boundary of our knowledge, and this includes our knowledge about the theatre. Theatre can take us up to another summit to see the mysterious field. And dramatic art is leading us to sprint towards the mystery. We humans will learn to discover ourselves in the process. Thus the core of dramatic art is to identify one’s self. Nowadays, increasing material prosperity drives our spiritual demands, but on the contrary, people are getting more hungry for spiritual satisfactions. The technology is updating like lightning bolts, but people are feeling more and more hollow, just as they are intaking richer nutrients than before, but their actual physiological function is getting worse. In the age of media domination, fragmentary information is readily available everywhere, but people’s perception of life is becoming less sensitive, and theatre may restore us to be sensitive, mindful and sober.

ramatic art is born in the drip of life, which slowly converges into the torrent of thought and runs into our hearts and minds. The old-fashioned value judgments and the “clichés” are indeed not the main course for theatre. They can be expressed to their maximum in popular culture, and people can watch them again and again, or even participate in the shows. But theatre possesses the strength of deafening and awakening us and even preparing us to confront the world, the time, the memories and the clichés in our life, which is its intellectual charms.

Nowadays, in the age of media domination, people are connected and communicating because of the Internet. Before, we describe narrow-minded people as frogs sitting at the bottom of a well who cannot jump out of the well, who have little knowledge and a narrow vision, so they believe that the whole sky is just as big as the well. Now with the Internet, we assume that they may finally jump out of their well and discover this big world and claim: Wow! This is how big the real world is! However, this is not the case. The real case is that frogs reaching each other and re-affirm their mutual consensus on the Internet that - the sky has definitely to be as big as the well. They are reluctant to jump out of the well and are prone to their narrow consensus, as the world and society are severely torn apart. In China, we use a social media called WeChat as our communication tool. Everyone will join different group chats. Such groups tend to converge in value, and not to accept different opinions. In this way, they are forming information cocoon rooms, and the users become more and more narrow-minded and stubborn. As a result, there is an increasing population who become less able to communicate as a backfire of the Internet. Perhaps dramatic art can make up for this shortcoming of online interaction, or break the loop. Through on-site, live communication, cultures can be reintegrated. Everyone is an isolated island, but our art will be the boat taking us to reach each other, and theatrical art will sail notably well in the tempest.

Art has always had to deal with its relationship with politics, capital and markets (spectators) in any country. The brutality of politics, the temptation of capital, and the squeeze of the market have caused many artists to lose their initial artistic dreams. And so had the Chinese artists who have been struggling through this difficult period. I once wrote three plays for responding respectively to these three pairs of relations: *Yu Tian* (Cry to Heaven), which discusses the relation between politics and art; *Ziben Lun* (Das Capital), which interrogates the relation between art and capital; and *Wuhe zhi Zhong* (The Crowd), which tries to understand the relation between art and its receivers - the spectators. All cultures are unique and they develop in an unbalanced, unequal way. The concept of a universal harmony or globalisation is distorted and devastated by politicians, and the system of co-existence is being ruined. Cultural exchanges have also been suspended. All cultures and arts have been hampered by health crisis, political disputes or war affairs. We often feel impotent in the face of such an international environment. And the art is all we have in front of us. It builds bridges, establishes bonds, and adds lubricants, which is essential for mutual understanding and compassion.

Once upon a time, everyone was an isolated island, and began to understand and integrate with each other due to globalisation and the science and technological advancement. But the pandemic, de-globalisation movement, ideological differences, scientific and technological breakthroughs are leading the global village to disintegrate. Cultural communication has also become more difficult, with people returning to their comfortable “cocoon rooms”. But artists are still working, trying, dedicating to bring some innovation and creativity to us. Theatre is still with us, and such symposium is still taking place. I therefore firmly believe that soon we will embrace each other for real, feel each other's breath and warmth for real, and then we are no longer detached small islands. (End)

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