

The “Grass Stage” Collective and ZHAO Chuan’s “Draft Theatre”

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Show of World Factory © ZHAO Chuan

Abstract: On 29 November 2022, the theatre artist Zhao Chuan adopted the term “draft theatre” in his lecture to review and reflect on the theatrical practices of his troupe, Grass Stage (Caotai Ban), which has been active for nearly two decades since its founding in 2005. The lecture was coordinated by the East Asian Department at the University of Göttingen, the Department of Theatre and Film Studies at Nanjing University, and the Journal of Ying Ming Theater. Grass Stage’s productions are mainly performed by “amateur” actors in informal, non-institutional performance spaces. The theatre troupe supports a collective-creative approach, and their work-in-progress pieces are normally shown at a certain stage in their development. Zhao explored the theatrical elements appearing in his definition of “draft theatre,” including space, performance, individuals and collectives, and the relationship between reality and theatrical imagination. In the public eye, “draft theatre” is an ambiguous, yet open term caught in-between the “professional” and “non-professional.” This vagueness arises from Grass Stage’s commitment to break and transcend boundaries. In this article, I will summarize of Zhao’s lecture and present my understanding of the Grass Stage’s creation.

“The dramatic works produced by ‘draft theatre’ are permanently in a state of becoming—it can be regarded as multiple drafts that people constantly endeavour to depict the world together. In this view, it cannot be simply counted among commercial theatre or personalized works. I put forward the idea of ‘draft theatre’ from the practices of Grass Stage, an amateur troupe. Rather than a formalistic theatre experiment, the idea is more about the relations of production in literature and art—why do we need theatre? However, it still concretely unfolds and explores through the form: space, performance, individuals and collectives, reality and poeticism. The raw, unrefined theatrical practices of Grass Stage also produce a more vivid space on which ‘draft theatre’ is based. The major practice is theatre workshops in which most participators are ordinary people rather than theatre professionals. It emphasizes the constant scribbles, sketches, and representations in the process of corporeal actions and movements. If theatre is part of social history, draft theatre is expected to accumulate positive energy towards the future in the current social circumstances.” Zhao Chuan gave his definition of “draft theatre” in his lecture on 29 November 2022, coordinated by the East Asian Department at the University of Göttingen, the Department of Theatre and Film Studies at Nanjing University, and *the Journal of Ying Ming Theater*. The practice of “draft theatre” is obviously targeted at the popularized commercial theatre in the contemporary theatre market. The assembly-line mode of production seems to deprive theatre of its vitality and agency. In the performances conducted in this approach, professional actors merely repeat the intentions of the script and the director, with the performers owning minimal agency.

Conventional commercial theatre groups normally follow an assembly-line mode of production, with little difference in each performance in the same way as products on an assembly line. Their revenue is obtained through selling tickets in formal theatres or theatre festivals. The audience sits properly and watches the performance in comfortable chairs, rarely having any real sense of meaningful interactions with the actors or the production team. However, unlike those groups, Grass Stage has been an exceptional presence on the Chinese theatrical landscape. Through involving ordinary people in theatre workshops, the amateur troupe is known for works imprinted with unique individual and collective experiences. Their performances are mostly non-profit, scattered in informal venues and expected to construct an open public sphere.

The term “Grass Stage” itself carries a strong sense of space and history, referring to migrant folk theatre troupes in traditional Chinese theatre. Therefore, the establishment of Zhao’s Grass Stage itself suggests the transformation of space. If the historical grass stage is only a travelling troupe, Zhao’s steps forward to expand the employment of space in the theatre. On the one hand, due to the lack of resources and funding, they are unable to use professional rehearsal and performance venues. Therefore, most of their performances take place in informal spaces, usually freely provided by sponsors and temporarily transformed, such as factories, worker’s theatres, university theatres, cafes, art galleries, etc. On the other hand, it does not mean that they are bound by space and thus robbed of autonomy. On the contrary, they are capable of evading censorship and freely expressing their ideas precisely because of the “amateurism” of the performing space. In the process of touring, or “lalian” (field manoeuvres) in Zhao’s words, Grass Stage is always “on the road”, traveling to different cities to interact with the public and society in various spaces, attempting to construct an open, autonomous public space through theatre. Their free performances also allow them to reach out to a wide audience, as in the case of World Factory in Shenzhen where many factory workers unable to afford expensive tickets rushed to watch and participated in the post-performance discussions (what Zhao calls “yanhou juchang (post-performance theatre)”). This anti-commercial approach arises from their appropriation of the conception of space in traditional grassroot troupes. Ultimately, the employment of space also lies in their organization of free lectures and workshops open to the public to expand the public space every year.

Zhao appropriates the military term *lalian* for military training of marching and camping to define their touring performances in different regions.

Most members of Grass Stage are the so-called “amateur” performers, which serves to subvert the traditional concept of performance held by professional actors. Zhao has emphasized, on various occasions, that the purpose of performances is to figure out one’s relationship with the world. It is also a response to the basic question of “why people perform”, which lies at the core of the concept of “interrogating theatre” proposed by Zhao Chuan. He believes that this question cannot be effectively explored in commercial theatre because the performances there are mostly driven by the professional demands of professional actors. In Grass Stage, however, anybody can become a performer and engage in their performances. Many of their members are previous audiences who have watched their performances and participated in post-performance discussions. Learning about the functioning of Grass Stage, they also hope to be involved in collective creation with Grass Stage members through “amateur” performances to understand their own body and memories and their relationship with society. In this regard, performance becomes an active participatory process for them. This also explains why Zhao rejects the popular term *suren* (a Chinese term translated from Japanese to refer to non-professionals or laymen) to designate amateur performers, which denies the initiative and possibility of amateur performances from the perspective of professionals and authorities.

The performances of Grass Stage are the products of collective creation or devised theatre. For them, the relationship between individuals and the collective is also crucial. Each of their plays originates from workshops through collective discussions, debates, and interactions. Therefore, they create different performances of a single play based on individual actors’ experiences. Each performance may present different dimensions of a play, for the work is the integration of every individual’s thinking. Contemporary Chinese society is witnessing an increasing emphasis on individuals and individuality, thus overlooking the creativity of the collective. However, human beings are, after all, social animals. And every action we take, such as having a meal together or performing a play, creates a collective. Therefore, the collective creation mode of production has a significant social and cultural significance in the context of contemporary China.

Collective creation forms a “little society” in the case of the Grass Stage, as the actors come from different social strata and backgrounds. The collision and confrontation of viewpoints among actors is highlighted in the workshops where the actors come to understand not only themselves but also others in the collective to comprehend events occurring in the unknown corners of society. The process of exploring themselves resembles that of drafting, ultimately forming a performance. Each performance changes through interaction with the audience in the post-performance discussions. In the end, each performance becomes a “palimpsest”, with layers of writings and meanings on top of others, representing the relationship between reality and theatre. The members of Grass Stage and the audiences also create a broader collective to reflect on reality and envision a theatrical utopia. It is in this sense that the productions of Grass Stage are different from the assembly-line-style commercial productions. It is a process of becoming, of drawing “multiple drafts that people constantly endeavour to depict the world together”. The troupe works with long rhythms. The making of *World Factory* includes the preparation of four years in whole, through multiple discussions, fieldwork, interviews, and research. During the two rounds of touring performances (Italian), Grass Stage has been in contact with numerous factory workers, including those from Foxconn in Shenzhen. At the suggestion of audiences who are workers, the troupe has also performed in factories, conducting workshops and training for the workers. Some members of Grass Stage chose to stay in Shenzhen and collaborated with the workers. Ultimately, the workers even formed their own troupe, “the North Gate Theatre Workers’ Troupe”, whose performance later won an award for its production of *Our Story* (Women de Gushi) at a theatre festival in Shenzhen.



Show of *Home* © ZHAO Chuan

Grass Stage can be regarded as an “anomaly” in contemporary Chinese theatre. With the promotion of anti-commercialization and anti-institutionalization, it is rooted in the grassroots, recruiting amateur performers and targeted at ordinary audiences. Their members mostly do volunteer jobs and give free performances. They explore the relationship between individuals and the collective or the world, expand the possibilities of performance, imagine how theatre shapes the future of society, and provide an alternative for the past or the future. (End)

Theatre as Social Studies and Practice



Show of *World Factory* © ZHAO Chuan

Zhao Chuan, who spans multiple creative fields, including theater, literature, and film, is also involved in art criticism and curation and is the co-founder and director of the independent theater collective Grass Stage, which started in 2005. He is obsessed with exploring how art and social practice intertwine - what is the individual, collective, physical, discursive, documentary, and poetic in it. He was engaged in the production, direction, and performance of the series "Grass and Mustard" (2018-2019), which explores the current state of youth existence, and the "Social Theatre Trilogy" (2006-2017) *World Factory*, *Little Society*, and *Madman Story*, which explores the plight of the underclass, revolutionary history, and the future. He has published various books, including *A Short History of Radical Art* (2014), *No Abandonment Theatre* (2021), and *Another Gathering* (co-edited, 2021).

Grass Stage is an experimental collective theatre that meets to discuss performance, theater, and social issues; over the years, it has used a variety of venues for rehearsals and exchanges and has planned a lecture series called "Culture Station" and a long-distance tour called *La Lian*. The group has been using a variety of venues for rehearsals and exchanges, as well as planning the "Culture Station" lecture series. Grass Stage encourages ordinary people to join the theater, focuses on grassroots issues, emphasizes the active connection between the theatre and the surrounding life, and constantly shapes a mobile public space, giving rise to discourse, discussion, and poetic imagination. The theater works include the series "Grass and Mustard" (2018-2019) and the "Social Theater Trilogy" (2006-2016). Since the era of the epidemic, Grass Stage has launched a series of new research and rehearsals on the relevance of personal situations to the times, such as *Home* (2022) and *The Geli Isle* (2021).