

Application of *Nuo* Opera Masks in Contemporary Theatre: on the Wearing and Symbolism of the Masks in *Shui Sheng*

Author / ZHAO Miao

Show of *Shui Sheng* © ZHAO Miao



ONE

Shui Sheng is a mask and physical theater that I created in 2012. Based on a literary work titled Wang Liulang in Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio (Liaozhai Zhiyi) written by Pu Songling in Qing Dynasty, the play tells the story of an old man who comes to fish every night and meets a water ghost who pushes people into the river in exchange for reincarnation. The two become close friends and often drink together. The old man discovers the water ghost gets trapped in an evil path, so he sacrifices himself to save the latter.

As I searched for a way of theatrical expression for the play, I was troubled by several questions.

First, how to be more creative in performing a play of this subject matter and genre? I wanted to draw on traditional Chinese theater, a stylized theatrical performance that brings oriental aesthetics, rhythm, and a strong sense of stage hypothesis. But I realized I need to overcome the rigid performance routines and patterns in Chinese stylized theater tradition.

Second, how can the performance embody a stronger sense of ritual?

Third, how to bridge the cultural gap when facing audiences from different countries?

In the end, I identified Shui Sheng as a physical drama that incorporates mask performance. Perhaps using masks is a good way to solve the three problems mentioned above. First of all, masks can not only act as a barrier to isolate characters and actors, but also help the two build a special communication bridge. When the actor's face is hidden behind the mask, they perceive the visible image through their own and the mask's eye sockets. The premise of looking out is to feel the physical space between the inner mask and the face, a distance about 1 to 2 centimetres that seems to form a narrow black tunnel. Actors' souls can hide in the darkness behind the eyes of the mask and look out as safely as if they were creeping through the cave entrance. This hiding and looking behind the mask makes it easier for the actor to peer inside and outside of the character, and to examine his own mind and body.

The principle and method of wearing masks comes from the European "neutral mask" which was developed and summarised by Jacques Lecoq, the founder of French physical theatre. He emphasized that actors should not put too much effort on their faces, they must understand that wearing a mask will weaken not only the realistic performance of the face, but also a huge sense of separation and playfulness, and will force the actor's body to become a brand new face that can express emotions and attitudes. He has found that whether using Lecoq's emotionless neutral mask or wearing an oriental mask with emotions of joy and anger, the attitude and emotion of the character is not solidified and defined by the mask's expression, but rather by the actor's entire body discourse. The masks bring new traction and constraints to the actors body, presenting a unique physical discourse.

The third advantage of masks is that they can break down cultural barriers and act as a bridge of understanding for audiences from different cultural backgrounds. In the global context, there is a great consensus on the symbolism and function of masks: from the intimidation and deterrence used by ancient humans in hunting, to their use in tribal warfare to defend and repel, and then to worship gods and demons in rituals, and to play in the arts and entertainment. All human beings share a common understanding and use of masks, even today, facing the epidemic, people wear masks that also perform a protective function.

TWO

In the very beginning of choosing the category of masks for the *Shui Sheng*, I set my sights on the field of European masks. At that time, I selected *Commedia dell'Arte* Mask and innovative French masks from lots of sources and images. I wanted to use European masks and their way to move and change the actors' performances, but this brought us new challenges. Italian *commedia dell'arte*, like traditional Chinese opera, has stylized performances and fixed narrative routines, including the division of roles. This would have made it very difficult for Chinese actors who are used to performing physically in the Eastern way, so we abandoned the idea of European masks in the end.

Then, among the information I kept reviewing, the oldest and most stylized Nuo Opera masks in China emerged. In the end I decided to use a Guizhou opera mask worn on the forehead for the following reasons:

First of all, the masks of the Nuo opera are related to the ghosts and gods in traditional Chinese culture. The images of the masks are mostly ferocious and weird, which actually endows our ghost-themed story with a mysterious temperament. The dull expression on the mask, the black eye sockets, and the big mouth that seems to cry and smile will make many viewers shudder, adding a strong sense of mystery and ritual to the performance.

Secondly, Guizhou's native operas are mostly performed in mountainous areas and are good at martial arts. In order to help the audience on the mountainside to see the masks clearly, and also for the actors to see their opponents easily, the masks of Guizhou local operas are mostly worn on the foreheads of the actors. The actors look out from the lower jaw of the mask, where a black veil is hanging. There are also many action scenes in *Shui Sheng*, and the jumping, turning, and rolling might affect the wearing of masks. Therefore, the unique way of wearing Guizhou's traditional masks is more in line with the performance needs.

Finally, the main character Wang Liulang in the *Shui Sheng* is a small ghost trapped in the underwater demon. He had to push people into the river and drown them to reincarnate himself. He was a timid, friendly, and active person before he died, so we decided to use the Qin Tong mask in the opera for Wang Liulang. With the bridge of the nose serving as axis in the Nuo opera masks, it can be stated that Qin Tong violated the rule of symmetrical and balanced deity faces. Qin Tong represents small characters on the fringes of society, highlighting the forms of crooked mouths, picky eyes, distorted left and right faces, and misplaced features. According to legend, he was the Jade Emperor's son but was thrown to a family named Qin on the ground from the Nantian Gate, because he looks ugly. The Laojun gave him the name, Qin Tong, and made him the Fairy of Nuo to add joy to the world. This kind of characters are grotesque, exaggerated, naughty, funny, both good and evil, and they are very colorful and interesting buffoon images in local operas. They are mostly used, like Trufalchino and Brighella in Italian *commedia dell'arte*, to depict the secular little people who rely on the wealth and power for survival.

Nuo Masks

Show of *Shui Sheng* © ZHAO Miao



THREE

Although I use Chinese Nuo Opera masks for our performance, I have to consider how to face a larger global audience, as well as whether the ancient and rich oriental drama could be integrated with contemporary theater. We undertook more attempts.

To begin with, due to the large number of action scenes in *Shui Sheng*, I chose Guizhou opera masks to avoid blocking actors' vision, but I also hope that the masks can bring more exaggerated forms and movements to the actors' bodies. Masks are mostly worn in Guizhou local operas to match scenes of upright martial arts, while the protagonist of *Shui Sheng* is a little ghost lurking in the water. Masks are required to give the body an unusual posture while not blocking the actor's vision. Finally, the mask is placed on top of the actor's head, resulting in a more distinctive body posture. To ensure that the audience can see the mask, the actor has to keep his chest closed, his back raised, and his knees bent all the way. This figure resembles not only a raptor flapping its wings before taking flight, but also an orangutan who is afraid and about to attack. Actors face the ground to perform, and their heads become the neck of the characters. They can hardly see the opponent's head all the way, but see the opponent's body through the peripheral vision when they lower their heads to communicate and perform.

Second, the masks obscure the actors' expressions, and the entire play is told without verbal lines, leading to great difficulties in the narrative of *Shui Sheng*. But I have discovered a new solution: Chinese opera has a highly stylized and symbolic body language, particularly hand movements, that are as prominently symbolic and indicative as European pantomime, mime, and impromptu comedy gestures, and can highly condense local characteristics in it, forming a unique and complete gesture language system under different cultural backgrounds. I incorporated gestures and movements from traditional Eastern and Western dramas into the *Shui Sheng* performance. Mostly use mime gestures in highly directional narrative scenes, and when it comes to the environment and inner feelings and attitudes of the characters, I use hand movements in Chinese opera, for example, the old man in the play falling into the water used the posture of escaping from the water in the opera.

Third, because of masks in the performance, the actor's head and movements become important traction for the body. Both the Eastern and Western stages place great value on the performers' masks. That is to say, their heads, yet the ways in which they treat it is different. The European masks emphasize the line of sight, and the body will use head to navigate, lead, and track before the initiation of many movements, so that the audience can observe the character's internal attitude, external facing, and the crucial point of attention. I learned in the European mask training session that the raised nose at the center of the mask is an important reference for the actor's training in line of sight and orientation, and that the tip of the mask is the point of traction and extension of momentum that drives the entire body. It must take the lead and point precisely to the external focus based on the character's internal dynamics. In traditional Chinese plays, both the Nuo Opera and drama operas attach great importance to the masks or heads of actors, but they have different ways. Unlike the method used in European theatre, traditional Chinese operas believe that the most important part of the body should appear last, therefore on traditional stages both important characters and the important part of the body, the head, shows up last. Only at the last moment of the characters' debut their constantly moving head finally stops and faces audience. And when the play shows the character found or saw an external object, it also does not face it directly to draw attention, but rather uses a combination of hands, eyes, torso, feet movements to portray, while the head remains steady and visible for

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the audience instead of turning or moving randomly. At this moment, the traction point which demonstrates the character's facing or turning movement is not the nose as in the case of European operas, but rather the pointing direction of a part of the performer's entire body, sometimes it's the arms and hands on the upper body, other times the feet on the lower body, therefore the head will only turn at last following the body. The actor's mask or face is supposed to be presented to the audience for a longer period to demonstrate the character's inner attitude when discovering or realizing something.

In the performance of Shui Sheng, both methods of utilizing the mask have been incorporated. For instance, to show that a character finds someone, if the found person is entering the stage for the first time, I would let the character look towards the direction of that person, and use the tip of the nose to show the process from sensing to seeing and then to observing and considering. If the found person is showing up for the second time, then I use the method from traditional Chinese mask or drama operas, and let the performer first point at this person with their body, while leaving their head to the audience to demonstrate their attitude when taking notice, therefore the body posture becomes the face externalized by character's internal world.

Fourth, I also made some major adjustments to the walking posture of performers wearing masks. Usually, in Nuo Opera, the performer would follow a stylized and ritualized way of walking, but in the Shui Sheng, I have designed new walking postures for different characters. For instance, I drew inspiration from the way characters walk in shadow puppetry plays from Central China to design the walking stance of pedestrian characters, so that the performance of peasants can be powerful and stylish, and the audience can easily differentiate them. The protagonist Wang Liulang, however, is a water ghost, therefore I let him walk on his tiptoe. This is inspired by the way drama operas portray ghosts, and at the same time let the performer's body float up and down, his head mimicking fishes swimming and zigzagging while both of his hands peddling the water, so that he appears as a water ghost submerging in the river.

Fifth, by fusing the principles of body movements in traditional Chinese plays and classic European plays, the stage presents more types of lateral, vertical, and spiral body movements. The Italian Commedia dell'Arte contains many lateral and fast body movements, and brings a comedic, witty and funny style of moving trajectory onto the stage. However, in Ancient Greek tragedies, it is rare to see this fast lateral movement. When the protagonists who bare heavy burdens of fate and destiny visit the meeting of the gods, they usually make vertical body movements, either kneeling downwards or extending arms upwards to pray. In traditional Chinese masked or drama operas, more circling or spinning movements can be seen. Whether stationary posture changes or the structure of the entire scene, they all seek to move in circles and spinning. These symbolic body movement styles are largely connected to Eastern culture, especially folk beliefs.

Horizontal and vertical are used specifically in Shui Sheng as follows: when the fishing old man appears, I use more lateral movements to show his hilarity, happiness, and kindness. When Wang Liulang is tortured by the demon, we use vertical body movements to demonstrate. He would be lifted by the demon upwards with his body extended, and after the torture he would be bluntly thrown to the ground. When the old man observes the suffering of his friend but is unable to help, we also use more downward movements such as collapsing or kneeling on the ground. First extending upwards then suddenly dropping downwards, this visual contrast would create a strong sense of weightlessness and pressure from an overwhelming power, so that the protagonist bears an inexorable shadow of tragedy.



Mask Making Workshop in Italy

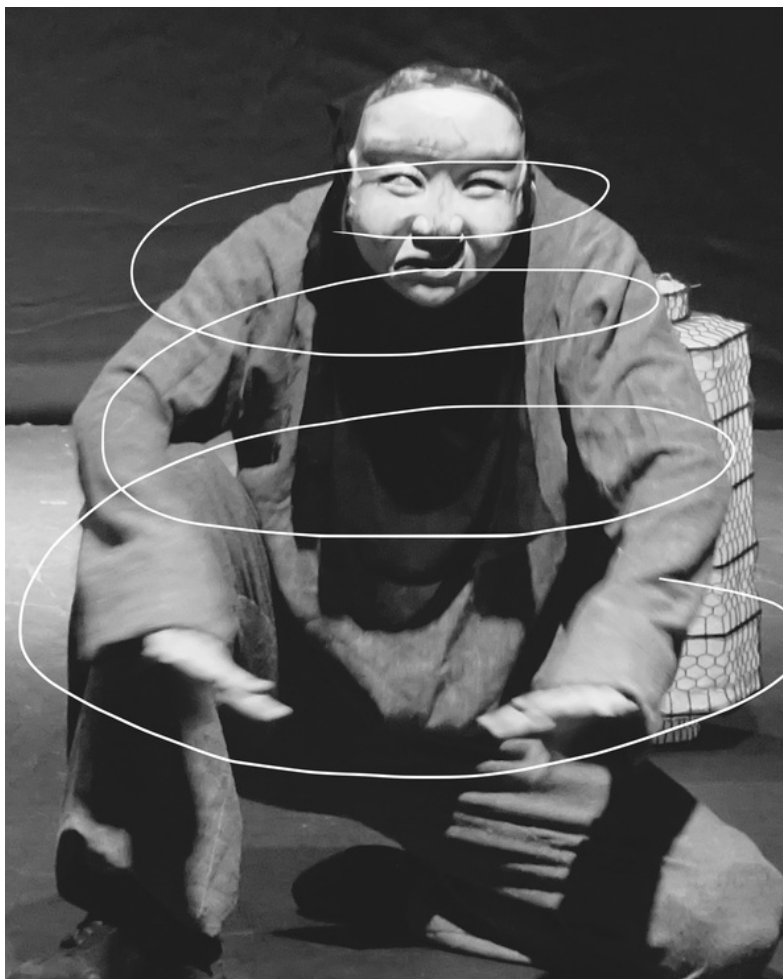
Image © ZHAO Miao

Moreover, circling and spinning is the body movement style that is seen throughout Shui Sheng, which comes from the ancient Chinese mask play and opera principles. I use spiral upwards or downwards to show Wang Liulang and the old man's excitement when drinking and playing hand games. And when portraying Wang Liulang slowly hugging his parents who are holding a memorial ceremony for him, as well as when portraying him and the old man being chased by the demon and running away, I use a "circle" body posture style, which contains gentleness, balance, and fulfillment, that is the aspiration of the Chinese folk belief. But I also discovered that this balance is quietly brewing the next meaning which is shifting. In Chinese folk belief of Yin and Yang, everyone believes that sadness and happiness coexist, as well as goodness and badness, and they will reverse and shift towards each other, which highlights both people's aspiration for happiness and beauty in life and living beings and their deep sense of insecurity. Therefore, the use of body also reveals that Shui Sheng's plot, scenes, and atmosphere can also change accompanying the movement's spinning, galloping, and changing. One turning around or circular running from the performer, the story has transformed into the next scene, and the character's situation also changes accordingly, so that the audience feels the overlapping emotions of happiness and sadness, and the unpredictability of fate.

The above is the original intentions, principles, symbolism, process and methods of using traditional Chinese Nuo Opera masks in our Shui Sheng play. (End)

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ZHAO Miao, Artistic Director of Theatre SanTuoqi, attends a mask making workshop in Italy.



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