



The Discussing of the Development History and Existing Problems of Immersive Theater in China

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Abstract. In recent years, immersive theatre has been booming in China. As a new form of theatre, immersive theatre has been loved by the audience because of its high degree of freedom and high interaction. This essay discusses the development process of immersive theatre in China by comparing the similarities and differences of viewing methods of landscape theatre, Sleep No More theatre, and immersive script entertainment. On the whole, the development tendency can be divided into three stages: the first glimpse of the landscape theatre, the popularity of immersive theater with Sleep No More as the leader, and the rising up luxuriantly of immersive cultural industries, such as script entertainment. In the end, this paper discusses the existing problems of immersive script entertainment, and at the same time, it prospects the future of immersive script entertainment.

Keywords: Chinese Immersive Theatre · Landscape theatre · Sleep No More in Shanghai · Immersive Script Entertainment

1 Introduction

In recent years, immersive theatre has become more and more popular as an entertainment industry in China, which is a kind of emerging theatre that uses theatrical methods and stage design to improve the communication and interaction between the stage and the audience. The Oxford dictionary indicates that immersive means “seems to surround the player or audience so they feel totally involved in the experience”. However, until now, there is no specific definition to explain immersive theatre in the academic community. Gareth White argues that immersive theatre has become a widely adopted term referring to a trend in performances that use installations and expansive spatial environments in which the audience moves and even participates [1]. Immersive theatre features innovations in scripts, audience’s sensory experience and performance space. It is obvious that immersive theatre is well known for its confrontation with traditional theatre.

In China, the development of immersive theatre is becoming popular. On the whole, the development tendency can be divided into three stages: the first glimpse of the landscape theatre, the popularity of immersive theatre with Sleep No More as leader, and the rising up luxuriantly of immersive cultural industries, such as script entertainment.

2 Landscape Theatre – The First Glimpse of Immersive Theatre in China

The origin of landscape theatre can be traced back to the musical performance *Aida* in 1986, which mainly talks about the story between the princess of Egypt and Ethiopia. Around such the plot, it designed the stage in front of the pyramids and sphinxes in Egypt and achieved great success [2]. *Aida* can be seen as the rudiment of the Landscape theatre. Since then, many theatre companies imitated *Aida*'s stage design to produce musical theater which were based on the world's scenic spots and historic sites. At the same time, in order to accommodate more audiences, there have also been many dramas that set the stage as a real landscape.

Chinese director Zhang Yimou was inspired by this theatre form and improved it to make it more adaptable to the Chinese audience. In 1998, he directed *Turandot* which was staged at the Ancestral Temple in Beijing and achieved great success [1]. Based on the inspiration and success of *Turandot*, Zhang Yimou and his team subsequently created a series of theaters that combing performances and landscapes in other well-known cities in China. They have attracted other art companies to follow suit. Since then, landscape theater has appeared in China.

Landscape theater can be regarded as the earliest form of immersive theatre in China. The main reason is that it has made a preliminary attempt to blur the boundary between the audience and the performance, at the same time frequently designing the interaction between the actors and the audience in order to invite them to participate in the performance. The main way for the landscape theater to blur the performance boundary is to set up the whole stage in the real landscape, which is also becoming the biggest feature of landscape theatre.

The landscape theater is a second creation of the space where the audience is located, creating an environment for the actors' lives. But at the same time, the stage created must be coordinated with the space where the audience is, and it must not be abrupt. Taking *Impression Liu Sanjie*, which is the first landscape theater in China as an example. Based on the landscape of the Lijiang River, the play builds a small mountain village where villagers live in the story. This small mountain village is the stage for actors to perform. After the stage extends to the auditorium, the auditorium is "wrapped", so that the whole auditorium is placed in this small mountain village. In this way, it helps to invite the audience into the space where the character is located. In the abstract, the real landscape is like the first layer of space, while the space of performance creation belongs to the second layer. The audience needs to walk into the first layer space independently, and then be invited to the second floor. In order to cooperate with the stage design, the actors in some works even went into the audience to perform. And because of this, the landscape theater can be regarded as the first glimpse of immersive theater in China.

3 Immersive Theater in China – Sleep No More

It was not until the establishment of the British punch-drunk troupe in 2000 that the submerged theater really began to have a wide range of influence. In 2003, the immersive drama *Sleep No More* created by the troupe was staged in London with the support of

the British Arts Council [2]. It attracted a large audience with its new interpretation form and the influence of the original Macbeth. Their local success in Britain soon helped them open up overseas markets. They boldly took this step and brought their works to New York. In 2016, the troupe entered Asia and brought this new way of performance to Shanghai.

Based on its unique performance style, Sleep No More quickly opened up the Chinese immersive theatre market. A great number of viewers came to Shanghai to experience Sleep No More. Many theatre companies have imitated this new form of performance. Since then, the performance form of immersive theater has been popularized in China and quickly become an emerging cultural industry. A wave of immersive theatre such as New World and Twilight have emerged in many cities.

Undoubtedly, Sleep No More is enlightening to the development of immersive theater in China. From the perspective of the audience, it creates a new way to watch performance. As mentioned before, the landscape theater is the first glimpse of China in the field of immersive theatre, because it still retains the characteristic of “mirror frame theater”. Although they have made innovations in stage design, they put the stage into the landscape. At the same time, it also allows the actors to enter the auditorium to perform, which strengthens the performance effect. However, the audience always sits in their own position and does not really use their “feet” to enter the performance environment, lacking a certain degree of autonomy.

Oppositely, Sleep No More has made a change in the way of viewing performance. They retain the freedom in the performance and separate audience separate from the auditorium. The audience can walk freely in the performance space to watch the performance in the way of space exploration. At the same time, the audience is able to interact with the space to further strengthen the connection between the audience and the performance. This just reflects the relationship between immersive theater and environmental theater as well as interactive theater.

Taking the Shanghai version of Sleep No More as an example, the stage of the play is set up in the McKinnon Hotel. The audience has entered the performance space since the moment they enter the hotel. This setting blurs the boundary of the stage. In this play, there is no stage, only the space for the story to take place. After wearing the mask, the audience can walk freely in the space and explore what happens in the space. It gives the audience more viewing space than the amphitheatre performance. After the audience has a certain degree of freedom, they get more initiative, so as to actively establish a link with the performance space and spontaneously strengthen the connection with the performance.

However, although Sleep No More invited the audience to participate in the performance, in order to ensure the smooth progress of the performance, the audience was still required to keep a certain distance from the performance. That is, “the fourth wall” is still not used, it is still blocked. After the audience stepped into the theater, they were asked to wear a mask, which is “the fourth wall” between the actors and the audience, indicating that the audience was given the identity of observer. While the audience is close to the actors, they follow the rules of the performance, maintain the rhythm of the story, and do not interfere with the performance too much. This has become an order to protect the smooth progress of the performance.

Sleep No More has fragmented the plot, which also strengthening the characteristics of post dramatic theater. Different from the methods of music linking the plot in the landscape theater, Sleep No More directly adopts the processing method of simultaneous promotion of multiple story lines. And on this basis, Sleep No More shatters the plot. In this play, different plots are staged in different places at the same time. As the degree of freedom is improved, the audience also has a relatively independent choice in the space. On the premise that the overall development of the story is not changing, the audience can independently choose the story they want to watch. However, its multiline parallel plot promotion mode makes the audience unable to understand what is happening on the stage. This design breaks the possibility for the audience to see the story from God's perspective, and puts the audience in the story, not outside it. The audience may be deceived, like the characters in the play, and can't know the truth, because they can't know everything that has happened. The audience can choose the plot they want to find out according to their own preferences, and then piece together the possible events according to those story fragments. The various combinations produced by different choices will also make the audience have different reasoning and speculations about the development of the plot.

4 Immersive Script Entertainment – The Development of Immersive Industry in China

4.1 The Rising of Immersive Script Entertainment

Immersive script entertainment is a popular board role-playing game in China at present. It can be divided into two modes: online app play and offline live experience. The birth of immersive script entertainment was first influenced by the TV show *Who Was Murdered*, an adaptation of the Korean TV show *Crime Scene* [1].

The play mode of immersive script entertainment is the same as *Who Was Murdered*. The participants select the story they want to play. After selecting the role card, they read the identity information and start to act the role. Then they enter the “crime scene” and search the evidence. After the searching, the participants share the information for reasoning, restore the truth of the story and find out the murderer. It is worth noting that all activities must be carried out in acting.

Compared with *Sleep No More*, immersive script entertainment tends to invite the audience to participate in a specific performance, which means the audience shifts towards actors. Its biggest feature is that it blurs the identity boundary between the actors and the audience. The participants are the actors, at the same time they are also the audience who enjoying the performance space.

In the process of participation, without the guidance and intervention of others, everyone improvises according to the role information choosing by themselves, and carries out random dialogues with other roles. Participants' understanding of the characters is entirely up to them, with no director or other staff to direct their performances. The responses of all the characters comes from their own ideas and judgments, there are no scripts to give them instructions. The rhythm of the plot depends entirely on the participants as well.

However, even if the performance is improvisational, there is still a large story framework that dominates the development of story. For example, who is the murderer in the story, when he killed the victim, how to kill the victim and why he was killed, etc. The information is written on the character card to ensure the story does not exceed the limits of the story outline, which means that the participants can only decide their performance and dialogues.

Compared with immersive theater, immersive script entertainment integration increases the interaction between the audience and the space, and improves the immersive experience. According to the story, the performance space of immersive script games is arranged into a space that conforms to the story setting. When the audience enters the space, they will perform the characters, which means that they need to use the props if they want. When looking for clues in the space, participants also need to interact with the on-site props. Therefore, immersive script entertainment is more thorough in exploring 'immersive' than immersive theater.

4.2 The Existing Problems of Immersive Script Entertainment

Although immersive script entertainment has become one of the most popular forms of mass entertainment, it still has many problems as a new cultural industry. These problems seriously affect people's sense of experience, thus hindering the popularization of immersive script game.

First of all, Immersive script entertainment has been loved by the public as soon as it appeared. The huge business opportunities bring a large number of works with the label of immersive experience in the market in a short time. However, due to the short time of appearance and the rapid popularity, the market has not formed a specific audit system to measure the quality of immersive script killing. Therefore, it is difficult to guarantee the quality of immersive experience works on the market at present.

It is worth mentioning that in the silent industry market, IP adapted works also account for a large proportion. For example, the well-known Chinese novel *Ghost Blow Lamp* has been adapted into immersive script entertainment, attracting a large number of original fans. However, the market evaluations of these adapted works are various. It can be that even the IP adaptations can have issues of poor quality.

Secondly, the mode of immersive script entertainment has a huge drawback, which is that people cannot predict the performance ability of the participants. Not all participants have received professional performance training, but they need to deduce the extracted role identity. Their performance level affects the performance experience of the participants. While playing their own roles, the participants also accept and enjoy the performances of others. Therefore, if the participants cannot perform their roles well, the viewing experience will be destroyed, which has become the biggest drawback of the immersive theater under this mode.

5 Conclusion

Consequently, the immersive theater in China is becoming more and more popular. The development tendency can be divided into three stages: the first glimpse of the landscape

theatre, the popularity of immersive theatre with *Sleep No More* as the leader, and the rising up luxuriantly of immersive cultural industries, such as script entertainment.

However, as immersive experience is still a new industry in China, there are still some problems that affect people's sense of experience. If these problems cannot be properly handled, it will affect the development of immersive industry. From this point of view, immersive industry still has a lot of room for development in China.

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