

MUSICAL THEATRE IN CHINA

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1 > Musical work *Daydream*
2 > Musical work *Spring Awakening*



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What is a musical? According to American lyricist Oscar Hammerstein, "It is everything you can think of, including music". Inclusive and penetrating, musicals are, in other words, a comprehensive medley of performing arts that combines elements from theatre, drama, dance and music. The genre's strength lies in defying accepted norms and assimilating the spirit of an era. To become the pinnacle of contemporary art innovative forces are employed to create a unique musical and theatrical narrative.

The History of Musicals

Musicals are a foreign

phenomenon. Their origins trace back to the drama, light opera, comedy, and theatre of African Americans, in the West, having long appealed to high society and ordinary folk alike. Geographically, the genre started in Europe before making its way to America and across the world. In China, musical theatre went by different names in different periods as a result of the cultural divide between the East and the West and the overriding perceptions and ideas of the era. These shows recreate life on stage, threading the narrative of history through a development that transcends nationality and language. Weaving the current aesthetics into their concepts,

Chinese musicals are an evolving historical art in an age of industrial and economic advancement.

Musicals are a hybrid of nearly every art form in the world — music, dance, theatre, literature and the like — descending and ascending a complicated lineage while spreading horizontally into different cultures. As a carrier of multiple art forms, musicals create their own systems of aesthetics, drawing from an energy and strength that make distinguish them distinguishable from other performing arts.

Shows from abroad have been coming to China en masse



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since the 1980s, broadening the horizons of local audiences. Musicals became a global cultural phenomenon in the 21st century, finding popularity across Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and the Mainland China. Foreign musicals played a part in awakening China's long theatrical traditions and did, in fact, always feel familiar. At one point they were all the rage, but it is a pity that, under such favorable conditions, there were so few well-received shows that reflected the social realities and core values of China's artistic traditions.

Today, musicals are burgeoning worldwide due to high demand spurred by their approachability. New York's Broadway and London's West End have seen

huge success, both in terms of artistic achievements and revenue, from their musical blockbusters. Musicals are the crown of both cities' cultural industry, their market-minded structures proving lucrative and competitive when compared to other art forms. Their social commentary attracts attention on a par with movies, with the most successful, such as the *The Lion King*, *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Les Miserables*, filling box office coffers. But with real performers appearing live on stage, night after night, the authenticity of musicals arguably exceeds that of movies.

Western Aesthetics and Chinese Theatre

Theatre does not belong to the

West alone. From the musical dance and Yuan Dynasty plays of ancient times, to the more recent opera, Model Opera, and ethnic minority drama, more recently, theatre is the bedrock of performing arts in China. However, after more than one hundred years of Westernization and the separation of art and science, Chinese creativity began to take on foreign aesthetics. In imitating Western theatrical classics and techniques, Chinese creatives imitated Western theatre at the surface level due to the lack of a deep understanding of the other culture. This 'Western influence' does not incur an immediate complete denial of native culture, but the habitual copycat approach in terms of narrative, style and mentality is so

1 > Musical work *Dream in the Concrete Forest*
2 > Musical work *42nd Street*
3 > Musical work *Legally Blonde*



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> Musical work *42nd Street* The artistic forms, types and styles of musicals are changing in the times, and will always be influenced by the artistic styles of the same era. Jazz, country, rock and other fashionable music styles appear in the plays of the corresponding period



pervasive it is almost impossible to discern where influence from the West ends and Eastern interpretation begins.

A direct reproduction, the Chinese version of *Cats*, has been quite successful, starting a cascade of other copies, including *Mama Mia and Jekyll & Hyde*. But although it is said that art has no boundaries, a difference in taste, worldview and mentality between East and West still exists. For one, the original songs and dialogues lose

some of their impact in translation, while subtitles are a distraction. Cultural barriers are another problem; audiences may find it hard to grasp central themes and punchlines without the original cultural context. As with other art forms concerned with the collision and entwining of two cultures, it is imperative that we return to China's original culture cultural heritage when utilizing practices from the West.

Famous creatives across the

world have long championed their own cultures and native tongues. Without exploration of the black community in America and their indigenous songs and art, popular culture in the US would not have attained its present glory. In the same way, China's cultural output must remain attached to its social context. It must stay rooted in the traditional art forms from which it came while simultaneously finding ways to modernize. Chinese composers could, for example, start with a Xing melody, intonation and

other traditional theatrical elements and combine them with stories and music from modern popular culture, creating a new narrative.

Original Chinese musicals have the potential to gain great momentum as their Western counterparts have prepared performers, audiences and the market alike for their arrival. Culture is, however, meaningless if there is no generational inheritance or dissemination among the public. If Chinese musicals are to be seen

1 > Musical work *Cat*
2 > Musical work *When Dance Meets Youth*

on the world stage, they carry a responsibility. Conveying the aesthetics and inspirations that are unique to China with a confident native tongue is what makes Chinese performance art special.

Social Environment and Present State of Development

Original musicals first started to emerge in China in the 1990s. Formats have since been widely diversified, and hardly a week goes by without a new show coming

onto the market. The hard part is finding one with enduring value; many are unpopular and struggle to turn a profit. Most of these originals also lack the cultural core values of the Chinese people, possibly because composers and directors are paying too much attention to form. Techniques part ways with art, and no amount of singing, dancing and performance can stand the test of time without a culturally valid narrative.

The number of musical shows in

China has increased rapidly, but few are welcomed by audiences, and, after 30 years, the genre is yet to reach its potential.

In fact, when the musicals entered the country, it they aroused the familiar feelings and love of the Chinese people, and also awakened the sleeping lion giant who has been destroyed sent to sleep by the culture for aof the past century. Since the 1980s, excellent foreign musical plays have broadened the horizons



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1-2 > Musical work *42nd Street*
3 > Musical work *Legally Blonde*



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of Chinese audiences. In recent years, they have entered the Chinese market on a larger scale, setting off generating a musical fever in which the external power is greater than the local endogenous power. It would be a pity of for this era if good works that reflect the current social situation and are full of the core of Chinese spirit were not performed on the stage at the good time of musical take-off this great time of musical popularity. What is synchronized with this vision is how to tell Chinese stories, full of Chinese spirit, in the Chinese language.

Requirements and Subjective Consciousness

Musical theatre is a new art form for most Chinese and one they rarely connect with their

own culture. The reason why is simple: there is no shortcut to the localization of art. What does a Chinese musical look like? No titles come to mind.

Theatre is, at in its essence, a combination of plot, circumstances and emotions. To develop concepts that reflect Chinese society, a writer must integrate Chinese aesthetics and social realities into the narrative, break away from Western-centric performance styles and plot techniques, and work to maintain China's own cultural characteristics. In both performance and stage design, the West tends to be ultra 'realistic', losing some of what the Chinese term 'essence' along the way. The art is obscured by elements, such as technique, those which are not key to the meanings of the story —

a phenomenon dubbed 'burdened by things' in Chinese.

Domestic musicals, therefore, could combine the abstractness of Eastern aesthetics with the phenomenology of traditional drama. In such a case, a simple table and chair would be enough to set the stage. "Our own theatre, though very distinctive, appears rigid and is not as free as Peking Opera in imagination," the New York Times once wrote about a production starring renowned Chinese performer Mei Lanfang. Conveying emotion should be the primary objective of a musical, so put distractions aside, focus on the stage, the story and the performance, let these elements grow and flow, and the audience will respond.

The journey to success starts from within. Alongside studying Western musicals and other artistic forms, a restructuring of Chinese aesthetics is needed to rebuild subjective consciousness.

Subjective consciousness refers to a kind of consciousness that Chinese musicals, as a modern art, should have on about the their subjective status and subjective value. Only by relying on the ability of the subject can they have free will and subjective initiative in their creation. Without the core values of local culture, everything

is scratching the surface. Only those who which really talk about the core, and carry and embody the core values of Chinese culture, are classic works. The internal force of Chinese culture should be reflected in the aesthetic culture that transcends materialization and can lead the international trend.

In the 21st century, musicals have ushered in a global development. With the gradual formation of a new cultural pattern, Chinese culture has become a competition competitive field for Chinese and

foreign art in terms of Creator creative consciousness, market ecology and the internal vitality of works. In terms of creation, we should pay attention to building the unified relationship between various elements of the artistic field and the theme of drama, the relationship between Chinese music and our mother tongue language, as well as the dynamic structural relationship of dramatic vertical and horizontal symphonies such as cooperation and conflict, contradiction and solution, so as to fundamentally explore the creative laws and mechanisms suitable

1 > Musical work *42nd Street*
2 > Musical work *Paradise Tree*



for musicals, and see seize the international development opportunities of Chinese musicals.

Musical education in China

An historical lack of talent in research and musical production, particularly among bilingual scholars, has been a big constraint in the development of Chinese musical theatre. In an effort to combat this, Beijing Dance Academy started teaching musical theatre to undergraduates in 1995. On a mission to turn out first-rate performers, the school has succeeded in developing many

of China's most beloved artists, educators, directors, producers, choreographers, actors and actresses.

Nowadays, there are dozens of musical teaching units in China, with their own educational models. On the road of musical localization, the Department of Musical at Beijing Dance Academy, for example, has undergone a series of changes in the course of exploring new ideas. It champions traditional arts, teaching Chinese opera and ballad singing, but has also introduced joint training

programs with arts companies and universities in the UK and the USA. I hope that with such excellent training, we will soon realize the dream of the Chinese musical.

Conclusion

Culture is the carrier of art. At a time when cultural renaissance is most needed, I propose Chinese creatives work to rediscover and reinvent Chinese art. Writers need to foster subjective consciousness if they are to reflect both contemporary life and China's traditional national character in their works.

