

Staging Eugene O'Neill in China in the 1980s

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Abstract

The 1980s, the decade right after the “Cultural Revolution,” witnessed a sudden surge of spoken-drama productions of Eugene O'Neill plays in Mainland China. These performances interacted with the political and cultural context of the time, producing a significant phenomenon in Chinese theater history that invites close examination. Most of the early productions of that decade showed propaganda and ideological propensities; they were supposedly realistic in style and faithful to the original script. Later efforts, however, expressed more humanist concerns and enlightenment values than socialist anxieties. Some turned from O'Neill's realistic plays to his experimental pieces and others featured conscious subjectivity in the directors' interpretation of O'Neill texts. The change also indicated a divergence in attitudes of different generations toward O'Neill. The eclectic American dramatist exerted a far-reaching influence on the Chinese theater of spoken drama throughout the 1980s and would continue to have his presence felt in the decades to come.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, Chinese spoken drama, stage production

95.03.05收稿，95.10.24通過刊登。

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Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) is one of the most frequently revived western dramatists in Mainland China. There he has inspired more than sixty stage productions of his plays since the early 1920s. All but a few of these productions took place in the form of spoken drama (話劇); they illustrated the transformation of the new theater form against a backdrop of the nation's social and cultural vicissitudes.¹ In the 1980s, especially, O'Neill's stage presence in China came to carry enormous cultural implications and intercultural complexities, leading to a major phenomenon that invites close examination. This paper will examine how the spoken drama artists of Mainland China represented O'Neill on stage during that decade and note the historical context with which their work interacted.

I. Absence of O'Neill during 1949-1979

After the founding of the socialist PRC in 1949, nationalized Chinese spoken drama troupes started to function as part of the state apparatus and state ideology. A survey shows that most of the foreign plays staged in China between 1950 and 1964 were written by dramatists from the "Socialist brother countries" such as the Soviet Union (Liu and Liang). Classical plays by Shakespeare, Carlo Goldoni, Pierre Beaumarchais, Molière, and Friedrich von Schiller also had some performances in the 1950s. The two modern western playwrights staged during this period were Henrik Ibsen (*A Doll's House*, 1956) and Bertolt Brecht (*Mother Courage*, 1959),² both labeled "classical" at the time (227, 251). Due to the political antagonism and military conflict between China and the U.S., American writers would have vanished completely from the Chinese stage were it not for the revival of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Renamed *Sorrows of the Black Slaves* (黑奴恨), the play was first staged by the Experimental Theater of Central Academy of Drama (中央戲劇學院實驗劇場) in 1961 and then revived by regional troupes in various cities till 1964 as part of the cold-war rhetoric in voicing China's support for the African Americans' struggle for racial equality. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), however, spoken drama composed by native writers came under attack and even Konstantin Stanislavsky

¹ The few exceptions include one adaptation in western opera (*Ile*, Shanghai, 1988) and three in traditional Chinese opera (*Mourning Becomes Electra* in Yue opera, Shanghai, 1988; *Desire Under the Elms* in Sichuan opera, Chengdu, 1989; *Desire Under the Elms* in Henan Qu opera, Zhengzhou, 2000).

² The Shanghai People's Art Theater (上海人民藝術劇院) presented the production in 1959 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the German Democratic Republic.

incurred denunciation, though Chinese theater people had looked up to his method as the only path to modern theater before 1966. As Huang Zongjiang (黃宗江) later recollected, O'Neill also became a target of denunciation for his pessimist outlook that conflicted with "revolutionary optimism" and for his non-realistic approach that ran against the "revolutionary realism" advocated by the government (170-71).

II. O'Neill Vogue in the 1980s and the 1988 O'Neill Festival

An important change came about in Chinese theater in 1979 when the China Youth Art Theater (中國青年藝術劇院) produced Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* following the country's turnaround for reform and opening in the political and economic arena. The ensuing decade witnessed an enthusiastic revival of western dramas on the Chinese stage, and plays by Western European and American dramatists took over the one-time dominating position of Russian and Soviet works. In 1981 the Directing Department of the Central Academy of Drama staged part of O'Neill's *Anna Christie* (Act III); for the first time an American playwright's work was performed in the PRC. Since then more O'Neill plays reached the Chinese stage. In 1982 the Central Academy of Drama and the Changchun Drama Troupe (長春話劇院) each presented *Anna Christie*; the year 1983 witnessed the production of *Beyond the Horizon* by the Shanxi Drama Troupe (山西話劇院), *Anna Christie* by the Shaanxi Drama Troupe (陝西話劇院), and *Desire Under the Elms* (Act III) by the Central Academy of Drama; in June 1984 the Central Academy of Drama staged *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (Act IV) and *Anna Christie*;³ in 1986 the Shenyang Drama Troupe (瀋陽話劇團) presented *Desire Under the Elms* and the Central Academy of Drama mounted *Mourning Becomes Electra* (*Homecoming*). Chinese scholar Long Wenpei (龍文佩) noted this new O'Neill "boom," remarking in 1988 that O'Neill's plays had become "standard theatrical fare in such cities as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, Dalian, Harbin, Changchun, and Taiyuan" (251). The China Central Television (CCTV) Network aired at least five of these O'Neill productions,⁴ thereby

3 The *Anna Christie* production, adapted into the Chinese-set *Andi* (安娣) by Huang Zongjiang, took place under the orchestration of American director George White. As an intercultural result, it will not be treated in the present paper that deals with all-Chinese efforts.

4 The O'Neill productions that CCTV broadcasted included *Anna Christie* (1981), *Andi* (1984), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (*Homecoming* 1986)—all of the three performed by

making them accessible to Chinese audiences nationwide.

The new wave of enthusiasm for O'Neill reached a climax in June 1988, when a theater festival took place in Nanjing and Shanghai to commemorate the playwright's centenary. China's first Shakespeare festival had taken place in Beijing and Shanghai in 1986, presenting at least twenty-five productions of the playwright's plays. The 1988 O'Neill festival, however, would go down in China's theatrical history as the first in honor of a modern western playwright. Chinese spoken drama troupes, both amateur and professional, presented ten of the thirteen festival productions that ranged from O'Neill's early plays to his late masterpieces.⁵ Three of them were presented in Nanjing, namely *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Emperor Jones* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The others, staged in Shanghai, included *The Great God Brown*, *Hughie*, *Beyond the Horizon*, *Marco Millions*, *Ah, Wilderness!*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra* in two different versions.⁶

The theater festival belonged to a composite project that also included an O'Neill-centered international symposium and a book exhibit, with over a hundred scholars, critics and theater professionals from China, Japan, India, the U.S., Britain, Germany, Belgium, and the Soviet Union attending. Co-sponsored chiefly by state-run institutions⁷ and staffed by government officials, the festival was more than a mere academic or theatrical event. According to a written statement submitted to the provincial government of Jiangsu and distributed at a press conference on 26

the Central Academy of Drama—and *Desire Under the Elms* (1986) staged by the Shenyang Drama Troupe. The Shanxi Television Network also aired a 1983 production of *Beyond the Horizon* by Shanxi Drama Troupe under the direction of Xie Kang (謝亢).

5 The other three included a western-style opera production of *Ile* by the Shanghai Opera Company (上海歌劇院), a traditional opera production of *Mourning Becomes Electra* by the Shanghai Yue Opera Company (上海越劇院), and a straight drama production of *Hughie* presented by a visiting American troupe.

6 The *Marco Millions* production was directed by Jackson Phippin from the United States. Like George White's *Andi*, detailed description and analysis of this joint venture will be covered in another paper. Due to the number and variety of O'Neill productions staged in the festival, and due to the fact that the authors have more access to materials from these performances, this paper will discuss the 1988 festival at length and also examine other productions staged in China throughout the 1980s.

7 Nanjing University, the Jiangsu Culture Bureau, Nanjing Television Network, the Jiangsu International Culture Exchange Center and the non-government Amity Foundation sponsored the first half of the festival in Nanjing; the Shanghai Culture Bureau, Fudan University, the Shanghai Academy of Drama, and the Shanghai Culture Development Foundation hosted the second half in Shanghai.

May 1988, the organizers also expected the project to “exert a benign influence, publicizing our policies of reform and opening up, building up our socialist spiritual civilization” (“Beijing”). The festival enjoyed much support from the state media, widely covered by local television stations and mainstream national newspapers as well as by influential journals such as *The People's Daily* (人民日報) and *China Reconstructs* (中國建設).

Also in June 1988, almost simultaneous with the O'Neill festival, a six-part television series aired by CCTV was received with great sympathetic interest by intellectuals and the general public alike (Mao). Narrated by Su Xiaokang (蘇曉康) and others, the documentary *River Elegy* (河殤) harshly criticized the conservativeness of traditional Chinese culture and ascribed China's historical failures to a self-imposed isolation from the outside world. Such was the mentality of most, especially the young, Chinese intellectuals during the 1980s. The first decade of the post-Cultural Revolution era witnessed a revival of the May-Fourth enthusiasm for western-oriented modernity, and western works of philosophy and literature enjoyed immense popularity among Chinese readers during this time. With the United States assuming a model image in the Chinese dream for individual freedom, political democracy and economic affluence, American dramatists who supposedly championed humanism and modernism also achieved immense popularity.⁸ Different from the New Culture movement (新文化運動) initiated by individual intellectuals in the 1920s, however, this new intellectual wave of the 1980s found toleration, even encouragement, from the government, which happened to need it to do away with the ultra-leftist remnants of the Cultural Revolution. Strategically weaved into the official blueprint of “reform and opening up,” a modernization discourse sprang up in both intellectual and state ideologies till June 1989. It was in this context that the 1988 festival dedicated to O'Neill took place, initiated and organized by Liu Haiping (劉海平), professor of English and American drama at Nanjing University, but sanctioned and participated in by government institutions.

When interviewed by *The New York Times*, Liu Haiping explained he had organized the festival out of “the conviction that it was important for China to explore the complexities of O'Neill's tragic vision” (Gargan). With his “tragic

8 American playwrights, for instance, filled three volumes of the five-volume *Anthology of Contemporary Foreign Drama* (外國當代劇作選) published by the Chinese Theater Publishing House (中國戲劇出版社) in 1988. The very first volume consisted of five of O'Neill's later plays in Chinese translation. The other two concentrated on Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, respectively.

vision” the American seems to have satisfied Chinese people’s need for reflection and catharsis in face of the collective memory of the Cultural Revolution. “Only after what I experienced over those years have I really achieved an understanding of O’Neill,” announced Hu Weimin (胡偉民), who directed both *The Great God Brown* and *Hughie* on the 1988 occasion (Ximen 23). Indeed, the Chinese critical reception of O’Neill has featured, by and large, a celebration of his tragedy, realism and experimentation. Few, if any, have discussed his flair for the melodramatic and comic. The Chinese fondness for O’Neill’s tragic inclination sets off a lack of interest in his only comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!*. Though one of the dramatist’s most revived pieces in the United States (Black 63), the light-hearted play had but three—the first two incomplete—student productions in China, chronologically by Nankai University in Tianjin in May 1988, by Fudan University in Shanghai in June 1988 and by Beijing University in Beijing in August 2005. Each initiated and orchestrated by teacher or director from the West and played out in English, these productions of the O’Neill comedy remained largely inaccessible to the general public.

Himself an ardent O’Neill student, Liu Haiping also believed that O’Neill came back in vogue in the 1980s because “the younger generation [saw] him as very modern” (Gargan). O’Neill was influenced by “modern” European philosophers such as Nietzsche, Freud and Schopenhauer, and that made him popular with young Chinese scholars, Liu argued, and “though O’Neill’s Expressionism [was] old in the West, it [was] still very new here” (Gargan). Despite this academic interest in a harbinger image of O’Neill, the dramatist’s expressionist works found no entry onto the Chinese stage until the 1988 festival.

III. Realistic Productions

Throughout the 1980s even some prestigious theater people celebrated O’Neill as a master of realism. Cao Yu (曹禺), for example, described the American dramatist as “basically a realist, a penetrating realist” (2). Although O’Neill once rebelled against realism with symbolist and expressionist alternatives,⁹ Gao Jian (高鑒) rightly points out that in Chinese theater of the 1980s the playwright towered above all as “a representative of the conventional realistic drama, apparently contrary to those theatrical experiments that ignored plot and characterization” (32). Even at the 1988 O’Neill festival, when staging of the experimental pieces such as *The Emperor Jones* and *The Great God Brown* garnered much attention, the

9 “Most of the so-called realist plays,” O’Neill remarked in the early 1920, “deal only with the appearance of things” (qtd. in Gelb 520).

majority of the productions remained realistic in style.

In this realistic vein the Nanjing rendition of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and a professional Shanghai realization of *Mourning Becomes Electra* attempted to faithfully translate the playwright's dialogue and stage direction, as did most O'Neill productions in the early and mid-80s. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution and influenced by the ongoing cold war worldwide, Chinese theater continued to function as a means of ideological contention in the early 1980s. Zhang Fuchen (張孚琛), director of the 1988 *Long Day's Journey* production and professor of theater at the Central Academy of Drama, had staged four student performances of O'Neill plays before 1988, among which an excerpt from *Anna Christie* in 1981 anticipated many O'Neill revivals to come after the Cultural Revolution.¹⁰ In 1980 the director still related theater to propaganda and realism, lecturing when teaching a directorial course that

the art of theater should first of all serve the politics of the proletariat. We make a stage production mainly in order to mirror reality, to imitate life after the script, and to clarify themes conveyed by the script. The fundamental end is to educate and edify the audience and to reinforce the cause of socialist construction. (Zhang 17)

Making a similar connection between realist approach and social end, Cao Yu observed in the 1980s that O'Neill exposed "the unspeakable pains and sorrows of the American society" (2). A few O'Neill productions prior to 1988 showed a conjuncture of humanist and socialist discourses, as exemplified by the staging of *Beyond the Horizon* by the Shanxi Drama Troupe in 1983. Rationalizing the very first revival of this O'Neill play in the PRC, director Xie Kang argued that all literary and dramatic masterpieces should "disclose the spiritual and emotional world of humanity" and that a successful work of art should "transcend the boundaries of district, nationality, and state." In the meantime, however, the director and one-time victim of the Cultural Revolution felt the need to justify his choice by providing a different and even contradictory interpretation: "Since capitalism generates all the miseries of the underprivileged American people, staging this play can help us to see through the capitalist society and its regime." To foreground this criticism, Xie altered the play's ending so that Andrew, rather than staying with Ruth to face the harsh reality as in O'Neill's text, rushed away to win back what he had lost in gambling. Portrayed by the director as an example of fallen

¹⁰ The O'Neill plays Zhang directed for the academy students between 1981 and 1988 included *Anna Christie* (Act III), *Desire Under the Elms* (Act III), *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (Act IV) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (*Homecoming*).

morality in the corrupt capitalist society, this new Andrew cared for nothing but material possession. Even with such a safe treatment, however, director Xie had to burn videotapes of the production when the government launched a new ideological campaign in the summer of 1989 following the unrest in Beijing and elsewhere.

Productions involved with such ideological intentions made no attempt to domesticate O'Neill's original tragedy, so that the audience would recognize they were watching an imitation of the American society and way of life. Take the 1988 production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* for example. It was the first foreign play produced by the Front Drama Troupe (前線話劇團) since its foundation in 1955; the troupe belonged to the Political Department of Nanjing Military Area of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (中國人民解放軍南京軍區政治部). Although translator Jiang Hongding (蔣虹丁) saw to it that his version accorded with the linguistic and cultural idioms of contemporary China to accommodate native actors and audiences, the staging gave no sign of deliberate nativization. Except for the controversial use of a symbolic mask in the background scenery (Jones 16), the director rigidly followed O'Neill's directions about time and place and attempted to create a verisimilitude of an American family on stage. The actress playing Mary earned critical acclaim for her evocative interpretation of a neurotic but loving mother, who nevertheless differed from the usual Chinese image of mother in appearance by wearing heavy makeup, curly hair and a bright dress that, according to American reviewer Betty Jones, reflected the Euro-American style of the nineteenth century (16).

Directed and led by Jiao Huang (焦晃) and Lou Jicheng (婁際成), a 1988 production of *Mourning Becomes Electra* also belonged to this realist category, even though the O'Neill play itself had some experimental elements in dramaturgy. When the curtain lifted, an authentic set featuring a huge tree and the front of a stately two-story mansion immediately located the production in the nineteenth-century American South. With a cast of veteran actors including Jiao Huang (as Brant and Orin) and Lou Jicheng (as Mannon), Lu Shichu (盧時初, as Lavinia), the production impressed the media and public with its restrained, realistic acting. The artists themselves intended to present a psychological production, believing that O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* dealt with "the dangerous inner world of human beings" rather than "the brutal outer world" (Program). Their realism in acting and setting, however, enabled the media to make an ideological interpretation of the definitely American-set production. A reviewer with the local newspaper *New People's Evening* (新民晚報) wrote that the play disclosed the weaknesses of the newborn bourgeoisie and that the tree's falling in the last scene symbolized "the household (indeed the society) was doomed to collapse in the end" (Zhong, "Tingyuan").

By the year 1988, however, humanist interest had predominated over socialist concern in the Chinese interpretation of O'Neill. With his drama perceived more and more as human tragedy rather than tragedy of the capitalist United States, nativized O'Neill productions emerged. The rendition of *Beyond the Horizon* by the Jiangsu Drama Troupe (江蘇省話劇團) provides a case in point. Director Xiong Guodong (熊國棟) announced in the program,

The communication between [O'Neill's] dramas and us can easily be established. The stories of the dramas seem to be happening around us. We ourselves even seem to be the very characters in the dramas...How successful[ly] we produce the play *Beyond the Horizon* finally depends on how profound[ly] we can understand our life and the humans.¹¹

The production, while in parallel to O'Neill's structure and action, was reset in the 1920s in a Southern Yangtze River village near the city of Suzhou. The architecture, furniture, costume and cultural idiosyncrasies of the locale and the time lent realistic, even naturalistic, details to the nativized adaptation. The setting even employed real-life properties such as a push plow, a handloom and some outdated woodenware, all collected from farmhouses in the southern Jiangsu countryside. Betty Jones described the impressive set design:

The Horizon set featured a triangular shape with the base open toward the audience ('third-wall' as opposed to 'fourth-wall' convention) with low platforms on each of the sides and at the apex rendering an 'A-frame' construction. Posts supported a slight abstraction of a traditional Chinese tiled roof. One got the transport of Chinese architecture with the prominent roofs and sculptured overhangs. (14)

Because of the heavy set and inadequacy of the theater in mechanisms, even Jones, who appreciated the Chineseness of the design, considered the scene change during the performance "loud, cumbersome, and long" (14). The Chinese audience reacted to the adaptation divergently. While some welcomed its Chinese consciousness and enjoyed its portrayal of the Chinese rural life, others criticized it as having gone to an extreme (Lü and Jiang 128).

Another nativized production that spiced up the 1988 O'Neill festival was the Shanghai Youth Drama Troupe's *Hughie* under the direction of Hu Weimin. While taking place in 1928 as the original play does, this Chinese version of the late O'Neill one-acter underwent transplantation from New York City to Shanghai,

¹¹ The translation of director's note is provided by the production's bilingual program.

China. Liu Haiping's translation, though faithful to the original and in Mandarin Chinese in general, already suggested an analogy between the two cities. The "Broadway sport" Erie Smith in O'Neill's text (3: 832) became a *baixiangren* (hoodlum) in Liu's translation (132), with the term carrying an unmistakable peculiarity of the Shanghai dialect and culture. The stage production not only replaced the New York slang completely with the Shanghai dialect, but its settings, costumes and sound effects also took great care to contribute to a sketch of the mesmerizing Chinese city in the 1920s. While fire engines and ambulance sirens symbolically conveyed an ominous message as in the original, the characteristic chantings of local peddlers that vividly streamed in voice-over immediately brought one to the time and space of old Shanghai. Both Jiao Huang and Lou Jicheng, cast in this production as night clerk and gambler respectively, appeared in traditional attire and adopted comic devices of the Chinese folk art of cross talk, perhaps inspired by the two-character format.¹² Sometimes they made allusions to contemporary events to achieve instant audience response.¹³

Presented in double-bill performance alongside another version of *Hughie* by the Eugene O'Neill Theater Festival from Los Angeles,¹⁴ the Shanghai production differs from the American one not only in costume and language but also in theme and style. According to a reviewer, in the American version the night clerk concentrated on the street and made no response to the gambler, so much so that the whole performance turned into a one-man show (Gao Jian 31). The Chinese production, however, placed less emphasis on the deeper absurdity of human existence and incommunicability between human beings than on the Shanghai experience of those living at the bottom of social order. In consequence, the sinicized *Hughie* took pains to imitate the appearances of life to the extreme of neglecting O'Neill's anti-realistic techniques in the piece. The author wrote lengthy

12 In O'Neill's script, for example, Erie describes how a girl attempted to force him into marriage: "Then she told her Ma, and her Ma told her Pa, and her Pa come around looking for me" (3: 835-36). In the Chinese production these lines expanded into a tongue-twister: "Then she told her Ma, and her Ma told her Pa, and her Pa told her Grandma, and her Grandma told her Grandpa, and her Grandpa told her other Grandma, and her other Grandma told her uncle, and all of her families come around looking for me" (Rehearsal Script).

13 Where the disease of "measles" comes up in O'Neill's *Hughie*, for instance, the Chinese production used "hepatitis A" instead, for the latter was running rampant in Shanghai in the 1980s and causing panic among the public.

14 The American production was directed by Tom McDermott and played by Charles Bouvier and Stan Weston.

stage directions to reveal the night clerk's inner action, including his rambling thoughts about the happenings on street and contemplations on his personal life; these hardly came into the Shanghai production.

During rehearsal on 2 June 1988, director Hu Weimin said *Hughie* told a story "similar to our present situation," which made it convenient to transform the play into a Chinese setting (Rehearsal Record). By nativizing *Beyond the Horizon* director Xiong Guodong also attempted to diminish the psychological distance between O'Neill's characters and the Chinese audience. Each adaptation nevertheless looked back at a native life before the founding of the PRC, which seemed vaguely foreign to most Chinese audiences of the 1980s. Thus each avoided relating the potential social voice in O'Neill's texts to the circumstances of contemporary China. Similarly, neither turned against the realist precept, which, as a double legacy from the May Fourth Movement (五四運動) and the socialist revolution, still prevailed on the Chinese stage of the 1980s along with what was understood as Stanislavsky's method. Take Xiong Guodong's directorial approach to *Beyond the Horizon* for example. He not only required a true-to-life representation in setting and costume, but also tried Stanislavsky's techniques in terms of actor training. He told the actors to "shed the artificial and seek reality from both within and without" (You Hong and Lu Ye). While discussing the play at length with the actors to analyze each character's objectives and emotions, he also took them to a typical southern Jiangsu village for immediate experience in order to bridge the gap in life between actor and character.

IV. Experimental Productions

Hu Weimin, however, directed not only the quasi-realistic *Hughie* but also one of O'Neill's most experimental plays, *The Great God Brown*. Although O'Neill's plays of this type did not appear on the Chinese stage until 1988, the experimental urge had edged its way into the Chinese practice of theater since the early 1980s. In May 1983 Xu Xiaozhong(徐曉鍾) directed Ibsen's early symbolic verse drama *Peer Gynt* for the Central Academy of Drama, thus terminating the one-sided association between Ibsen and realism that had held sway since the May Fourth period. Throughout the 1980s, the Chinese kept developing an interest in the theory and practice of theatrical innovators like Brecht, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook. Anti-realistic western plays, including works of expressionism and the theater of the absurd, came to diversify the Chinese stage.

The enthusiasm for stylistic experiment resulted in part from the fact that spoken drama had embarked on a slippery slope since the beginning of the 1980s.

Challenged by popular entertainments like movie and television, the propagandist drama in the so-called “realistic” convention was rapidly losing its appeal to the audience. In 1984 and 1985 the Shanghai People’s Art Theater and Shanghai Youth Drama Troupe staged only four plays in total, including a promising production of Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* that eventually closed with only four performances due to a rather scanty audience (Yan 10). In face of the unprecedented crisis, playwright Gao Xingjian (高行健) argued that “theater has to find its particular reason to exist, that is, why the fashionable presence of movie and television cannot replace it” (42-43). In this context, while some scholars and artists stuck to realism as precondition for the making of modern Chinese theater, others began to experiment with alternative approaches.

At the 1988 O’Neill festival one third of the staged productions were presentational in style. A group of students from the Shanghai Academy of Drama (上海戲劇學院) staged a less realistic version of *Mourning Becomes Electra* as graduation performance. Director Zhang Yingxiang (張應湘) visualized the South Sea Islands that Orin dreams for with vigorous dancing of the islanders, so that the symbol of “everything that was peace and warmth and security” (O’Neill 2: 972) formed a sharp contrast with the lifeless New England house of the Mannons. Ximen Lusha, a staff writer for *China Reconstructs*, compared the student production with Jiao Huang and Lou Jicheng’s rendition of the same trilogy: “The performance by the eager young drama students seemed more innovative, a modern interpretation whose power of expression was enhanced by the use of modern dramatic techniques and devices” (23). For some critics, however, such a treatment seemed too superficial and too modern to fit in with the whole play (Gao Jian 31).

Aside from the student production of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, two of O’Neill’s experimental plays appeared at the 1988 festival. With Hu Weimin and the Shanghai Youth Drama Troupe, the masked O’Neill drama *The Great God Brown* made its debut on the Chinese stage. Having long planned to lead China’s spoken drama theater to “the other shore of non-illusionary art” (“Huaju” 36), Hu wished to relieve the realistic-bound Shanghai stage with this *Brown* production (Hong). Another homage paid to the experimental O’Neill at the 1988 festival came from the Jiangsu Drama Troupe, which staged *The Emperor Jones* with Feng Changnian (馮昌年) as director and Su Shijin (蘇時進) as choreographer (Feng). Lowell Swortzell wrote of *The Emperor Jones* as “O’Neill’s most adapted play and a major source of inspiration for experimentation among other writers, directors, designers, composers, and choreographers” (200).¹⁵ The same applies to the play’s reception and

¹⁵ The play had its world premiere in 1920 and major revivals in Europe or the USA

production in China. After Hong Shen (洪深) modeled his controversial *Zhao, the King of Hell* (趙閻王) on the O'Neill play in 1922 and staged the original in 1934, this expressionistic work reappeared on the Chinese stage in 1988 and this time received much attention and evoked positive responses.

Unlike Zhang Fuchen who viewed the script as the “foundation for the creation on stage” (13), Feng Changnian and Hu Weimin posed a challenge to the central position of the author in production. According to some critics, Feng’s innovative approach to *The Emperor Jones* marked a transition from the author’s age to the director’s age that the Chinese staging of foreign classics was undergoing (Liu and Zhao). Rather than adhering to O’Neill’s lines and directions, Feng decided to “bring into a single work elements of spoken drama, mime, music, dance, plastic arts and gymnastics.” American scholar Felicia Londre points out: “The juxtaposition of psychologically based realistic acting with highly stylized sound and visual design is both a challenge and a strength of *The Emperor Jones*” (184). Feng, however, avoided the juxtaposition by replacing dialogue and monologue in the original with body language dubbed with music, sound effects and voice-overs. He further dismantled the realistic frame by deleting the opening and closing scenes of the original, so that the production became coherently stylized throughout. In addition, a female performer played in turn the prison guard, auctioneer and Congo witch-doctor, who, Feng explained, acted as the externalization of the “forever present threat of death or seduction of love” in Jones’ subconscious mind. Through these alterations, the director brought O’Neill’s expressionist perspective into even fuller play. Hu Weimin, too, argued that Chinese theater was departing from the age of playwrights for that of directors (*yanjiu* 55). Although his presentation of *Brown* retained many of O’Neill’s intentions, it omitted the original Prologue and Epilogue and featured innovation in set design.

Indeed, the productions of *The Emperor Jones* and *The Great God Brown* differed in their abstract set design most radically from those realist performances at the festival. The set of *The Emperor Jones*, designed by Wang Zhengyang (王正陽), employed irregular shapes such as raked platforms and rope ladders, with looped cloth strips hanging haphazardly from the roof and a full moon gradually waning on the dark cyclorama which eventually turned into a huge cobweb. The stage flared with contrasting colors such as black, white and scarlet to indicate the chaotic forest night and externalize the character’s disordered inner world. The set of *The Great*

in 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1949, 1967 and 1991 (Black, File 37). As some critics have noted, however, it receives fewer productions nowadays “because its stereotype of the Negro is unacceptable” (Styan 3: 103).

God Brown designed by Li Rulan (李汝蘭) also made for a suggestive effect, featuring abstract lines of varying thicknesses and lengths that constantly changed in combination to specify different dramatic spaces as the play went on. In the office scene in *Brown*, these lines segmented the stage in depth so that three rooms appeared respectively in the front, middle and rear of the stage, with the physical or psychological switch between the rooms smoothly realized by the lighting plot. Moreover, the production reinforced the play's illusion-breaking approach by abolishing the proscenium curtain and adopting slides, which at vital points read "We are broke," "What is his name?" or "Y" (the upside-down image of the Chinese character for "Human").

These non-realistic settings resulted from a revolution among Chinese set designers, which had started in 1980 when Xue Dianjie, designer of the ice-breaking *Galileo* production in 1979, appealed to his colleagues to "get rid of the bondage of illusionism" (20). Even though the majority of Chinese theater scholars and artists still believed in 1982 that abstract sets, to make sense to the audience, should at least incorporate some realistic elements (Shu 7), many designers were turning their attention from environmental specificity to stylistic expression, trying to rebuild the connection between spectacle and spectator by tearing down the imaginary fourth wall. Even the conventional production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in 1988 attempted to give a symbolic touch to its otherwise realistic set by using an indecipherable mask in the background. Although scholars generally considered this mixed approach forced and inappropriate (Jones 16; Gao Jian 30), it at least demonstrated the popularity of non-realistic set design at the time.

In terms of acting, however, the realist criterion remained in control during the 1980s, and it was in this respect that the 1988 productions of *The Emperor Jones* and *The Great God Brown* differed. The latter featured a combination of realist performers and symbolic masks. Hu Weimin cast Zhang Xianheng (張先衡) as William Brown, Ren Guangzhi (任廣智) as Dion Anthony and Song Ruhui (宋茹惠) as Cybele—all of them considered excellent in realistic characterization and psychological naturalism.¹⁶ Zhang Xianheng, in particular, impressed critic Zhong Yuan (中原) with his vivid depiction of Brown's split personality after Dion's death ("Mianju" 335). The Jiangsu Drama Troupe's *The Emperor Jones*, on the other hand, forefronted presentational rather than representational acting. Brilliantly choreographed by Su Shijin and led by Cai Wei (蔡偉) as Brutus Jones, the production reduced the play's spoken language and psychological elements to the minimum and applied a ritual-like performance combining dance and pantomime

16 See Huang and Mao; Song 8; "Guojia" 24-25.

instead. It reminds one of Artaud's theater of cruelty, which, "like renewed exorcisms," resorts to the physical in expression and the metaphysical in thought (89).

O'Neill once suggested, though it was not used in the play's premiere in New York in 1920, that not only the witch doctor but "all the figures in Jones's flight through the forest should be masked. Masks would dramatically stress their phantasmal quality, and as contrasted with the unmasked Jones, intensify the supernatural menace of the tomtom" (Sheaffer 81). In Feng's interpretation, the dance chorus wore black or white leotards and featureless masks of the same color in order to "give prominence to the main character and augment the production's style" (Feng Changnian). In the 1988 Shanghai production of O'Neill's *The Great God Brown*, where the playwright made a fuller exploration into the device, the actors wore plastic masks covering only part of their own features so that the audience could perceive the hidden half of the characters' double personality as well. Some critics compared the masks in this production with the painted face in traditional Chinese opera, reaching the conclusion that the former brought out interior complexity while the latter indicates a clear-cut stereotype.¹⁷ As director Hu put it in the production program, the masks used in *The Great God Brown* should "represent the duality of human mind and disclose the truth of human nature." This interpretation, demonstrating psychological and humanist concerns, differed not only from Feng's use of non-individual masks in *The Emperor Jones* but also from Hu's own words elsewhere that contemporary Chinese directors should use devices such as mask to restore a play to its "playfulness" rather than reduce it to a mere demonstration of thesis (*yanjiu* 49).

The experimental productions of *The Emperor Jones* and *The Great God Brown* attracted special attention at the 1988 O'Neill festival due to their contrast with those realistic pieces. At the concluding panel discussion in Nanjing, Feng Changnian's *Jones* received warm acclaim from the Chinese and foreign audiences alike. Besides, of the two productions presented by the Jiangsu Drama Troupe, troupe leaders picked *The Emperor Jones* to take part in the first Chinese Theater Festival held by the Chinese Dramatists' Association (中國戲劇家協會) in Beijing, even though the other production, the realistic *Beyond the Horizon*, also had its artistic merits. The realism of Ibsen and Stanislavsky had reigned over the Chinese spoken drama stage for more than six long decades; the critical and official endorsement the 1988 production of *The Emperor Jones* received proves that non-realistic trends of modern western theater finally became legitimate in China at

17 See Zhong, "Mianju" 335; Yang 336-37.

the end of the 1980s. The *Jones* production was not completely free from negative reviews, however. When it traveled to Beijing in December 1988, the bold adaptation met with both commendation and criticism. One of the two western—or rather American—plays among the nineteen festival productions in spoken drama or traditional opera,¹⁸ the O'Neill piece was reviewed by *The People's Daily* (Overseas Edition) as one of the “several remarkable productions” and a picture showing Jones and his dance chorus in a physically striking position was printed to evidence the comment (Liu and Zhang). According to critic Dou Xiaohong (竇曉紅), however, the production “rudely castrated” the dramatic text of *The Emperor Jones* by overlooking O'Neill's thought, so much so that “despite the dazzling style and a few innovative scenes the whole performance turned out to sound hollow.” Another critic Sun Wei (孫巍), arguing that Feng's production lacked O'Neill's exploration into the black people's past and present, suggested theatrical directors stage plays with themes that could “resonate among the contemporary Chinese.”

The staging of *The Great God Brown* aroused much less controversy by comparison. Before its performance at the opening ceremony of the Shanghai O'Neill festival, the production had opened at a university auditorium on 28 May with an audience of about 1,000 persons and had eleven performances at the Changjiang Theater (長江劇場) with an audience of about 5,000 persons. At a talk-back on 3 June, the audiences gave a favorable response to the director's use of slides and the actors' focus on characterization. They also thought of the simple but elegant set design as suitable for the action of the play, which had both lyrical and philosophical facets (Rehearsal Record). Critics held similar opinion about the set design. Although Gao Jian considered the set too “light” in tone to match O'Neill's intense tragedy, he agreed that it graced and enriched the performance space on stage (31).

Another revival of *The Great God Brown* took place less than a year after the 1988 staging. Directed by young independent artist Mou Sen (牟森) for his Frog Experimental Troupe (蛙實驗劇團), the production opened in Beijing on 28 January 1989, when on another stage in the city veteran artists of the renowned Beijing People's Art Theater (北京人民藝術劇院) were giving their last performance of a revival of Lao She's (老舍) masterpiece, *Teahouse* (茶館). Mou Sen deemed the coincidence as a prophetic sign: “The artists of the older generation have created a golden age. But life is forever cycling and updating. Just as *Teahouse* buried an old

18 The other was Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, produced by the Tianjin People's Art Theater under the direction of British director Mike Alvarez.

era, *The Great God Brown* carries a new dream and the substitution is sure to happen" (Program). The Beijing People's Art Theater had served as China's leading state-run drama troupe since its foundation in 1952, and *Teahouse* had topped the theater's best-known repertoire since its premiere in 1958. The play narrates some Beijing natives' personal vicissitudes along with the Chinese nation's social-historical changes during the first half of the twentieth century, featuring authentic spectacles set in a typical Beijing teahouse. Mou Sen and his *Brown* production, however, broke away from this realist tradition of *Teahouse* to declare the emergence of a younger generation of theater artists in the late 1980s.

Though each turned against the conventional realist theater, Mou Sen and Hu Weimin differed in their relationship with the state and in their position in the theater circles. As an established director of a state-run company, Hu Weimin staged *The Great God Brown* with state subsidy for a state co-sponsored festival. In fact, state-run companies presented most of the 1988 festival productions except those student efforts and the version of *Mourning Becomes Electra* directed by Jiao Huang and Lou Jicheng, which enlisted individual artists voluntarily coming from over ten drama troupes in Beijing, Shanghai and the northeastern city of Kiamusze. The *Electra* group had to rely on its members to get financial support and other necessities for the production. When the production reached the Shanghai stage in May 1988 after two months of rehearsal, the three-night O'Neill trilogy was condensed into a three-hour piece (eight scenes plus epilogue) to accommodate the Chinese audience of the time.¹⁹ A February interview showed that at first the *Electra* cast and crew had planned to do an excerpt to check the audience's response before deciding to stage all three parts of the trilogy (Rong et al.). Otherwise the production had little noticeable distinction from those staged by state-run companies, however. Co-sponsored by an academic institution (Fudan University), a government supported institution (the Shanghai Workers' Union Headquarters) and a China-based foreign enterprise, the production distributed most tickets via unions and other organizations and only a few went to individual spectators through the box office. Due to these artists' established fame and position, the media gave their project adequate publicity and showered the production with favorable previews and reviews.

As director of a private troupe, Mou Sen enjoyed none of the above conveniences and, without a legitimate license, he did not even have the freedom to give a public performance or sell tickets (Zhou). Born in the northeastern province of Liaoning in 1963, Mou Sen graduated from the Chinese Department of Beijing

¹⁹ The production reduced *Homecoming* from four acts to four scenes, *The Hunted* from five acts to three scenes, and *The Haunted* from four acts to one scene and an epilogue.

Normal University in 1986 to become an independent theater director in 1987. Neither professionally trained nor officially subsidized, Mou Sen and his troupe managed to survive on the fringe of illegality, forever striving to find artistic recognition against severe marginalization. They started rehearsing *The Great God Brown* in anticipation of a Beijing celebration of O'Neill's centennial to be hosted by the Chinese Dramatists' Association. The conceived celebration gave way to the more ambitious project of the first Chinese Theater Festival later on, but Mou Sen decided to carry out his plan all the same to "pay respects to the great dramatist" (Program). The troupe finally put on the play in January 1989 with the financial support from the United States-based Ford Foundation.

The 1989 production of *The Great God Brown* heralded the advent of a new, alternative theater that was to boom in the 1990s, in which Mou Sen stood as a pioneering figure. As founder of the first "avant-garde" theater group in the late 1980s, Mou Sen had mounted Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* in 1987 and the musical drama *L'Histoire du Soldat* composed by Charles Ferdinand Ramuz and Igor Stravinsky in 1988 before he directed the O'Neill play in 1989. Wu Wenguang's 1990 documentary *Bumming in Beijing* (流浪北京) traced Mou Sen's life and work from summer 1988 to spring 1990, during which *The Great God Brown* went from page to stage.²⁰ Wu later said he started making the film about vagabond artists at the end of the 1980s due to a feeling that something was about to finish.²¹ Upon the opening of his *Brown* production, Mou Sen articulated the sense of closure that Wu vaguely referred to: "We are a newborn troupe.... We will have our own actors and playwrights of prominence. ... We belong to the new century, which we will embrace with our own action" (Program).

Shortly after the mounting of *The Great God Brown*, the incident of summer 1989 officially brought the 1980s to a closure, along with its social and literary aspiration after western models. Meng Jinghui, another alternative director to emerge in the 1990s, would distinguish theatrical experiments of the 1980s from those of the ensuing decade, arguing that the former "assimilated foreign techniques, expressions and outlooks to do away with the audio-visually humdrum theater of the 1970s" while the latter had "something of its own" and aspired after "individual

20 Wu Wenguang made the film as an independent artist himself and the work anticipated China's New Documentary movement.

21 The latter half of the 1980s saw an emergence of independent artists in Beijing, who called themselves "vagabonds" (盲流) for choosing to stay away from secure "work units" sustained by the state. In the 1980s, when it seemed indispensable for a Chinese citizen to belong to some "work unit" and have "registered permanent residence," these freelance artists had to lead a hard life and work underground.

creativity” (Xie Xizhang 351).

If Meng’s generalization has merit, the *Brown* production Mou Sen staged in 1989 still mirrored the cultural and theatrical idiosyncrasies of the 1980s. Not unlike Hu Weimin’s, the production gave a relatively truthful rendition of O’Neill’s text, its human interest and psychological depth included. According to Meng Jinghui, Mou Sen turned the O’Neill play into a not necessarily perfect but definitely formal and solemn ritual:

Its masks failed to reveal the characters’ profound fear and helplessness while they juggled their souls. Neither did the production achieve a better integration of its slow rhythm, simple mise en scène and conscious alienation effect. Yet in the blue light that immersed the stage, caught by Margaret’s largo monologue and the tragic aura pervading the theater, the audience could still arrive at a touching moment of sublimation in the end. (357)

As the subtitle to Wu Wenguang’s documentary indicates, those independent artists drifting in Beijing around 1989 were *The Last Dreamers*, who held on to the 1980s even more than they looked forward to the coming 1990s. With the yearning for enlightenment and inundation of all kinds of modernist discourses in the post-Cultural Revolution years, dream and passion characterized the 1980s as a spiritual era; at the same time, however, commercialism started to loom over the rapidly opening-up land and would take over in the following decade. Mou Sen’s *The Great God Brown* thus voiced a criticism of materialist beings by one of the young idealists of the 1980s. With the director asserting in the program that “theater aims to teach,” this *Brown* production also exemplified a typical enlightening stance of elite intellectuals toward the common people at the time.

Just like Mou Sen’s *Brown* marked off the 1980s from the 1990s, the alternative attitude to O’Neill would undergo an apparent transition in the new decade. O’Neill had served as a key to theatrical innovation in the 1980s; in the 1990s, however, the “avant-garde” Chinese would conveniently set themselves against the eclectic dramatist as an example of conservative theater. As either an experimental model or an exemplary realist, O’Neill exerted a far-reaching influence on the Chinese theater of spoken drama throughout the 1980s and would continue to have his presence felt in the decade to follow.

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尤金·奧尼爾在二十世紀八十年代的中國舞臺上

朱雪峰 劉海平*

摘要

「文革」結束後的二十世紀八十年代，尤金·奧尼爾的戲劇作品在中國大陸話劇舞臺上大量湧現。這些演出與當時的政治、文化背景相互動，成為中國戲劇史上一個很有意義的現象。其中早期演出多以政治宣傳和意識形態批評為目的，風格儘量寫實，試圖忠於原著；後期演出則多注重人文主義和啟蒙觀念，一些導演開始轉向奧尼爾的實驗性作品，或對其文本進行自覺的主體性演繹。該變化也顯示了幾代藝術家對奧尼爾的不同認識。作為兼收並蓄的美國戲劇家，奧尼爾給八十年代的中國話劇演出帶來了深遠的影響，並將在此後繼續宣告他的存在。

關鍵詞：尤金·奧尼爾 中國話劇 舞臺演出

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