Research on the Differences of Audience Experience between Large Theaters and Little Theaters in China from the Perspective of the Actor-Audience Relationship

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Abstract: With the sustained and rapid development of China's theatre economy, more and more audiences have begun to enter the theatre to watch dramas. Based on the actor-audience relationship, this paper uses in-depth interviews to understand and analyze the differences between the audience's experience of the large theatre and the little theatre from the perspective of the audience. The study found that the alteration of the space caused audiences to present different psychological states in different types of theatre and was a central influence on the differences in experience that emerged.
Keywords: the actor-audience relationship, the Big Theatre, the Little Theatre

1 Introduction

In recent years, with the popularization of the arts, the launch of theatre festivals and related variety shows, China's theatre economy has begun to grow at a sustained rate, and various theatre performances have brought audiences a rich experience. While large theatre performances are steadily developing, little theatre plays are also receiving more and more attention. In the post-epidemic era, the question of how to bring more excellent works of both artistry and spectacle to more and more audiences in a more diverse way has become increasingly important. Compared with the large theatre, audiences in the little theatre can easily get rid of the "distant spectators" and become close spectators or even participants. And the same play from the little theatre moved to the large theatre, but also prone to decline in audience evaluation. So what are the factors that lead to the difference in audience experience between the little theatre and the large theatre performances?

2 Literature Review

With the development of China's theatre performance market and the little theatre, the characteristics of the little theatre and the differences with the big theatre have attracted the study of multiple perspectives in the academic field.

2.1 A literature review on the differences between the little theatre and the big theatre

In 1982, Lin Zhaohua's Absolute Signal became the starting point for the development of Chinese little theatre. Since then, with the staging of the little theatre across the country, many scholars have taken little theatre as the main subject of their research, focusing on the

characteristics of little theatre and the differences between them and large theatre.

Although the definition of the concept of little theatre has been debated in academic circles, the reduction and alteration of spatial attributes is recognized by various theatre practitioners and scholars as the most crucial and obvious difference between little theatre and large theatre.

Wang Xiaoying, a famous Chinese drama director, pointed out in 2001 that the unconventional performance space is the most intuitive and essential difference between little theatre and large theatre; based on the change of space, the blurring of the boundary between the performance area and the viewing area, and the sharing of space are the spatial aesthetic characteristics of little theatre.

In 2010, Li Ziyi proposed from the perspective of the actor-audience relationship that, compared to large theatre, the viewing space of little theatre was shared and had diverse spatial treatments, while at the psychological level, the creative psychology of the actors and the receptive psychology of the audience have been reconstructed, changed and strengthened to different degrees. In A Chinese Contemporary Little Theatre, Wu Baohe pointed out in 2016 that Chinese contemporary little theatre presents the characteristics of establishing an audience-based theatre concept, changing the relationship between stage performance and script, and breaking through the realist theatre model in terms of theatre art exploration.

On the whole, existing researches on the differences between little theatre and large theatre are mainly at the level of theory and artistic creation, focusing mainly on the qualities and artistic characteristics of littletheatersthemselves, rather than on the differences between the two and the differences in audience perception.

2.2 A literature review on the actor-audience relationship

Since the 20th century, the idea that audiences are essential to the existence of theatre has become widely accepted, and the exploration and study of the actor-audience relationship has become increasingly important.

As for the actor-audience relationship, Chinese scholar Lu Ang gave a clear definition in his 2000 book The Comparative Integration of Chinese and Western Theatre, stating that "the actor-audience relationship of theatre mainly refers to the special aesthetic relationship between the performer and the spectator determined by the structural form of the performance venue (environment)." It is stressed that the spectatorship includes both the structural form of the performance venue and the aesthetic relationship between the performer and the spectator.

In 2011, Guo Yongwei suggested that through the development of the actor-audience relationship from the pre-theater era to environmental theatre and episodic theatre, the actor-audience relationship has evolved from ambiguity to clarity and eventually reverted to ambiguity. In 2015, Ye Peiling pointed out that since the early 20th century, the exploration of the actor-audience relationship in little theatre has shown an overall change in the process of narrowing physical distance - closing psychological distance - breaking physical boundaries.

However, these studies have not explored the reasons for the difference in the audience experience between large theatre and little theatre from the perspective of the audience, one of the central elements of theatre performance.

2.3 Problem formulation

This paper will therefore take a look at the actor-audience relationship and attempt to

answer the following questions from the perspective of the audience: how do differences in audience experience between large theatre and little theatre emerge? What are the dimensions of the audience's perspective in terms of spatial changes, emotional perception, immersion and interaction that bring about changes in the actor-audience relationship and the theatre-going experience?

3 Method

Considering that theatre audiences are still a relatively small group in China, this paper uses in-depth interviews in an attempt to answer the above questions in order to gain a deeper understanding of the differences in audience experience and feelings.

3.1 In-depth interviewing method

3.1.1 In-depth interviewing method

The interview questions were divided into three main sections.

The first section deals with basic information about the interviewees, including when they were introduced to theatre, when they started going to the theatre regularly and the average amount of theatre they attended.

In the second part, the research questions are downscaled into interview questions to understand the interviewees' definitions of large theatre and little theatre, the differences in their feelings when attending large theatre and little theatre from their personal theatre-going experiences, their impressive productions in large and little theater sand the reasons for them, their preference for attention to the whole and details when attending theatre, their level of immersion, etc.

The third part prepares the main possible deeper questions, further exploring the research questions from the perspectives of objective differences between large and little theaters, interaction, the recent rise of environmental and immersive theatre in China, as well as artistry, entertainment and commerciality.

During the interviews and the conduct of the study, the researcher tried to avoid the four ethical issues and transgressions highlighted by scholar Al- an Bryman: (1) causing harm to the research participant; (2) not using informed consent documents or materials; (3) invading the privacy of the research participant; and (4) deceiving the research participant. Interviewees may also remain silent or withdraw from the interview if they have any questions they do not wish to answer or if they are unhappy. Interview materials that the interviewees declared they did not wish to disclose were not included or quoted in this study.

3.1.2 Selection of interviewees

This study conducted approximately 50 minutes of semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of the eight interviewees who had been exposed to theatre for more than three years and had been in theatre regularly for more than two years. The interviews began in April 2022 and ended in May 2022. The interviewees consisted firstly of theatre-related students and non-specialist theatre audiences recruited by the researcher within the on-campus theatre public lectures, and secondly of a larger research sample collected through the proliferation of various theatre bloggers on Weibo. In accordance with the maximum sampling principle of qualitative research methods, when the low number of interviewees was recruited, all the interviews were sufficient to answer

the research questions and the sample was collected. Respondents differed in terms of age, region, length of time spent watching theatre, and whether or not they were theatre majors, with a low degree of homogeneity.

The interviews were conducted as one-to-one face-to-face interviews, text interviews on WeChat and voice interviews in Tencent meetings. The results of the interviews were collated into verbatim transcripts, with a total of 44,319 words in the interview transcripts. The basic profile of the interviewees is shown in the table.

Table 1 Basic Information for Interviewees

Respondent No.	Age	Gender	Whether or not you are a drama major learner	Time of exposure to theatre	Timing of regular theatre entry	**Average number of plays watched**
S1	20	Female	Yes	2019	2019	6-7 units/month
S2	26	Female	No	2019	2019	5-7 units/month
S3	24	Female	No	2018	2018	12-15 units/month
S4	20	Female	Yes	2015	2021	1-2 units/month
S5	28	Female	No	2014	2016	2 units/month
S6	38	Female	No	2003	2019	3-4 units/month
S7	19	Female	Yes	2016	2021	10 units/month
S8	21	Female	No	2017	2020	3 units/month

4 Research findings and discussion points

4.1 The debate over the academic definition of little theatre and audience perception

Since 1982, when Lin Zhaohua's Absolute Signal marked the birth of little theatre in China, there has been a debate in the domestic academic community about the definition of little theatre. According to the collection of essays from the first Chinese Little Theatre Festival, Little Theatre Studies, the mainstream view of little theatre in China at that time was in reference to the Western little theatre movement, which believed that little theatre should be anti-commercial, anti-mainstream, anti-establishment, experimental and strongly rebellious, and this view still persists. With the development of the times, the definition of little theatre has gradually formed a consensus based on the current situation of theatre development in China, that is, the essential feature of little theatre is the reduction of the performance space, but the view that little theatre should be distinguished from large theatre in the frame, experimental and rebellious still exists.

For most audiences, little theatre is the drama performed in relatively little theatre, often with smaller stage, simpler choreography and fewer actors. All eight respondents had similar views on

little theatre, and for those dramas that have toured and changed in size in terms of theatre, one respondent mentioned focusing on the 'size of the cast and choreography' of the production (S5), while another felt that it should be 'defined by the size of the theatre in which the production was first performed' (S6). Only one respondent felt that 'little theatre is somewhat experimental and has a barrier to viewing' (S4). It is clear that for most audiences, the size of the theatre, as well as the size of the stage set and cast, is the fundamental basis for differentiating between large and little theatre productions.

4.2 Differences in audience experience between theatre and little theatre from the perspective of actor-audience relationships

In his book The Empty Space, renowned theatre theorist Peter Brook suggests that "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." Pointing out that space, actors and audience are the most essential elements that make up a play. These three also become the basic elements that build up the relationship between the spectator and the actor. The actor and the audience are the core elements of a theatrical performance, without either of which the drama cannot properly take place, while the space is the link between the actor and the audience where the theatrical production takes place.

This section will explore the differences between the experience of large and little theatre from the audience's point of view, taking into account the results of the in-depth interviews and the other two elements of the viewing relationship: space and actors.

4.2.1 Differences in audience focus given spatial differences

Guo Yongwei points out that space not only means the place where the performance takes place in a broad sense, but also the distance between the actors and the audience in a narrow sense, and includes both physical and psychological distance.

In the face of the changing space between large and little theatre, the audience's focus in theatre-going has also changed.

Firstly, the distance between the audience and the stage in a large theatre makes it difficult for the audience to take into account the details of the work, while the audience in little theatre is more likely to pay attention to the business of the actors and the detailed design of the stage, and can better balance the whole with the details.

"In a large theatre you can see the whole story more fully and the movement of the characters is clearer, but in a little theatre attention is often divided by the business of actors close by or details in costume." (S7)

In large theatersit's more often the case that you're still focusing on the plot and the overall staging, but in little theatersit's easier to focus on a particular actor in great detail because you're closer to the stage and there are fewer actors on stage, it feels like you can't help but start paying attention to a lot of details when you're in a little theatre." (S8)

"Only after already being very familiar with a particular big theatre production do you bring binoculars to see the details in a performance, otherwise you just can't see all of the drama." (S3)

At the same time, in terms of subject matter, large theatre productions are generally more ambitious, with a wide range of narratives and more diverse and complex character stories, while

little theatre productions focus more on relatively simpler, closer-to-life stories. Also based on the difference in subject matter, coupled with the difference in stage structure between large and little theaters, large theatre productions have a far superior performance in terms of stage art, which can bring about more shocking dramatic conflict. When interviewees talked about their impressive theatre productions, they invariably mentioned the eye-catching and striking staging and scheduling of the theatre stage, in addition to the excellent script themselves, such as The Count of Monte Cristo and Jane Eyre produced by the National Centre for the Performing Arts, and the musicals The Book of Lost Souls and Anna Karenina. When it comes to little theatre, the performance of the actors themselves, in addition to the script, became the main point of memory for the interviewees.

Secondly, the difference in space between large and little theaters brings about a change in physical distance that also affects the psychological distance between the audience and the play and the actors.

The large theaters with their proscenium stages and large distances from the performance area and the audience keep the audience at a psychological distance from the play as 'spectators'. In little theatre, however, the distance between the audience and the stage, and between the audience and the actors, is significantly reduced, so that the audience, wherever they are in the theatre, can easily establish a psychological state of 'interlocutor', and in some environmental theatre productions can even create a psychological state of being part of the work.

Large theaters are relatively serious and distant, little theaters are smaller and more intimate, and because they are so close to the stage, they bring a connection with the actors themselves." (S4)

With a big theatre it's like gears, every department, the actors on stage, the lighting and the choreography all jammed together tightly, with a little theatre it's a bit more flexible and very close to the actors." (S1)

One interviewee said of the little environmental theatre, "We are so close to them that we feel like we are one of them." (S3) This is an experience that is not available in the larger theatre productions.

Despite the fact that some of the large theatre productions have used means to break down the 'fourth wall', including interaction and dialogue with the audience outside the character, they still do not change the psychological state of the audience when watching them.

A lot of the interaction in the big theatre is that the actors will have to sit at the edge of the stage to interact because the pool seats are also seated with the audience, which is actually a 'looking down' gesture, as long as you are not in the front row you cannot connect with the actors through this interaction. Even if the actor walks off stage, I'm still very aware of being on the sidelines because of the distance. But in little theatre I am level with the actors and I can easily meet their eyes and receive their energy even when I am sitting back." (S8)

Like the French musical Romeo and Juliet have the interaction of walking out into the audience, but for those sitting on the second or third floor many times they don't see that interaction and it becomes very abstract." (S3)

The proscenium stage of the large theatre has a certain height difference from the auditorium, and the actors often appear to be 'looking down' when breaking the 'fourth wall'. In addition, the blind spots in the audience's field of vision caused by the performance and the interaction with the

audience at the top of the auditorium further increase the distance between the audience and the work, so that the audience is not fully immersed in the performance and is more likely to approach Brecht's idea of allowing the audience to detach from the play for rational thought and judgement.

The interviewees' answers also support this: "I can evaluate a play relatively objectively in a large theatre from my evaluation system, I can notice relatively quickly what I like about the play and what I think is not good enough, it is a more rational state. But in little theatre I'm more emotional, I'll have the feeling that although the play has a lot of problems, because I'm very involved or enjoying it, I still like it and I'll want to see it again in the future, but if it was a big theatre play with as many problems I wouldn't have the same idea." (S8)

In little theatre, even in proscenium stages, the height difference with the audience is reduced to the point where it no longer exists. In this case, the distance between the audience and the actors is greatly reduced, which helps the audience to form a psychological state of 'interlocutor', making it easier for the audience to immerse themselves in the work and to establish a psychological connection with the actors, creating a stronger empathy.

4.2.2 The new type of little theatre-going experience and problems under environmental theatre

In the 1960s, Richard Schechner developed the theory of 'environmental theatre', which broke away from the original form of theatre and involved the audience in the process of performance. At the same time, Schechner dug deeper into theatrical space, stating that all spaces could be used for performance and that the area between the stage and the audience was not fixed but could be adapted to the plot. Sheckner's ideas break down the boundaries between the audience and the actors in a theatre performance, causing a fundamental change in the traditional form of theatre performance and a dramatic change in the actor-audience relationship, with the audience becoming involved in the action of the performance and becoming the 'creator of the scene'.

In recent years, many environmental theatre productions based on environmental theatre theory have emerged in China, such as the musicals Kings Table and Light Keepers, and the play The Great Detective Zhao Gane, which have been loved by many audiences. Seven out of eight interviewees have seen two or more environmental theatre productions, which shows that these productions have become a popular form of theatre performance in China in recent years. And interviewees also said that these productions have brought new theatre-going experiences.

The interaction, the distance and the setting of the theatre are unique to this type of play and will immerse you in the play as soon as you enter the theatre, it's very immersive." (S1)

The environments like Light Keepers are so well done that it will feel immersive." (S2)

It will become relaxed because of the design of the environment and it won't be as serious as it would be in a big theatre." (S6)

The ambient design of Kings Table is fantastic, with the Viking warriors stomping on the audience as they sing their war songs so that everyone can feel the 'earth tremble', which is a very strange and powerful sensation that no framed stage can do. " (S8)

Only a few productions, such as The Great Detective Zhao Gane, involve the audience as a band or police officers in the performance.

For the interviewees, the new theatre-going experience brought by environmental theatre is mainly focused on the sense of atmosphere brought by the design of the theatre environment,

which helps the audience to better integrate into the plot, and even in some cases makes the audience a part of the setting of the performance, while taking advantage of the smaller venue of environmental theatre to bring the audience other sensory stimulation in addition to sight and sound, in a way that cannot be achieved by large theatre. These are ways of enhancing and enriching the audience's sense of experience and participation in a way that is not possible in large theatres.

Despite the fact that environmental theatre provides a good live experience for the audience, the interviewees also coincide in pointing out common problems: many script of environmental theatre and the performances of the actors still need to be strengthened.

Environmental theatre creates an atmosphere and enhances the audience's sense of experience, which often leads to the audience being immersed in the play and ignoring some of the textual and performance shortcomings in the production, sometimes even becoming a means for the production to 'hide'. Improving the quality of theatre productions and performances should be a key concern for theatre makers when creating environmental theatre.

On the other hand, environmental theatre, with its diverse experiences and contents, is becoming the mainstream of little theatre today, attracting many ordinary people to theatre, while its strong entertainment properties have to a certain extent weakened the original experimental, rebellious and bold exploration of theatre art in little theatre. Some of the interviewees said that if large theatre productions are compared to "main meals", these little theatre productions are more like "dessert" or a pastime after life, lacking profound connotation and reflection, which is also a problem that theatre creators need to pay attention to and think about. This is also an issue that needs to be considered by theatre creators.

4.2.3 Actor differences between large theatre and little theatre from the audience's perspective

In conversations with interviewees, the differences between actors in large theatre and little theatre also made a difference to the audience's experience.

In little theaters, where the audience is closer to the actors, the business and changes in expression help the audience to better understand the actions of the characters, the development of the plot and to pick up on the energy and emotions of the actors, whereas in large theatre the large performance space and the distance from the audience places greater demands on the actors' performances. Little theatre productions therefore offer many opportunities for the less experienced actor, but also have a negative impact on the audience's experience, compared to the mature and large scale of large theatre productions.

At the same time, some interviewees pointed out that a clear difference in terms of actors is the contrast between actors who have never performed in a big theatre production and those who have performed in both big and little theatre productions: "There are some actors who are not capable of acting big theatre, but if he has been honed in big theatre and his energy can be put at 10, then he may only need 5 to come back and act little theatre□ But for actors who have only acted little theatre, their energy only have 5, but during the show it might be that they acted only have 3." (S6)

4.3 Misplaced theatre productions in commercial performances

As the popularity of theatre and theatre audiences increase, more and more theatre productions are being performed commercially on a larger scale, touring to different parts of the country and

making a richer range of productions available to audiences in more regions.

When talking about this type of theatre productions, interviewees mentioned that many little theatre productions are 'misplaced' in large theaters in commercial performances due to revenue and the lack of suitable space in local theatre settings, thus reducing the experience of the audience.

The sense of oppression and tension that was present in the little theatre is gone in the large theatre." (S1)

Despite being excellent script, it can feel strange or immersive and loses a lot of its original charm." (S5)

The stage became empty and the original tightness and cohesiveness was gone, making it feel cutthroat." (S4)

For most audiences, the greatest feeling of this kind of misplaced theatre work is that the integrity of the play has been destroyed. Actors need to use more exaggerated body and performance on stage to achieve the effect in little theatre. The original psychological distance is broken by the space, and the audience becomes a relatively separated part. This results in a disparity between the ideal relationship of the performance and the reality of the work, which in turn deprives it of a certain value and emotional transmission.

For some of the environmental theatre works, due to the constraints of the venue during the touring process, the works are often changed to proscenium stage versions. They are still performed in little theatres, but because of the lack of environmental shaping and multi-sensory stimulation, the valuable qualities of the works as environmental theatre are lost. The ‘fourth wall’ is rebuilt by the proscenium stage, while the flaws in the script and the actors performances are exposed, further reducing the audience's experience.

This shows that it is important for theatre creators to consider the impact of changes in space and stage style on the actor-audience relationship in the course of commercial performances, and to maintain and avoid it through various means.

5 Conclusion and Reflection

This paper uses the in-depth interview method to study the phenomenon of audience viewing and experience differences between large theaters and little theaters from the perspective of the actor-audience relationships, and tries to answer the question of what factors affect the audience's experience differences.

The study found that spatial change is the central factor influencing the difference in audience experience between large and little theatre productions, with the physical distance brought about by space greatly affecting the psychological state of the audience when watching. Even if the ‘fourth wall’ is broken in large theatre productions, it is still difficult to change the audience's psychological state of being relatively rational and distant as "spectators"; little theatre productions, on the other hand, because of the closer physical distance and the reduced height difference between the stage and the audience, are more likely to produce a psychological state of being closer and more intimate. "In environmental theatre works, through the full use of the environment and the mobilization of sensory stimuli, the audience is more likely to feel a sense of "part of" identification, which in turn has an impact on their attention, immersion and

psychological resonance during the performance. This has an impact on the audience's attention, immersion and psychological resonance during the performance, resulting in a different theatre-going experience.

At the same time, this study also found that there are problems in the domestic theatre performance market such as the misplacement of theatre productions, resulting in a diminished audience experience, and the obscuring of important spiritual and connotational aspects of the productions that deserve the attention of theatre creators.

However, this study lacks a comprehensive approach to the issue from the perspective of the theatre creator because of the audience perspective alone, and in future research, researchers in the relevant field may need to focus on this perspective and, by extension, on the improvement of misplaced theatre productions in commercial performances.

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