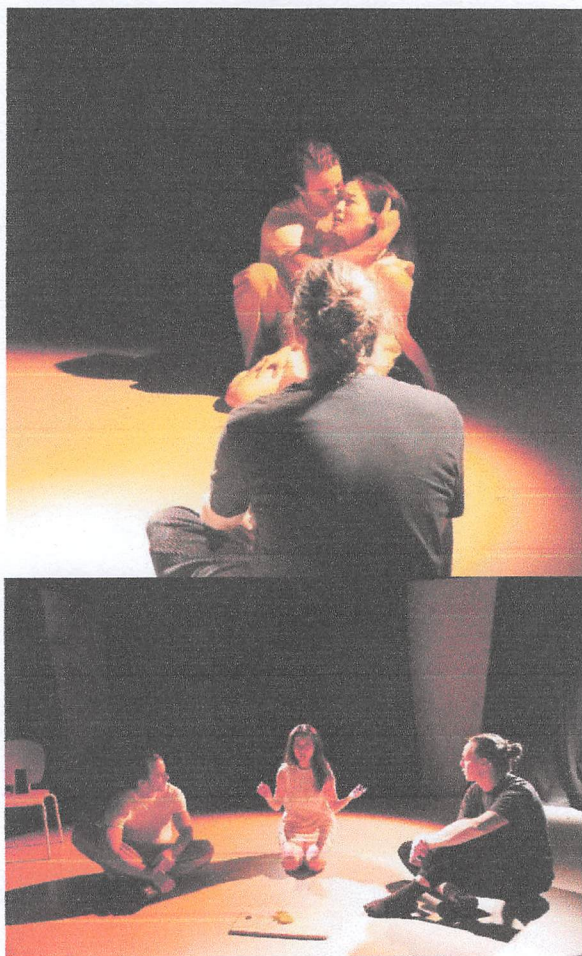


A Successful 'Grafting' of Eastern and Western Dramatic Forms — Conversation with the Young Actor and Director Xiangyi Tan

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This October, at Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), a leading drama educational institution in the world, Xiangyi Tan from China started a bold experimentation in theatre. She adapted the original work of *Barn Burning* by famous Japanese writer Haruki Murakami. She approached the text from metaphorical and philosophical perspectives, reimagining and narrating the story of a woman who comes from a disadvantaged background, who pursues the meaning of existence and eventually disappears from this world. Thus, her work uses theatrical means to focus on the experiential reality of female groups from the lower class and interrogates the meaning of their lives.



Stage Photo

In the adapted play, Tan mixed poetic textual imagery of oriental qualities with Western existentialist philosophy and expressionist approach, and tested it out on the stage of the RADA.

The following is a conversation between the Journalist and Xiangyi Tan.



Q: Why did you come up with the idea of adapting Haruki Murakami's work?

A: Because it seems that no one here has adapted Murakami's text on stage. I like oriental literature very much, and I want to test it out on the stage of Western drama.

Q: Based on your past experience, talk about the differences between Eastern and Western dramatic representations.

A: Western drama in general has followed a linear narrative to dramatise character conflicts in order to push towards a dramatic climax. That generally has been a characteristic of Western drama, especially tragedy, since Aristotle and Ancient Greece. However, the metaphors in the Eastern drama are different, and even at times perhaps they challenge those mechanisms. In the early historical stages of oriental drama, the playtext (including singing) was not the main way of representation, but rather a combination of opera, voice, body and other forms of representations, with distinctive qualities of symbolism. This kind of symbolism seems to reveal an allegorical quality, therefore more appropriate for the staging of this text. Since the story centralises on the female experiences from the lower class as she searches for the meaning of life, when does 'social death' of human beings (as opposed to the natural death of flesh) begin? This kind of allegorical quality resonates with the metaphorical narrative approach of the East.

Therefore, I want to do an experiment in the UK, across geological and cultural differences, to reflect collectively on feminine experiences. To me, drama does not lie solely in the dramatic conflicts between individual actors, but in the experiential reality and thinking towards human collective lives.

Q: How did you do that in this practice?

A: The beauty of drama is that it is alive and spatially charged. Therefore, the characters I have designed have direct physical and sonic resonance on the stage, so as to have experiential impacts on the audience at the same time. Unlike classical directors who prefer to use linear narrative to dramatise conflicts, my work has been influenced by a kind of grace and poetic narrative structure of the East to construct a dramatic experience that resembles rebirth. Just as the characters in the play search for the meaning of existence, the audience by the end seems to feel a sense of collective reimagination within the dramatic space by the end of the play. Why do we usually say that 'drama can't be replicated'? Because it is different every time it is performed, it lives here and now.

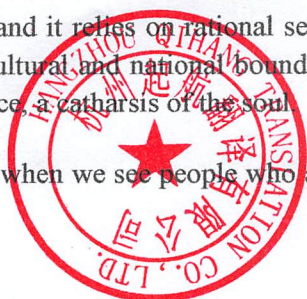
Q: What are your feelings in terms of working with British actors?

A: I learned a lot from working with them. Having been exposed to drama since a child in China, I planted the seeds of drama in my heart. I later went on to study drama as an undergraduate at Vassar College in the United States. Although the origins and traditions of drama vary in each region of the world, actors approach and embody human experiences in similar ways through the plays. So, when we perform, the audience can have a conversation with us that transcends national and cultural borders.

Q: What do you think is special about drama as an art form?

A: I think drama is the most direct way to converse with the audience. What language itself can communicate is limited and it relies on rational senses, but drama's effects on human experiences are immediate, spot-on, crossing cultural and national boundaries. The audience walks out of the theatre with almost similar feelings of resonance, a catharsis of the soul.

In theatre, when we see people who are different from us, of different races, countries and regions performing



together, the moment brings us to an experience that belongs entirely to the body and the space itself. That experience is real and palpable, and it exists within each body. At the same time, drama can create a collective atmosphere, so that each one of us is willing to open up the space and listen to a collective experience. This brings me a sense of commitment to keep making drama.

Xiangyi Tan, a young actor, director and producer. She finished her master's degree with honours from Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and her undergraduate degree with honours from Vassar College. She received several awards, including the Maguire Fellowship for Graduate Study Abroad and the Molly Thatcher Kazan Prize for Distinction in Theatre Arts. The film *Flee and Engulfed*, in which she acted as the chief producer and co-screenwriter, has recently finished shooting in 2022. Recently she starred in *Platinum Tales* and *King Coal's Curtains* at Colchester Castle in England. In 2021 she starred in the film *Spring in Yangzhou* in Yangxian County, Shaanxi Province as well as independent film *Drown*. She was in the promotion of the second season of the American TV series *Westworld* at Village East Cinema in New York, and she starred in dramas in many theatres such as Beijing Auto Space and New York Off-Broadway Nubox Theatre. (Personal website: xiangyitan.com)

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