

Meng Jinghui, Pioneer of Experimental Theatre in China

L'AVANT-GARDE DU DRAME D'ESSAI DE LA CHINE --- MENG JINGHUI

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Abstract: Meng Jinghui, whose name has gained increasing popularity in China in the past fifteen years, is undoubtedly the most influential stage director of 先鋒戲劇 in Chinese theatrical circles. Referred to Experimental Theatre or Small Theatre in China, 先鋒戲劇 has been experimenting new theatrical presentations that have not previously seen in China. Though controversial from the very beginning, Meng Jinghui has won more and more audience. With the box-office success of his 2005 production *Amber*, which is reviewed by some as a repetition of some previous productions of his without breakthrough, people begin to doubt about Meng Jinghui's creativity and his leading role as a pioneer artist who seems to be naturally away from pop culture and commercialization. Investigating the birth and growth of Experimental Theatre in China, this paper gives a glimpse of Meng Jinghui's major productions and what he has tried to do in this field called 先鋒戲劇. The paper gives credit to Meng Jinghui's long time efforts of making his dream true ---- to make theatre going a mainstream culture in China, which would surely prove him to be the great pioneer of Chinese Experimental theatre.

Key words: Meng Jinghui, Experimental Theatre, pioneer

Résumé: Meng Jinghui était de plus en plus réputé dans les quinze dernières années. Il est sans aucun doute le metteur en scène le plus influant du drame d'avant-garde chinois d'aujourd'hui. Le drame d'avant-garde en Chine, en d'autres termes le drame d'essai ou le petit théâtre à l'étranger essaie tout le temps de nouvelles techniques d'expression scéniques. Bien que contesté, Meng conquiert de plus en plus de spectateurs. Son œuvre de 2005 « Ambre » a fait recette, mais aux yeux des autres, cette pièce, répétition de ses ouvrages précédents, manque de nouveauté. Donc la créativité et le rôle d'un artiste pionnier détaché de la culture courante et la commercialisation sont contestés. Cet essai explore l'apparition et le développement du drame d'essai chinois ainsi que les ouvrages principaux scéniques de Meng. En affirmant les contributions que Meng Jinghui a apporté au drame d'essai, cet article indique qu'il sera l'avant-garde exceptionnelle du drame d'essai de la Chine.

Mots-Clés: Meng Jinghui, drame d'essai, avant-garde

The name of the Beijing-based stage director Meng Jinghui (孟京輝), for the past fifteen years, has been associated with "avant-garde" theatre in mainland China (generally called Pioneer Theatre in Chinese 先鋒戲劇, also referred to as Experimental Theatre or Small Theatre) and the 40-year-old is considered as one of the most influential figures in China's theatrical circles. Last March, his multimedia musical drama "Amber" (《琥珀》), co-produced by China National Drama Theater and Hong Kong Arts Festival in association with the Singapore Arts Festival, had its premiere at the Grand Theatre in the Hong Kong Cultural Centre and

turned out to be an unexpected hit. In spite of his original intension to explore something new in every new production, Meng Jinghui seemed to disappoint some of his fans. They failed to find anything really new in "Amber" except for the joining of the two acclaimed movie stars, claiming that it was more a continuation rather than a breakthrough, that it was no more than another "Rhinoceros in Love" (《戀愛的犀牛》), which was Meng's first commercial success six years before. Without breakthrough and with its increasing popularity, what is Meng Jinghui doing in this field called Experimental Theatre? Is experimental theatre being

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assimilated into pop culture? Has it been commercialized? And what makes Meng Jinghui a pioneer without excelling himself?

The definition of Experimental Theatre given in Wikipedia is: "...a general term for various movements in Western theatre that began in the 20th century as a reaction against the then-dominant conventions governing the writing and production of drama, and against naturalism in particular. The term has shifted over time as the mainstream theatre world has adopted many forms that were once considered radical. It is used more or less interchangeably with the term avant-garde theatre". According to Henry Zhao (趙毅衡, 2000), Experimental Theatre² is generally defined in the west as non-mainstream, non-box-office-comfortable, non-institutional and not usual. It seems that commercialization and mainstream culture have been the opposite of experimental theatre. From the emergence of Off-Broadway in New York since 1950s, to Off-Off Broadway then Off Off-Off Broadway, we can see the persistent endeavor of Experimental Theatre against officially controlled or commercialized mass culture. However, what is called Experimental Theatre in China, from the very beginning to its sensational success and social impact caused by Meng Jinghui, seems to be a little different.

Unlike experimental theatre in Hong Kong, where it has always been at the cultural margins (for example, the experimental cutting edge maintained by the company 進念甘面體 since founded in 1982), Experimental Theatre in China, started with the Experimental Theatre Movement in early 1980s, was not totally "small theatre". The plays staged during the ten years of the Movement, including Gao Xingjian's (高行健) "Absolute Signal" (《絕對信號》), "Bus stop" (《車站》) etc., were almost all staged by state-run companies with large audiences. Those plays were labeled experimental in the sense that they employed new techniques such as "absence of division into acts or scenes", "theatricism" and anything that had not previously seen. This brought about an unprecedented change in modern Chinese drama by diversifying the simplistic performing mode. The years 1984-1987 saw the peak of the Movement but soon reached its end, mainly due to the fact that it had been contented to enjoy its success and new techniques lost their originality, while political cause acted as a catalyst of its sudden death (Zhao, 2000). Toward the beginning of 1990s, in order to enjoy more freedom of theatrical creation, some enthusiastic leading experimentalist directors like Lin Zhaohua (林兆華) and Mou Sen (牟森) founded their own drama groups and went further in the innovation of

dramatic form and subject matter. However, their too avant-garde plays in the following years met with box-office failure, which might not be the directors' major concern but without which no financial support came for them to carry on.

It is Meng Jinghui, beginning his directing career from 1990 and having directed nearly twenty plays, who has made Experimental Theatre increasingly popular to the Chinese with his continuous efforts. The change especially owes to the success of his "Rhinoceros in Love" and "Amber", both plays works of his playwright wife Liao Yimei (廖一梅). Being staged and restaged about 100 times to sell-out houses, the first 47 small theatre runs of "Rhinoceros in Love" not only returned the investor's capital, but brought a respectable profit; while "Amber", with 9,600 tickets sold, was among the most successful drama in the Hong Kong Arts Festival's 33-year history, second only to the mainstream production by Beijing People's Art Theatre, its signature work "Tea House" which sold 10,000 tickets 18 years before. These facts seem to make Experimental Theatre in China different from that of any other countries in the world.

It seems that there has never been a precise definition of Experimental Theatre in China. Even Meng Jinghui himself found it hard to give an answer. When asked what he and his fellow artists meant by Experimental Theatre, he would honestly reply, "I don't really know! But I know what it isn't. We wanted to create something different, something that didn't exist. So what we're doing is whatever constitutes the opposite of non-experimental drama"³.

This may best explain what experimental theatre he has been doing: breaking the existing theatrical tradition. His earliest productions were mostly adapted from the plays of Theatre of the Absurd, like "Waiting for Godot", "The Balcony", "The Dumb Waiter" and "The Bald Soprano". The 1991 production "Waiting for Godot" was staged in an unforgettable manner: a room painted in white, high windows, a black piano, a white bicycle, the tree in Beckett's play hung upside down from the ceiling fan, burning candles, a corpse in the foreground and further in the background, part of a celebrated surrealist painting. All are exposed in bright light. Meng injected a lot of slang and nursery rhymes from northern China. The inane dialogue between the two ragged tramps turned into delightful though still inane conversation conducted in tones of total assurance, creating, as he said, "a kind of frightening tenderness" and "a gentle sharpness"⁴. The director had Vladimir and Estragon play blindfold games, move the wheels of the bicycle, perform exuberant dances of joy, and finally

² Experimental Theatre takes many names: Avant-Garde Theatre, Small Theatre, Anti-Theatre, Alternative Theatre, and Innovative Theatre etc. However, Experimental Theatre or its variation Theatre Experimentalism is the most commonly used term in the West. (Henry Y. H. Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre*, London: University of London, 2000, pp 2-3)

³ Internet source. Christopher Barden, *Experimental Drama Comes of Age: Meng Jinghui's New Production Plays to Packed Houses*, 1999.

⁴ Meng Jinghui, "Beijing's Experimental Theatre", *China Avant-garde: Counter-currents in Art and Culture*, Hong Kong : Oxford University Press, 1994, p78.

he had Vladimir smash the window panes with a black umbrella, manifesting the uncertainty, angst, helplessness but also the longings of mankind. The unusual visual impact, the explosive power and the originality of the rhythms, the grotesque and surrealist tendencies and poetic expressiveness constitute the most obvious features of the play and his later productions as well. "I Love XXX" (《我愛 XXX》), which was written by himself and was staged in 1995, was a rebellion against conventional authoritative discourse through radical and morbid expressions. From beginning to end, the play contained mere repetitious recitations starting with the phrase "I love...". The disordered juxtaposition of sacred and secular, noble and humble images and motifs is a rejection of authority and domination, a catharsis of individual free will. The play had no storyline, no dramatic tension, no attempt at audience involvement and no characters showing any personality. In 1998, Meng Jinghui brought to stage the most controversial and audience-pleasing production of the last decade: Italian Nobel laureate Dario Fo's "The Accidental Death of an Anarchist" (《一個無政府主義者的意外死亡》), a tragicomedy about police brutality, official corruption, and tyrannical absurdity. Fo's play, modernized and localized, satirized almost every element of contemporary Chinese society worth targeting. It is a satire about human dignity. Rather than the presentation of the play itself, the audience were more appealed by the elements that many of them could relate to, including the references to Chinese issues Meng Jinghui added ---- the lyrics of the often-censored rock star Cui Jian (崔健), Lao She's theater classic "Tea House", and Jiang Qing's (江青) Cultural Revolution "model operas." (革命樣板戲). Together with other plays produced during this period, Meng Jinghui has developed the style that is typical of him: banter, ridicule and satirical parody by poking fun at social sanctimoniousness, solemnity as well as cheap popular culture, commenting at will on community life, social order and artistic conventions. It may well be this non-admonitional but challenging attitude that attracts the audience more than other avant-garde elements in his productions.

From the hard time at the very beginning when they hardly found any audience who could make sense of what they were doing to the staging of Fo's play, Meng Jinghui and his collaborators had created and nurtured a new audience, mostly university graduates aged 25 to 35, who had developed along with them and in turn, as Meng said, nurtured them. If Meng Jinghui had wanted only to express himself in an art-for-art's-sake way, he might, from then on, have found joy in sharing what he does with more people, as he put it, "At first I didn't care; I just wanted to make the plays happen. Later, it became more important for me to have people actually see our plays" (See footnote 2). He realized that if there were too much barriers between the stage presentation and the audience, there could be hardly more to share, not even the play, and in order to share common human

concern with more people, he sometimes needed to present his play in aesthetic ways that were more easily accepted by them without losing himself.

This could be the very motivation of Meng Jinghui when he put on stage "Rhinoceros in Love" in 1999, which told the story in an easier-to-follow way and was reviewed as a return to the realistic theatre. Focusing on the sentiment of love at the end of the century, the play was about a rhinoceros trainer who is in unrequited but undying love, and it featured singing, satire, humor and live guitar strumming. Many lines in the play could be recited by Meng's fans, among which the most noted one: "To forget is the only thing could be done by people. But I've been determined not to forget her". The persisting rhinoceros trainer who would do and give up anything for love moved the theatre-goers and Meng's unique way of presentation impressed them: they had never known that a love play could be done this way. The play has caused a sensation throughout China since its debut. By the following year, it had been staged more than 70 times in small theatres. Then the play has been moved to large theatres not only in Beijing but also in other big cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen. "Rhinoceros in Love" is especially popular among university students. According to Beijing Youth Daily (2004), it had been one of the most frequently restaged plays in universities and colleges, following Cao Yu's "Thunderstorm".

Then came "Amber" which had its successful premier in Hong Kong last year. Like "Rhinoceros in Love", it is a blend of social satire and poetic romance, a modern fable of a woman's pursuit of love and the resurrection of a rogue in a world of false sentiments and forgeries, set in the contemporary China of perplexing social and moral values. After its opening in Hong Kong, "Amber" started its national tours in major mainland cities in the same year and proved to be a sold-out show wherever it traveled.

Is Meng Jinghui, instead of satisfying himself as an artist, trying to satisfy the taste of pop culture? The answer could be "no". The superficial or vulgar mass culture, as a matter of fact, is often target of his relentless satire, which could be seen in "Amber": "Mass culture is a piece of shit". But I do not think that the director would take mass culture as necessarily "a piece of shit". Neither do I think that he has ever equalized mainstream or pop culture with mainstream theatre (which he dreams to make experimental theatre to be⁵), though they could overlap. If mainstream culture can be guided, Meng Jinghui could be the one who, rather than catering to the interest of the masses, has been changing the taste of pop culture.

As regards to commercialization of his plays, Director Meng only sees it true in terms of marketing.

⁵Meng Jinghui, *Experimental Theatre File*. Beijing: Writer Publishing House, 2000. (孟京輝,《先鋒戲劇檔案》,北京:作家出版社,2000。)

He believes that these plays are still experimental in their own right. Indeed, people might mainly come for Meng Jinghui's reputation, for the movie stars they like or just for curiosity, but most would find it a brand-new and worthy theatrical experience. More importantly, commercial success makes it possible for him to do something more experimental, like "Bootleg Faust" (《盗版浮士德》), an adaptation of Goethe's famous work, produced shortly after the nationwide success of "Rhinoceros in Love" and was meant for small theatre performance. If this is what Meng Jinghui keeps doing, I see no reason to blame him for seeking box-office.

However, "Bootleg Faust", a hilarious satire of Chinese pop-culture, does not seem to have power as strong as his earlier experimental productions, resting on the sensory stimulating segments. And this could be a potential crisis for Meng Jinghui, as was pointed out by Mao Junhui (毛俊辉) of Hong Kong Repertory Company. I do not wish going mainstream has blunted Meng Jinghui's ever sharp creativity. I would rather believe this had only been his frazzled period and he would be as fresh and powerful in his future productions, as he once said: first you must reach out for people (going popular), and then when you come back (to experimental theatre), you could have the strength (See note 4).

To be a pioneer is not easy. Meng Jinghui has not been a stranger of controversy, and the more audiences he reaches, the more criticism he puts himself open to. It may not be a bad thing for people to feel that Meng Jinghui is not like a pioneer as before, for this could as well indicate their progress as audience of experimental theatre represented by Meng Jinghui. Breakthroughs may be important to a pioneer, but it may not be realistic to expect a breakthrough in whatever an artist produces. Up till now, Meng Jinghui has formed his own style, which is necessary for a mature artist. Maybe what he needs first of all, rather than breakthroughs, are improvements within what "truly belongs to him".

In spite of whatever disappointments he might have brought, Meng Jinghui deserves the title of pioneer. Pioneer is a kind of spirit, as he once said about Experimental Theatre, "...it means a spirit of courage and perseverance to express oneself in a manner that truly belongs to him". This spirit can even be seen in "Rhinoceros in Love" and "Amber" ---- the persistent pursuit of love regardless of the fear of being hurt, or ridiculed and judged by social norms. Pioneer is also a spirit of trying to be better. This is also where Meng Jinghui is different from other Chinese theatre directors who usually feel they have fulfilled their mission right after the premiere of a production. In a sense, many of his productions have not been finished products in that he and his fellow artists would rehearse even on a daily basis a few hours before each performance, arguing and tinkering in an attempt to make the next performance as better as it can be, as is the case of the most popular "Rhinoceros in Love" and "Amber". Not only scenes and dialogues are reworked, but sound, lighting and backdrop could be modified for better. So basically, if you have seen a production of Meng Jinghui once, you can just as well watch it a second even more times because each time could be a more or less difference experience. When "Amber" had its runs in Shanghai, Meng Jinghui even made the streets his stage.

Theatre is the most communal of art forms, and this may be what Meng Jinghui is doing by going mainstream with his experimental theatre. After all, he is the one who has brought a "remarkable resurgence of spoken drama" in China, as was credited by *The New York Times*. However, China has never had a city of drama like New York, Moscow or Tokyo etc., where theatre-going is a very important part of people's life. If Meng Jinghui could make theatre-going a mainstream culture in China, as he ever dreamed to make experimental theatre the mainstream theatre, he would be the greatest pioneer of Chinese theatre, which is really a long way to go.

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