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# Staging: A Comparative Study of the Chinese Yuan and English Renaissance Theaters

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## Abstract

This article argues that the bare, open stage of the Chinese Yuan and English Renaissance theaters called for similar processes and methods of staging. In both theaters, portable properties such as tables and chairs were handled by stagehands in full view of the audience. Musicians stationed on the stage made some of the sound effects. Combat scenes, supernatural beings and assemblage of the characters at the end of the play made superb spectacles. The spectacles popular in Renaissance England but not seen in Chinese Yuan dynasty were dumb shows

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and splashing of blood, reflecting more cultural than theatrical differences. Both theaters were player-centered in their staging. The players departed with special cues such as a couplet, and they rehearsed without a director in the modern sense of the word. They wore splendid and expensive costumes, disregarding historical accuracy. Other than the clown-villain roles in the Yuan dynasty theater, facial makeup was subdued. These similarities indicate that both theaters aimed to entertain instead of presenting verisimilitude, which is extremely difficult, if not impossible, on the bare, open stage. There were signs, however, showing the Chinese theater moved over time toward a more stylized type of performance, whereas its English counterpart became increasingly realistic.

### Key Words

Chinese Yuan; English Renaissance; staging; portable properties; sound effect; spectacle; combat scenes; supernatural beings; happy ending; bloody scenes; player; entrance and exit; director; costume; facial makeup.

# Staging: A Comparative Study of the Chinese Yuan and English Renaissance Theaters

## Introduction

Theaters of the Chinese Yuan dynasty (from its maturing time around 1264 to its fall in 1368) and the English Renaissance (from the opening of The Theater in 1576 to the closing of all theaters in 1642) are believed by scholars<sup>1</sup> to have many similarities. While some scholars focus on the similarities between their poetic conventions, the most obvious similarity in terms of theater are their bare, open stages surrounded by an audience on at least three sides for mostly daylight performances. We naturally would like to know if this similarity led to similar processes and methods of staging.

My study of staging in these two forms of theater reveals more similarities than differences, yet no records of mutual influences between the two theaters have been identified. The differences are minor and insignificant; however, the similarities are found in the major factors that work together for

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<sup>1</sup> James Jo-yu Liu (*Elizabethan and Yuan: A Brief Comparison of Some Conventions in Poetic Drama*, London: The China Society, 1955) and James I. Crump (*Chinese Theater in the Days of Kublai Khan*, 1980) are examples.

the shaping of a theatrical convention. Although the English Renaissance theatrical convention discontinued when the London theaters reopened in search of realism, we saw examples of its revival in Bertolt Brecht and other modern playwrights in western theater. In contrast, many major aspects of the performance convention of the Chinese Yuan theater were passed down to us and preserved in today's Kunqu 崑曲 and Peking operas. In this essay, I argue that the bare, open stage and other similar theatrical conditions between the Chinese Yuan and English Renaissance theaters led to similar processes and methods of staging. In the course of my argument, I will examine the stages of the two theaters and show how they affected staging methods, including portable properties, sound effects, spectacle, use of players, costume, and makeup. Specific plays will be studied as examples to see how the methods were applied.

## The Stage

In England, even though Inigo Jones, the court architect and designer in Caroline times, designed the most elaborate perspective scenery for the court, it was not used on the common stages, not even the private ones, for reasons of convention and finance.<sup>2</sup> English stages remained bare throughout the Renaissance:

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642* (N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 156 and p. 185.

The bare stage backed with a curtain on which the Tudor moralities and farces were played forms the basis of the Elizabethan staging tradition, and seems to have remained firmly entrenched at all the Stuart playhouses up to the closure...<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese Yuan stage was also devoid of scenery. All the information we have shows the Yuan stage was bare, as is today's Peking opera stage. The Mingying King Temple 明應王廟 wall painting,<sup>4</sup> the only visual document of a Yuan era stage performance, depicts no scenery; only decorated hangings separate the front from the back stage. In "Country Cousin Unfamiliar with the Theater" 莊家不識勾欄,<sup>5</sup> the Country Cousin who visits the theater in town describes the players acting on the stage: "They walked and walked, saying that they were walking to town." No scenery is mentioned; the players

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.185.

<sup>4</sup> The wall painting, dated 1324 and found in the Mingying King Temple at Hongdong County 洪洞縣, Shanxi Province 山西省, reveals a performance or assemblage of a Yuan dynasty theatrical troupe. This painting can be found in many books and the best one is a colored photo picture in Encyclopedia Sinica--Traditional Theater 中國大百科全書：戲曲曲藝 (Beijing: Zhongguo Dabaikequanshu Chubanshe, 1983), colored illustration p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> A piece of "sanqu" (散曲 "song suite") of the late Jin, early Yuan period by Du Shanfu 杜善夫, who was probably born between 1190 and 1197 and who died between 1269 and 1275, according to Professor Zheng Qian 鄭騫 in his Jingwu Congbian 景午叢編 (Taipei: Zhonghua 中華, 1972), Vol. 2, p. 152.

were "saying" they were walking to town. Obviously, speech was used to create the imaginary scenery.

In Lan Caihe (藍采和), a Yuan play that depicts players' lives and activities in the theater, the leading player orders the stage to be prepared for performance by asking his brothers-in-law to hang out the troupe banners (chi p'ai 旗牌), swing the wall and eave drapes (chang-ngo 帳額), the rear curtains (k'ao pei 靠背) and backdrops (shen-cheng 神擘).<sup>6</sup>

The result of such preparation should have created a stage close to that which we can see in the wall painting at the Mingying King Temple.

## Portable Properties

We now know for sure that no scenery was erected on the open stage in the two theaters of our study, but portable properties were clearly employed. Most of the moving and carrying of these properties was done without a curtain to block the audience's view from these activities, which were not part of the performance. We need to study how these properties were moved and carried as well as how these activities affected the performance. In the English list of properties that Henslowe compiled in March 1598, we see some ordinary items such as a rock, a cage, tombs, a scepter, a tree of golden apples, a helmet,

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<sup>6</sup> Crump's translation, p. 53.

a spear, crowns, etc., and also some uncommon ones- a lion skin, a bear skins, a bull head, a lion, a lion heads, and "one great horse with his legs," etc. An additional item, the city of Rome, must have been a considerable property as well.<sup>7</sup> Some of these items were designed for display, but most were portable in the sense that they required "somebody or some bodies" to handle them, if they were not worn or carried on and off the stage by players.<sup>8</sup>

Large properties in particular needed special men to move them around, and certain large properties "had always to be available."<sup>9</sup> The throne could be lowered onto the stage from "heaven" by the flying gear, but it was probably "the only flyable property in the Globe."<sup>10</sup> Other large properties, such as the beds for Volpone, Desdemona and Cleopatra, had to be put out onto the stage. Tables and chairs, "more easily portable than beds,"<sup>11</sup> were often equally revealed in the "discovery space" and then carried onto the stage. The same was true for benches, stools, trees and banquets already set out on a table.<sup>12</sup>

The Yuan stage also made use of a great variety of properties. The small items, called "qi mo" (砌末 believed to be a Mongolian term)<sup>13</sup>, included silver and gold pieces and ingots,

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<sup>7</sup> For a complete list, see Gurr, pp. 171-2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare's Theater* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gurr, p. 175.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 175-6.

<sup>13</sup> Chen Wannai 陳萬勳, *Dramatic History of Yuan, Ming and Qing*

lamps, sacrifices used in religious ceremonies, pieces luggage, a dead dog, etc., according to the stage directions presented in some play scripts.<sup>14</sup> In the Mingying King Temple wall painting, we see three small properties: an official tablet, two circular palace fans, and a knife with a long handle-all of which could be carried on and off the stage by players.

Certain larger props such as a table, some chairs or benches, seem to have been used for every production, much like the conventions of Peking opera today. Larger pieces, again like the Peking opera, had to be mobilized by a stagehand. In his *Chinese Theater in the Days of Kublai Khan*, Professor Crump has a detailed discussion of the uses of tables and benches. He believes that chairs, less versatile than benches, might not have been used.<sup>15</sup> However, I tend to believe that chairs (at least stools) were used for important characters such as emperors or high officials to sit behind the table or on two sides of the table to converse or play chess. Benches are usually longer than the tables used on stage in Peking opera. If we assume that such a convention was also true of the Yuan stage, then to place a bench behind a table for an emperor or a judge might impede the players' mobility or signal a lack of dignity for high officials since the bench would protrude beyond the table.

In Hangong Qiu 漢宮秋 (*Autumn in the Han Palace*), the leading female character, Wang Qiang 王薔, should be sitting on a chair or stool rather than a bench to play her "pi pa" 琵琶

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元明清劇曲史 (Taipei: Dingwen 鼎文, 1980), revised 2nd ed., p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Crump, pp. 63-4.



(the lute) and to do her makeup. This would match the setting of the palace and her status as the emperor's favorite lady. In Act III, when the emperor and Wang Qiang are having their farewell toast, I can not imagine any other staging than having the two players sitting on two chairs or stools on both sides of a table on which wine and wine cups are displayed and served. In a permanent theater such as Lan Caihe's "Liangyuan Peng" 梁園棚, adding two chairs to their list of properties should not have created a problem.

Properties larger than the table, chairs and benches, however, do not seem to have existed on the Yuan stage. The tombs, trees, the throne, beds, the city of Rome, and the monument in *Antony and Cleopatra* (all of which appeared on the English Renaissance stage) were not recorded in any Yuan document or description. A look at today's Peking opera properties will also give us an idea of Yuan properties. Other than the conventional table, chairs and benches, large properties are non-existent. A city wall is a piece of painted cloth on two poles which can be carried onto the stage by two soldiers and extended in front of a bench and a table upon which a general can easily mount. When a character is required to fall asleep or dream, the player sits on the chair and leans on the table to pantomime a sleeping posture. Sometimes we see a player lie on a table or a bench (but still not a bed), which is a design for him/her to exhibit his/her acrobatic skills lying on and getting up from it.

If the well-developed Peking opera keeps this convention for the use of large properties, I believe we can not expect the Yuan stage to have employed fancier properties. In Act II of one famous Yuan play, Tou Ngo Yuan 竇娥冤 (*Injustice Done to Tou*

*Ngo*), the ailing Mother Ts'ai enters and "sits at a table resting her head on her hands."<sup>16</sup> No bed is called for. In Act IV, the official Tou T'ien-chang, in the process of reading criminal reports, yawns and says, "I feel sleepy...Let me rest my head on the table for a while."<sup>17</sup>

The study above shows that both Chinese Yuan and English Renaissance theaters managed the portable props by having stagehands move around in full view of the audience. The troupes and the audience may or may not have liked this type of maneuvers, but the open stage seemed to have dictated such staging methods. Having the stagehands at the performance, the production could not be realistic even if it was desired. Judging from the fact that more realistic staging soon replaced English Renaissance style, we may assume that Londoners were happy to become rid of the "bothersome" stagehands. On the Chinese scene, however, the stagehands are alive and well. In a recent Kunqu production of *The Peony Pavilion* 牡丹亭 at the Lincoln Center in 2000, the stagehands were even directed to interact with the characters! Obviously, the Chinese theater has been more committed to the idea of "play" than its western counterpart and has totally disregarded realism in its presentation of the world. This trend was visible as early as the Yuan dynasty staging, in which, as we see from the discussion above, the players mimed falling asleep by resting their heads on the table, whereas the English Renaissance stage provided a bed.

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<sup>16</sup> Liu Jung-en, trans., *Six Yuan Plays* (N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 131.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

## Sound Effects

In both theaters of the English Renaissance and the Yuan, musicians were employed for all performances. They, with their instruments, naturally became creators of some desired sound effects. In the English Renaissance playhouses, music

... was commonly introduced as song, with or without accompaniment, and the usual musical atmospherics were supplied in the form of a sennet or flourish of trumpets of the kind that heralded the commencement of a play. Drums provided martial music as well as thunder, and accompanied battle scenes in a consort with the trumpets ...<sup>18</sup>

In Yuan theaters, the major task of the musicians was to accompany the singing of leading players, but with the drums, clappers and sometimes even cymbals at hand, the musicians could certainly have helped with combat scenes, much like the English Renaissance drummers who provided martial music. In most combat scenes such as *San Zhan Lu Bu* (三戰呂布 *Three Battles with Lu Bu*), *Zhi Yong Ding Qi* (智勇定齊 *Stabilizing Qi with Wisdom and Courage*), drums are called for in the scripts when combat starts. This imitates very ancient martial custom—drums to advance cymbals (or gongs) to retire.

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<sup>18</sup> Gurr, p.170.

Other sounds are also required by the scripts. A Cockcrow is called for to indicate daybreak in Feng Yulan 馮玉蘭, Hamlet and Macbeth. The honking of geese is heard in Hangong Qiu (*Autumn in the Han Palace*). Wind and thunder are mentioned in numerous other plays. Though we might not know exactly how the sounds were made, we can see that some offstage sounds were certainly required and some onstage ones, too, if the sounds were made by the musicians, who were stationed on stage in both theaters. The Yuan theater musicians were stationed in front of the back curtain and behind the players in full view of the audience.<sup>19</sup> The musicians of the English Renaissance theater appeared in the area "above," looking over the playing area of the stage and facing the audience. Since some of the sounds called for in the scripts were created or imitated by the musicians, they became a part of the performance and the effects would be more artistic than realistic.

## Spectacle

Spectacle was a frequent show device on the English Renaissance and Chinese Yuan stages. It became a common phenomenon mainly because the bare, open stage provided an ideal background for extravagant and colorful shows, or this reasoning can be reversed to say that the pageantry enlivened the

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<sup>19</sup> Liao Ben 廖奔, *Theatrical Artifacts and Customs of Song and Yuan* 宋元戲曲文物與民俗 (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Chubanshe 文化藝術出版社, 1989), pp. 349-51.

bare stage. The spectators' interest in and desire for spectacle may also have helped in its development.

Combat scenes made a good spectacle: having many generals, soldiers, forest outlaws, gallants, etc., confronting one another made for fantastic, eye-appealing shows. Costume and all kinds of weapons were equally impressive.<sup>20</sup> More discussions on costume will follow. Fancy combat skills were exhibited – the English Renaissance sword play was always popular, and the Yuan players could show off their acrobatic virtuosity in combat. Combat scenes usually featured the chase. Players tumbling, jumping on the stage and running in and out of the back stage made exciting moments. These visual presentations were accompanied by lots of shouting and drumming, which certainly added to the wonder and verve of the spectacle.

Deities and supernatural beings made up another occasion for spectacle. Yuan plays, many of which were written for religious and festival celebrations, are full of gods, goddesses, ghosts, demons, dragon kings, Taoist immortals, etc., and "the most colorful and imaginative use of costuming is to be found in the sacred, or semi-sacred, plays."<sup>21</sup> These unusual creatures probably had unusual ways of presenting themselves and their special abilities, though we know little of such details.

In London theaters, deities were made to ascend to and descend from the stage heavens, another kind of spectacle:

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<sup>20</sup> See also Crump, p. 172.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

The earlier plays tended to allow their gods to walk on like any mortal; the first of Shakespeare's gods to fly in was Jupiter on his eagle in *Cymbeline*. Flights were more favored by the boy companies than the adults; they had a weight advantage, of course. The ingenuities of Inigo Jones in the Court spectacles of later years, which allowed boys to fly in not only vertically, but at a slant, may have encouraged imitation in the commercial venues.<sup>22</sup>

Such a spectacular device as flying gear might have been available in the Yuan court; however, commercial venues probably did not have the wherewithal to employ this technology.

The "happy ending" is another "spectacle or tableau of some kind" in "nearly every" Yuan play.<sup>23</sup> Happy ending provides an occasion for a great reunion ("da tuanyuan" 大團圓) in which almost every one of the dramatis personae assembles on stage for a good show. This grand finale of dramatis personae at the end of the show can also be found in most of Shakespeare's comedies – notably *Twelfth Night*, *Cymbeline*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (in two consecutive final scenes, one for courtiers and guildsmen and the last one for the fairies). Even many of Shakespeare's and Yuan plays that conclude without a happy ending also have a similar display of dramatis personae. For instance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the two families get together around the leading roles to mourn their tragic

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<sup>22</sup> Gurr, p. 174.

<sup>23</sup> Crump, p. 173.

deaths. In *Hamlet*, the only important absentees are Ophelia, who has been drowned and buried, and her father who has been killed. Guan Hanqing's 關漢卿 *Ku Cunxiao* (哭存孝 *Lament for Cunxiao*) also exhibits a grand memorial service at the end for the hero. Spectacle is certainly one of the purposes of these assemblies.

Two examples of spectacle on the English Renaissance stage, dumb shows and splashes of blood, do not seem to have been staged in Chinese Yuan. Dumb shows on the English stage

... were affairs of pure spectacle, and employed relatively far more properties than the plays in which they were incorporated. At their simplest they were parades of spectacle, formal processions using all the most gorgeous apparel, with crowns, scepters, torches and swords, in the company's possession ...<sup>24</sup>

Probably because dumb shows were merely "affairs of pure spectacle," by the time Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in 1600, they were already considered out of fashion,<sup>25</sup> an indication that they were short-lived and not particularly popular. Splashes of blood, however, were often called for in English Renaissance plays. Londoners of the time must have been extremely fond of bloody scenes. *The Spanish Tragedy* has many bloody scenes; Lady Macbeth has bloody hands to show; Gloucester's eyes are plucked out on stage in *King Lear*; in *Cymbeline*, a chopped off, bloody head is carried on to the stage and the headless,

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<sup>24</sup> Gurr, p. 174.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

blood-oozing body is stationed at the stage center for quite a long time for Imogen to lament over and smear herself with its blood. In *'Tis A Pity She's a Whore*, Giovanni displays Annabella's heart upon his dagger in the final scene before more stabbing and bleeding end the play. The list goes on and on.

In order to stage the splashing of blood, "...bladders or sponges of vinegar concealed in the armpit and squeezed to produce the resemblance of blood were not unknown."<sup>26</sup> After the splashing, it must have been quite some job to clean the stage. If the companies were not bothered by the extra job, it indicates that these violent plays must have helped business at the box office. One cannot help wondering if the constant executions at the Tower had some impact on Londoners' interest in bloody scenes.

Murders and executions abound in Yuan plays, but exhibition of blood is seldom called for. There is perhaps only one scene in all of the Yuan plays that would require a splashing of blood on the stage in full view of the spectators-Tou Ngo's execution scene, at the end of Act III. Before the execution, Tou Ngo requests a clean mattress for her to stand on and a long strip of thin white silk to be hung from a lance. She claims,

If it is true that I have been unjustly condemned, when  
the sword strikes and my head falls, not one drop of  
my warm blood will be spilled on the ground. The  
blood will flow up into the strip of white silk.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 166.



The Prison Governor grants her wishes. Then the stage direction reads as follows:

The Executioner spreads a mattress and takes a length of white silk and hangs it on a lance.

When she is executed, the script goes as follows:

*The Executioner swings his sword; Tou Ngo falls.*  
Prisoner Governor (*awestruck*): Ah, it is really snowing. Can such a thing be possible! Executioner: Usually when I cut off a head the ground is covered with fresh blood. But the blood of Tou Ngo has all flown up into the strip of white silk. Not a single drop has fallen to the ground. I'd never have believed it!<sup>27</sup>

No stage direction is provided to tell us how Tou Ngo's blood is made to fly up into the strip of white silk or if any blood flies up at all. The script clearly dictates a length of *white* silk before the execution. Therefore, when the executioner proclaims the blood "has all flown up into the strip of white silk," this strip should appear full of blood. If stage realism had been followed, some kind of device like the English players' bladder containing animal blood or red ink must have been employed. After all, this scene provides a great occasion for a display of awesome blood splashes and magic, making for a superb spectacle.

However, occasions for the display of blood in Yuan plays and plays of later eras are so rare that we begin to doubt that

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<sup>27</sup> Liu Jung-en's translation, pp. 142-4.

Yuan players and their spectators cared enough about stage realism to see a piece of white silk actually stained with blood. Perhaps they were content with the statement about the blood flying up the piece of white silk. Perhaps one of the attendants at the execution scene quickly attached a piece of red cloth to the white silk on the lance when Tou Ngo falls at the swing of the executioner's sword-stage realism has never been a serious concern in the history of the Chinese theater. The English Renaissance theater's interest in the splashing of blood indicated its inclination toward realistic presentation and probably reflected some cultural differences between the Chinese and British societies. In terms of displaying spectacle in staging, however, this difference is insignificant.

### Player-Centered Staging

Except for the display of blood, all the other devices of spectacle-combat, the gathering of deities and supernatural beings, the gatherings of the "dramatis personae" at the end, and dumb-shows-actually consist of various assemblages of players. Players are, therefore, the center of attention in both the theaters of our concern. The importance of the player is such as to lead Peter Thomson to state that "the primary aim of Elizabethan staging was to maximize the presence of the actor."<sup>28</sup> The same was also true of Chinese staging.

The players were designers of the bare stage. They maximized their presence by creating the scenery on their own.

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<sup>28</sup> Thomson, p. 45.

With un-localized settings, change of scene was indicated by the movement of the players from one point to another on the stage, by one player departing and another entering, and by having the players point out or describe the locations. Locality signboards were used during early development in Renaissance England, but it was "a cumbersome way of locating scenes."<sup>29</sup> Locality boards or similar devices are never mentioned in documents about Yuan staging; Yuan scripts show that players always announced where they were upon entrance and where they were going at departure.

Departures needed special attention and devices on the open stage, for no curtain could be dropped to indicate a break in the performance. Most exits in English Renaissance drama

... are announced in words before they are carried through in action ... In order to enable the actor to make the turn and take the steps toward the stage door, the dramatist usually provided him with a cue to leave. A concluding couplet was an aural equivalent.<sup>30</sup>

Many Yuan plays also concluded the story with verses chanted by one or all of the players. Many entrances were marked by the chanting of a verse called a "dingchang shi" (定場詩 a poem to fix the scene). Many others concluded by having a "sanchang qu" (散場曲 a song to disperse performance).<sup>31</sup> The

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<sup>29</sup> Gurr, p. 163.

<sup>30</sup> Thomson, p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> Tseng Yong-yi 曾永義 "Yuanren Zaju de Banyan" 元人雜劇的搬演 ("Performance of Yuan Plays"), in his *Zhongguo Gudian*

accompanying verses and/or songs must have been formal gestures that required players to enter and exit with "some sort of measured and stylized movement."<sup>32</sup> I speculate that the concluding couplets in the English Renaissance plays must have been recited in a special, measured way as well, so as to distinguish them from ordinary speech. These concluding couplets or verses as cues for the players' departure from the stage were certainly unrealistic designs to cope with the physicality of the open stage in both theaters.

The English Renaissance players had to move on the stage basically on their own abilities, flexibilities, and resourcefulness because

... there was no time for the prolonged and detailed rehearsals we now take for granted... (and) there was, of course, no director in the modern sense to conduct such rehearsals ... A `plot' hung up backstage would give an outline of entrances, property requirements and cues for sound effects, and the book holder would act as prompter and callboy.<sup>33</sup>

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Wenxue Lunwen Jingxuan Congkan – Xijulei 中國古典文學論文精選叢刊—戲劇類 (*Selected Articles on Classical Chinese Literature-Drama*), (Taipei: Youshi 幼獅, 1980), Vol. 1, pp. 420-4.

<sup>32</sup> Crump, p. 78.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Leggatt, "The Companies and Actors" in J. Leeds Barroll, Alexander Leggatt, Richard Hosley, and Alvin Kernan, eds., *The Revels History of Drama in English*, III, 1576-1613 (London: 1975), pp. 112-3.

No such detailed information about backstage preparation in the Yuan theaters is available. However, we know for sure that, similar to the practice of the English Renaissance theaters, no "director" was available to stage the Yuan plays. The "teachers" of the Yuan players may have functioned as directors of a sort. In *Qinglou Ji* 青樓集 (*A Record of Painted Houses*),<sup>34</sup> some famous players are recorded to have become teachers in their later careers. Wang Ben'er 王奔兒 and Gu Shanshan 顧山山 were players turned teachers. Zhulianxiu 珠簾秀 had at least two famous disciples, Sailianxiu 賽簾秀 and Yanshanxiu 燕山秀. Many player-parents recorded in *Qinglou Ji* must also have taught their own children from early childhood and turned them into famous players. These teachers, I speculate, taught their very small group of students to sing and act, much like the practice of today's Kunqu and Peking operas. They may have been responsible for teaching only one or two leading players, but it is perfectly possible that they gave instruction to the entire troupe while overseeing the performances or rehearsals of their disciples. The lack of a formal "director" in both theaters indicates that players were quite self-reliant and sufficient.

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<sup>34</sup> This is a small volume that records the lives and skills of approximately 117 singer/actresses and thirty odd actors, compiled in 1364 (?) by Xia Tingzhi 夏庭芝 of Yuan dynasty. The volume is collected in *Zhongguo Gudian Xiqu Lunzhu Jicheng* 中國古典戲曲論著集成 (*Collection of Writings on Traditional Chinese Drama*), ed. by Zhongguo Xiqu Yanjiuyuan 中國戲曲研究院 (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiqu Chubanshe, 1982), Vol. II. The English title is Crump's translation.

## Costume

Costume is another important way to emphasize player-centered staging. Vivid costumes magnify the players in front of the backstage curtain on a bare stage. Costumes on the English Renaissance stage were elaborate and impressive. A Swiss visitor "wrote in 1599 that the players were `very expensively and handsomely dressed.'"<sup>35</sup> The impresarios and players spent a lot of money on apparel and "Henslowe had a rule against players leaving the playhouse wearing his apparel."<sup>36</sup> Alleyn, the player, spent "more than a third of Shakespeare's price for a house in Stratford" on a "black velvet cloak with sleeves embroidered all with silver and gold."<sup>37</sup> They were willing to invest in costumes not only because magnificent apparel stood out on a bare stage but also because the spectators were "interested in clothes."<sup>38</sup> The significance of costumes cannot be over emphasized in the English Renaissance theater "in which Lear's descent on Fortune's wheel will be visibly emphasized, not by changes of scenery, but by changes of costume."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Kenneth MacGowan and William Melnitz, *Golden Ages of the Theater* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1959), p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> Gurr, p. 178.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Thomson, p. 36.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

On the equally bare stage of the Yuan, costuming is believed to have been as lavish and expensive as the English Renaissance kind. "What the Chinese stage may have lacked in scenery elaborations they made up for in exuberant garments,"<sup>40</sup> which is exactly a major function of costumes on the English Renaissance stage. The Ming dynasty court edition of the Yuan plays (the Maiwang Guan 脈望館 edition) has a detailed list of the costumes required of all the characters in fifteen plays. Of course, we must be aware of possible Ming additions, but we can also assume that Yuan costumes were not very different from these lists.<sup>41</sup> The lists cite forty-six kinds of headgear, forty-seven kinds of clothes, five kinds of shoes, six kinds of belts, etc., just for the male roles.<sup>42</sup> These lists with their variety give us some idea of how important and elaborate the costumes must have been.

Illustrations of the wall painting at Mingying King Temple are available in many books; nevertheless, a first-hand report<sup>43</sup> is used here as reference. Among the eleven characters on the painting, six are identified as players by scholars. The player to the extreme left wears a piece of headgear, a belted, blue robe

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<sup>40</sup> Crump, p. 171.

<sup>41</sup> Tseng Yong-yi, p. 406. See also Liao Ben 廖奔 and Liu Yanjun 劉彥君, *Developmental History of Traditional Chinese Theater 中國戲曲發展史* 4 Vols., (Taiyuan 太原: Shanxi Education 山西教育出版社, 2000), Vol. II, pp. 108-112.

<sup>42</sup> Chen Wan-nai, p. 224.

<sup>43</sup> Liu Nianzi 劉念茲, *Xiqu Wenwu Congkao 戲曲文物叢考 (Researches on Drama and Cultural Products)*. (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 1986), pp. 60-1.

with a round neckline, narrow sleeves and embroidery of three golden dragons on the chest and both arms. The second from the left in the front row wears a black hat, a robe in yellow background with loud, floral designs of red and blue, and round-toed, yellow shoes. The player in the center wears a headgear with extended wings, a red robe with wide sleeves, and black boots. The fourth from the left in the front row wears a hat, a short, blue robe with red floral designs and light green trim, a rope-like belt, and black boots. The fifth wears a piece of headgear, a belted, yellow robe with a round neckline, narrow sleeves and an embroidery of four white cranes on the shoulders, chest and abdomen, and black boots. The last one, on the extreme right in the second row, does not wear a hat or a piece of headgear but wears a small, white flower in her hair, yellow inner shirt, and a light green outer robe with narrow sleeves.

These illustrations are rich enough to reveal the variety of the Yuan costumes-the types of headgear, robes, embroidery, shoes and boots in all colors. But these were not the most fancifully costumed players, not even the deities mentioned earlier wore the most colorful and imaginative costumes. The most striking costumes on stage in Peking opera are worn by generals, and we have textual evidence to indicate that the costuming of Yuan theatrical generals was equally impressive. The general's costume of Peking opera is topped by a large headgear with two pheasant feathers, each six or seven feet long, leaning backward and slightly to the sides. The shining military garment is often equipped with several (usually four) small flags above the back shoulder. The pheasant tail and flags together make the slightest movement of the player's head a great visual display that spectators cannot miss. A general's costume of the



Yuan theater, together with his weapon and horse, is described in elaborate and fanciful detail in *Qi Ying Bu* (氣英布 *Infuriating Ying Bu*) in Act IV. A practical realization of this general's costume would not be very different from the general's costume of Peking opera in terms of style and degree of magnificence.

These magnificent costumes are, of course, very expensive and had to be well taken care of. The general's costume of the Peking opera

... is a masterpiece of the tailors' and trimmers' arts, costs a fortune, is a treasure of the troupe, and incidentally served to keep the troupe's repertory stable — no investment that large was liable to be used for only one season, let alone one play.<sup>44</sup>

The same things can be said of Yuan costuming. In *Lan Caihe*, the leading character meets his old troupe after thirty years of separation. The troupe members try to persuade him back to the stage, saying, "Brother, all the costumes you wore for the plays are still kept unharmed."<sup>45</sup> Keeping the costumes for thirty years says a great deal about the preciousness of the costumes for a troupe.

Since many of the costumes in both English Renaissance and Chinese Yuan theaters were so very elaborate and expensive, those who commissioned them could not afford to pay for historical accuracy. Thus, we can expect the same magnificent

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<sup>44</sup> Crump, p. 171.

<sup>45</sup> Crump's translation, p. 59.

military costume appeared in plays of widely differing historical backgrounds. This convention is still being followed by today's Peking opera; there is no reason to expect the earlier performances to have done a better job in this respect.

For the costuming of English Renaissance performances, Henry Pencham's drawing of a scene from *Titus Andronicus*, the earliest visual evidence made in ca. 1595, indicates that the costumes were lavish, but "a mixture of Roman and Elizabethan."<sup>46</sup> Again, realism is sacrificed. Elaborateness of costumes and financial concerns were placed on a higher scale of importance than accuracy of presentation in both theater.

## Facial Makeup

The Yuan players' facial makeup was rather subdued and simple compared with that of today's Peking opera. Heavier makeup was applied to the "jing" 淨 roles of clown-villains-black ink and white powder for the male, and black, white and rouge for the female. On the wall painting of the Mingying King Temple, the player that looks like a clown-villain has two white circles around his eyes and darkly painted eyebrows, plus black whiskers which were probably added on rather than painted. In "Country Cousin," the clown's "whole face was limed an ashy white/With some black streaks on top of that."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Thomson, p. 115. See also Gurr, p. 182.

<sup>47</sup> Crump's translation, p. 61.

In a play named *Wu Yuan Chui Xiao* (伍員吹簫 *Wu Yuan Plays the Xiao-flute*), the clown claims, "I don't run a powder shop, but why we father and son both have a painted face?" In another play, *Kuhan Ting* (酷寒亭 *Bitter Cold Pavilion*), the leading male character criticizes a courtesan in a role called "cha dan" (搽旦 "painted female," a female clown-villain): "The powders that you applied to yourself--green, purple, white and black--have turned you into a multi-colored, gaudy ghost!"<sup>48</sup> The "purple" color might have been an exaggeration or variation of the rouge.

Yuan players of other roles do not seem to have painted their faces. The wall painting reveals several players wearing different kinds of artificial beards--for the female players to personify male roles and for the younger players to take up older roles, we presume. The documents available to us point out that the intricate, bold and sometimes highly symbolic facial makeup that we see in today's Kunqu and Peking operas was not present on the Yuan stage.

Facial makeup never seemed an issue for the English Renaissance players. Only special occasions and needs called for special makeup:

Mad women, such as Cassandra in *Troilus and Cressida* or Queen Elizabeth in *Richard III*, wore long-haired wigs, a fairly realistic symbol of their condition ... considerable efforts were made on occasions to simulate dark skin and curly hair. Face masks and elbow gloves of velvet, and black leather

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<sup>48</sup> My translation.

leggings were topped with 'Corled hed Sculles of  
blacke Laune' in early Court performances. Paint  
superseded masks in the seventeenth century on the  
initiative of Queen Anne herself, who appeared with  
eleven of her ladies in blackface for the *Masque of  
Blackness* in 1605 ...<sup>49</sup>

Masks were also used by the Yuan players, but Crump believes that "there is good evidence that Yuan drama used masks strictly for the roles of deities."<sup>50</sup> It seems clear from the passage quoted above that masks and paint were used by English Renaissance players to present black characters only—a realistic attempt. The English Court had done something spectacular for their masques, but the players did not carry such spectacle into commercial theaters. The only painted faces that theatergoers could see at the Globe would be those of players presenting characters such as Othello, a dark-skinned Moor. Bottom, Dogberry, Feste and Lear's Fool probably did not appear on the English Renaissance stage with faces painted like today's circus clowns or Yuan's clown-villains. These differences in facial makeup are minor, compared with the major similarities in the use of elaborate costumes in the two theaters of our study.

## Conclusion

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<sup>49</sup> Gurr, p. 183.

<sup>50</sup> Crump, p. 169.

From the above study of Chinese Yuan and English Renaissance theaters, we can see that stagehands in both theaters stagehands were busy moving props around in full view of the audience; musicians not only played music and accompanied singing but also created sound effects in front of the audience; players wore colorful and magnificent costumes, regardless of historical accuracy, to become center of attention, especially in combat scenes. When we read the scripts now, we understand that announcement of location by the characters themselves may seem unnatural, but it served both theaters well as a solution to the problems of locality that a bare stage presents. We also understand that for most of the characters to assemble at the end of many plays may look unrealistic when viewed from today's perspective, but it had its own conventional values. All these similar staging activities were solutions people in 13<sup>th</sup> century China and 16<sup>th</sup> century England found in order to present their plays on open, bare stages.

Differences were also found. The English Renaissance theater made use of large pieces of portable props such as a city, monument, or bed, which were never called for in Yuan plays. This difference required the Yuan players to do more mimetic actions than their English counterpart. The English theater's ample splashes of blood, which were not seen on the Yuan stage, marked another difference, which might indicate that the Yuan theater cared less about stage realism. These differences revealed signs pointing toward later developments in the history of the two theaters-the Chinese theater became more stylized in performance, whereas the post-English Renaissance theater evolved into more realistic presentations. However, the differences had little to do with the governing principles of

staging. In comparison, the similarities were much more significant, showing that the staging processes and methods undertaken by personnel and players of both theaters were coping with their theatrical conditions and preparing a theater for entertainment. Realism was out of reach for a bare, open stage would not allow it. And they made the best use of an open stage to create the maximum amount of wonder.

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