

## Reflections of Chinese Theatre in Thornton Wilder's Play

LIU Ya<sup>[a],[b]</sup>, YANG Min<sup>[c],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Ph.D. Candidate in Department of Art, Wuhan University, Wuhan, China.

<sup>[b]</sup>Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Chinese Medicine, Wuhan, China.

<sup>[c]</sup>Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Chinese Medicine, Wuhan, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

In Thornton Wilder's stage techniques, his freehand of time and space on the stage greatly stimulates audience's imagination. The bareness stage; the use of pantomime or sign language; the vast expanse of life and the innovative use of the Stage Manager emancipate the restrictions of the traditional western box set, breaking down the so-called "fourth wall" between the audience and the actors. It seems difficult to judge exactly whether Chinese theatre affecting Wilder or not, but they are indeed close relative. But it is also arbitrary if takes the Chinese theatre as the main source of influence. In fact, the interplay of these diverse aesthetic modes in Wilder's drama not only helps to create the dramatist's unique "world theatre" idiom but also gives his plays a broader, more balanced appeal.

**Key words:** Thornton Wilder; Chinese theatre; Reflection

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### LITERARY ANALYSIS

Thornton Wilder is one of the most well-known American playwright and novelist of the twentieth century. He won three Pulitzer Prizes—for the novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and the two plays *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. He was concerned with the affirmation of human values and the questioning of certain ideologies and attitudes. In his own explanations or analyses of his dramatic work, Wilder most often links it with the great classical or traditional theatres of both the Orient and the Occident rather with the theories or practices of any of the movements or playwrights examined thus far.

Many critics have already remarked on the numerous remarkable parallels Wilder's drama exhibits with the traditional Chinese theatre such as Beijing Opera. *Our Town*, in particular, has been regularly associated with the Beijing Opera. There are some features of the play, such as the use of pantomime, which might be considered "Chinese" or quasi-Chinese as well. Wilder's interest in pantomime was apparently influenced by Beijing Opera master Mei Lan-fang, for Wilder had witnessed Mei's performance in New York in 1930. While writing *Our Town*, he even explicitly described the play as "utilizing the technique of Chinese drama". In 1938, *Our Town* won the Pulitzer Prize; the play "with the most engulfing simplicity, presents the growing up and growing down that is everyone's life and, though laid in a New Hampshire village has the human heart as its real setting" (Brown, 1963, p.60). There are many creations in this play: the Stage Manager, playing multiple roles that exists both in the world of the audience and the world of the play, thus breaking down the so-called "fourth wall" between the audience and the actors; the scenic minimalism with simple properties in the bareness stage; the use of pantomime or sign language; the vast expanse of life, and so on. The stage devices employed by Wilder in this play include the whole world and hence although the play

begins and ends in Grover's Corners. New Hampshire, the audience understands clearly that the emphasis is on things which range far beyond the village boundaries. Wilder begins at Grover's Corners, and from there, proceeds to include and involve all creation. By avoiding scenery and all loud theatrical paraphernalia from the very beginning, he suggests clearly that the meaning of his play relates to several other things—other than those visible at Grover's Corners. In Wilder's play, the spectator is made to lift his imagination beyond the "fourth walls" of the theatre and then interpret the play accordingly. This open-ended quality of this play, constitutes its appeal. Writing to Gertrude Stein in 1937 Wilder said that *Our Town* is a "little play with all the big subjects in it: And it's a big play with all the little things of life lovingly impressed into it." (Harrison, 1983, p.177)

The stage and the literary techniques of the play are the foundations of the edifice that is *Our Town*. The deceptively bare stage; the seemingly bare plot; characters which are symbols; the use of pantomime; the role of the Stage Manager; the narrative technique; the ordinary everyday dialogue, the startling expressionistic device of juxtaposing time segments—all foreground the haphazard pattern of life as experienced by all of us. The audience that arrived at the theatre on the first performance of *Our Town* found themselves facing a curtainless, bare, empty stage in half light. This bare stage had an immediate impact on the minds of the spectators, conditioning them from the very beginning that they would be witnessing a portrayal of the eternal human experience, being presented through a couple of family albums. They understood very well, that whatever was happening on stage would be an expression, in very general terms, of whatever happened on the terrains of life. Just as life is bare, except for the various experiences and events which fill in the gaps so also, Wilder's bare stage. It speaks eloquently in an aesthetically gratifying way. The deliberate laying bare of the stage is a technique in itself. This technique is similar to the theatrical technique in Beijing Opera. Compared to the western theatre, Chinese theatre is more open. Gao Qihua wrote in *Chinese Stage*: "Chinese theatre stage, is basically an empty stage, there are no any background and props on the stage, besides one side as the background, the other three sides are surrounded by the audience." (Gao, 1996, p.63) So in relationship between performance and audience, Chinese theatre has the characteristics of positive warm theatrical and participative. "There is no fourth wall in Chinese theatre, theatrical is the resonance of the diffuse among participants, a mass of aesthetic experience between the audience and the participants." (Tang, 1999) A main purpose of theatrical is to get through the boundaries between the stage and audience, reducing the distance between actors and audience. Chinese theatre especially focus on the actor's performance on the spot, the actors on stage should always pay attention

to the existence of the audience as well as their reaction. Each action by actors is made for the audience. There is sensitivity between the audience and the actors on the stage, and the audience is clear when to keep silent when to be cheerful. This is quite different with the Western theatre's "fourth wall" in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Obviously, Wilder noticed the audience's participation in the theatrical activity and tried to explore it. The beginning of *Our Town* is as this: "No curtain. No scenery. The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light." (Wilder, 2007) On the stage setting adjustment in Act II of *Our Town*, Wilder rearranges the stage props without putting down the curtain, which is also consistent with Chinese theatre. In Beijing Opera, the artists rarely put down the curtain, but readjust stage props on the stage to show the change of scenery.

Another very important and brilliant stage technique of Wilder is the role of the Stage Manager. The scorn of verisimilitude prompted Wilder to entrust the responsibility of the smooth movement of the play to the Stage Manager. The role of the Stage Manager is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. The role of the Stage Manager is very much similar to that of *Fu Mo* and property man in Chinese theatre. In Beijing Opera, *Fu Mo* is usually an old man, telling the audience the plot in the open of the play. He also performs as minor characters as plot develops. The role of the Stage Manager is just as the role of *Fu Mo*. At the very beginning of the play, he immediately names the author, director and chief actors of the play, making it clear that the play is fiction and not reality. He says: "This play is called *Our Town*. It was written by Thornton Wilder; produced and directed by A...In it you will see Miss C...; Miss D...; and many others." (Ibid., p.149) His role is vital. Much depends on how he delivers his lines. Wilder's Stage Manager wins over the trust and confidence of the spectators through friendly discussions and informal chats. He becomes a friend and feels one with the audience and his talk conditions the audience to feel one with him. He even acts some of the minor roles himself, such as Mr. Morgan, the owner of the town drugstore; Mrs Forrester, an old lady; and the minister at the wedding, participating in the performance. Then all move together on the journey through life, we feel ourselves believing in the gossip regarding the people of *Our Town* as we imagine ourselves in similar situations. Traditionally, when there is a change of acts in Beijing Opera, a group of men called stage checkers would change the settings. Wearing long gowns but no facial expression, they would come onto the stage after an act is over, reshuffle the table and chairs, indicating a change of place and time, and leave the stage in silence. Sometimes they would produce some stage effect (Zhou, 2012). Based on the function of a stage checker in Beijing Opera, the western dramatists give the stage checker another name: property man. The use

of visible property man in virtually every Chinese style play in America sprang from the popularity of the *Yellow Jacket* in 1912, the first American play done in a total Chinese manner. And Wilder made his Stage Manager the property man in *Our Town*. Sometimes like the property man in Chinese theater. At the beginning of the play, the audience see the Stage Manager placing a few properties like table, chairs on the stage, "Presently the STGE MANAGER, hat on and pipe in mouth, enters and begins placing a table and three chairs downstage left, and a table and three chairs downstage right. He also places a low bench at the corner of what will be the Webb house, left." (Ibid.) Sometimes he becomes the mouthpiece of the dramatist philosophizing convincingly on the ignorance and blindness of human existence. Sometimes he becomes an independent, individual spectator viewing the presentation of life on stage. He set each scene and also points to the existence of non-existent properties, which the audience are asked to imagine. Some critics called the Stage Manager as a "vocal Chinese property man", but there are also some differences between them. The difference lies in the respective functions of the Stage Manager and the property man. The property man essentially "disappears" while he is on stage, the audience being only marginally aware of his presence. His task is to assist with the mechanical aspects of the performance, efficiently and, above all, unobtrusively. Although the Stage Manager in *Our Town* does periodically rearrange the furniture on the stage, he is meant to be anything but an invisible, self-effacing assistant to the other performance. He not only serves as chorus and bit player, but he also determines the pacing and overall shape of the performance, responsible beyond those assigned to the Chinese property man. In fact, Wilder combines the *Fu Mo* and property man together as the Stage Manager in his *Our Town*.

All the same, it is only in certain limited, if important, respects that Wilder's theatre resembles traditional Beijing Opera. These respects all have to do with scenic minimalism or symbolism. In the first place, the Chinese stage, which is devoid of nearly all scenery and properties, is emphatically anti-illusionistic. Objects are frequently conjured up entirely through pantomime, as they are in Wilder's plays. For example, a common technique of the Chinese actor is to suggest, solely through pantomime, that he is in a boat on a river. A chariot in Beijing Opera is suggested by a pair of flags with wheels painted on them, borne by two supposedly invisible stage assistants, between whom the actor playing the character riding in the "chariot" walks. Wilder's technique of representing vehicular travel in his play is close to both these Chinese practices. Finally, in order to show that he is entering a room, the Chinese actor will perform a gesture imitating the drawing back of a bolt and will then move forward, as he step over the (imaginary) high threshold that was

a feature of all Chinese houses in former times (Chen, 1951, p.39). Obviously, any character in *Our Town* who passes through the doors to the Gibbs or Webb kitchens—as George does in Act II, for instance—must perform a similar sequence of pantomimic movements. Wilder also admitted that the device of the two portals representing "birth" stage right and "death" stage left in *The Long Christmas Dinner* was derived from Chinese theatrical conversions. Actually, the only convention of the Chinese stage that could have suggested the device to Wilder is the invariable presence of two doorways, one on the right side and another on the left, in the upstage wall in Chinese theatres. These doorways are known as "Spirit Doors" in Chinese theatre, and entrances are generally made through the right stage, exits on the left stage. Although the portals in *The Long Christmas Dinner* correspond closely in their placement to these "spirit doors", Wilder goes beyond Chinese practice in assigning the symbolic meaning to them.

Derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*, the classical unities, or three unities are rules for western traditional theatre, constitutes the dominated time-space, pursuing the unity of plot, time and place Aristotle thought tragedy as an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude. The imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. The stage is a relatively closed space, reflecting the section of life in different scenarios. In other words, the duration of the plot development is equivalent to the watching time of the audience. But in Chinese theatre, what performs on stage is the reflection of the essence of life, not superficial imitation. Theater actors are free to abstract visual things and visualize invisible things, their freedom in presenting time and space on stage is limitless. Wilder's drama is never constrained by three unities. His time, place and plot (though often considered no plot), is not focusing on the narrative element of one thing. The stage time sometimes is consistent with the history, but in most cases has deviated. In *Our Town*, when the Stage Manger's first introduction of Mrs. Gibbs makes the audience quite surprised "Mrs. Gibbs died first—long time ago, in fact. She went out to visit her daughter, Rebecca, who married an insurance man in Canton, Ohio, and died there —pneumonia—but her body was brought back here." (Wilder, 2007, p.151) When the newspaper boy Joe goes off the stage, the Stage Manager's foretelling also arouses audience thinking "Want to tell you something about that boy Joe Crowell there. Joe was awful bright—graduated from high school here, head of his class. So he got a scholarship to Massachusetts Tech...But the war broke out and he died in France. —All the education for

nothing.” (Ibid., p.153) This kind of time arrangement is not only a simple flashbacks, but standing on the characters’ future and the audience’s past. The whole play stretches over twelve years—Act I took place in 1901, Act II in 1904, and Act III in 1913. In *Our Town*, the Stage Manager sets the time, and he manipulates it freely. Time is reversed as the past comes after the present and the past become “now” on the stage, or even co-exist throughout the play. In Act III, the dead Emily talks with the Stage Manager, and the flashback enables her to both relive her twelfth birthday and observe herself living at the same time. Wilder lets the audience to sense daily life from the external perspective, enjoying the beauty of life. Such a historical time deviation model improves the ordinary life, giving the eternal meaning.

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## SUMMARY

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In fact, when Wilder was a child, he lived in China for a time and attended missionary school there, he claimed never to have seen a performance of Chinese opera. However, he seems early in his career to have acquired a rudimentary familiarity with Chinese theatrical conventions, whether from having seen Mei or from books and conversations. His familiarity is evident not only in his transformation of the “Spirit Doors” into the portals of birth and death in *The Long Christmas Dinner*, but also in several references in his essays to the Chinese convention of having an actor indicate he is on horseback by carrying a stylized whip. Although in one essay his description of the convention is inaccurate, indicating an imperfect knowledge of Chinese theatre at that stage of

his career, the reference itself is sufficient testimony to an interest in Chinese staging methods on Wilder’s part and a recognition of the similarity of those methods to his own. With these various inferences, it seems difficult to judge exactly whether Chinese theatre affecting Wilder or not, but they are indeed close relatives. His denying of Chinese theatre’s influence seems to some extent absolutely, he has seen Mei’s performance after all, which exerts a subtle influence on his minds. But it is also arbitrary if takes the Chinese theatre as the main source of influence. In fact, the interplay of these diverse aesthetic modes in Wilder’s drama not only helps to create the dramatist’s unique “world theatre” idiom but also gives his plays a broader, more balanced appeal.

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