



# “Su Shi and Henan”: Exploration and Practice of Contemporary Little Theater Drama

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DOI: 10.32629/asc.v5i5.3091

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**Abstract:** As an imported form from the West, the development of “Little Theater” in China is also drawing lessons from the development concept of drama art in the world, so as to clarify the development direction and future of little theater drama in China. *Su Shi and Henan*, a 30-minute drama tells the origin of Su Shi and Henan from a brand-new perspective, mainly employing the stage assumption, which can be regarded as a successful practice in expression historical figures, especially in contemporary Little Theater.

**Keywords:** Su Shi and Henan; Su Shi; little theater drama; stage assumption

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## 1. Introduction

In the never-ending drama art, “Little Theater Drama” has the characteristics of low cost, low risk, wit and flexibility, and its vitality may be longer and more vigorous than the traditional big theater.[1]“Little Theater” first appeared at the end of the 19th century. The “Freedom Theater” was founded by André Antoine(1858-1943), a famous French director and dramatist. He rented a small wooden theater with only 350 seats to realize his dream of performing a new play. Since then, the “Experimental Theater” has been of great importance alongside commercial drama in the world.

From 1907, the performance of “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*”(《黑奴吁天录》) by the student studying in Japan, to “Amateur” in the 1920s, all of them were inspired by the European experimental theater movement, which was completely consistent with the European and American drama innovation movement led by Antoine in spirit, that is, opposing the mainstream commercial drama. Lin Zhaohua is honored as “the evergreen tree of exploring drama”[2]. In 1982, his “*Absolute Signal*”(《绝对信号》) revolutionized the traditional view of drama, broke the rigid form of stage performance, broke away from the inherent constraints of creative norms, and started the creative practice of “Little Theater Drama”. In 1999, “*Rhinoceros in Love*”(《恋爱的犀牛》), rehearsed by Meng Jinghui, also triggered a new trend of urban aesthetics, maintaining the interaction and experience with the audience as the main body. The national little theater drama exhibition in 2013 and 2017 also made little theatre drama more active in the audience’s field of vision. These dramas have different themes, rich contents and unique styles, which reflect the artistic interpretation and aesthetic value of the development of little theater drama creation in the 21st century.

## 2. The Brief Development of Dramas about Su shi

Su Shi (苏轼), a literary leader in the Northern Song Dynasty, has made great achievements in poetry, ci (词), writing, calligraphy and painting, etc. His poetics, artistic value of calligraphy and painting, philosophical thinking, and interpretation of life experience and spiritual world are the core themes of the study. The research on Su Shi covers a variety of media, and playwrights of past dynasties have never stopped exploring Su Shi. There are more than 30 kinds of dramas involving Su Shi in Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, and there are 19 kinds in existence. From Yuan Zaju (元杂剧) to Ming and Qing Zaju (明清杂剧), legends (传奇) include Su Shi’s story themes such as official career, interpersonal relationship and legendary acting. Dongpo Drama, referres as dramas about Su Shi, takes Su Shi’s life experience as the theme, is an important source for contemporary people to understand opera creation and Su Shi. Drama performance has the characteristics of the times, and drama education should integrate traditional ideas and modern elements. Make the form of drama performance more in line with modern people’s artistic aesthetic preference.[3] In recent years, there have been many kinds of dramas with Su Shi as the theme, such as musical poetic drama, dance drama, and Sichuan opera, etc. Playwrights in a new era, can interpret and reconstruct Su Shi from many angles, thus inheriting and developing Dongpo Drama. This paper analyzes the exploration and practice of “Dongpo Drama” on the stage of contemporary little theater.

### 3. The Analysis of Stage Assumption in *Su Shi and Henan*

*Sushi And Henan* is a new drama launched by “Only Henan Drama Fantasy City”, which is the first panoramic immersive drama theme park in China, located in Zhengzhou City, China. It mainly takes the immersive drama art as the means and the unique drama “Fantasy City” as the carrier, emphasizing the design concept of “big chessboard”. As the chief director and screenwriter, Wang Chaoge, with her love for this land of Henan and admiration for heroes and historical figures buried under the land of Henan, recreates history on the stage of drama by using modern technology. *Su Shi and Henan* (hereinafter referred to as *Su*), as a little theater drama with a 360-degree panoramic stage, is a perfect practice for a “little theater” to interpret the “biggie”. This paper discusses the drama from the perspective of stage assumption. Whether it is a traditional opera or a modern drama, the assumption makes it possible to change the stage time and space in the plot.[4]

Little theater abandons the production mode of the big theater, constructs a new relationship between viewing and performance, and attaches importance to the direct communication between actors and audiences.[5] The stage plot and the relationship between characters in *Su Shi* are very simple. “*Su*” begins with a dialogue self-proclaimed “Only Henan Drama Fantasy City”, with *Su Shi*, asking the question: “Why are you buried in Henan?” The lights are on, and *Su Shi* and the fictional character “Changshou” (长寿, *Su Shi*’s extremely boy attendant at school) perform on the stage. There are only two actors in the whole drama, and the plot setting is simple. From the beginning of *Su Shi*’s entrance to Bianjing to the end of his death, *Su Shi*’s turbulent life in officialdom and his origin in Henan are told in just 30 minutes. Changshou follows *Su Shi* on the stage, like modern people following and studying *Su Shi*.

The whole drama takes *Su Shi*’s promotion and demotion as the main narrative context, which embodies *Su Shi* and Changshou’s running around on the road and creating poems, leaving aside *Su Shi*’s wife, family and other specific events and emotions in the officialdom. The actors have delicate expressions and full movements, and the staggered stage is like a path. The audience is scattered everywhere, freehand brushwork and realism are combined. The scenery shows the change of scenery, accompanied by sounds to indicate the weather change. Other props, such as lychee, quilt and table, are placed on the stage in advance. On the same stage, the scene is quickly switched, and the two people are everywhere, and the lights are gathered. The traditional footlights of the framed stage always separate the stage from the audience. Although there is emotional communication between them, the distance of physical space also causes psychological distance, and the relationship between the performance and the audience is relatively fixed. Little drama theater minimize the distance, only the stage where the audience is concentrated.

*Su Shi* was demoted, and the sound of thunder and rain sounded on the stage. “Changshou, Sir, it’s raining, hurry up. *Su Shi*: Slow down. Changshou, Hurry up. Changshou, Slow down.” When the rain stopped, *Su Shi* began to write a poem and Changshou made the action of killing insects on the side, skillfully completing the transformation of time and space. “In 1085, Emperor Song Shenzong died, Empress Dowager Gao took control of the state affairs, and *Su Shi* was recalled to Bianjing, and his official position was promoted.” *Su Shi*’s word “go” represents returning to Bianjing. “However, nine years later, Emperor Zhezong died, and the Empress Dowager Gao took charge of the government, and you were banished from Bianjing.” Two lines of dialogue, time is fast flowing.

On the curtain, the reprimand started, the lights changed, the actors strode on the stage with crutches, accompanied by the lines “hurry up, slow down”, the second reprimand came from the curtain, the actors stopped, the music sounded, the third reprimand came, and the actors stopped again. At the same time, the actor *Su Shi* showed an old state, his back was bent, his voice was hoarse, and the actors stopped.

Changshou, We haven’t arrived in Yingzhou yet? The decree ordered us to go to Huizhou again!

*Su Shi*, Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Changshou, This is to force us to die and demote us to Huizhou.

*Su*, Chang, It’s getting farther and farther away from Henan, and it’s getting farther and farther away.

The dialogue between *Su Shi* and Changshou indicates that *Su Shi* received the demotion order on the road, and the performance time is only a few minutes, but the time span of the event is many years, and the transformation of space and the passage of time all happened in the transformation of lights, movements and lines. Actors rush on the stage, striding on the empty stage, looking back at these virtual actions in a fixed frame, suggesting the existence and transformation of specific space. Freeze-frame shots can pause the lost time and the transformed time and space.

The highlight of “*Su*” lies not only in the thinking and excavation behind *Su Shi*’s “open-mindedness”, but also in the interpretation of his stage art space, *Su Shi*’s poetry culture and the hypothetical multi-time narration on the stage and the practice of combining reality with reality. The whole drama *Su* uses a lot of stage assumptions. In just 30 minutes, *Su Shi*’s ups and downs of the official sea are naturally related to time and space, and the span expression and deduction in time and space are carried out. In the time dimension, the time of the plot changes with the voice-over. As *Su Shi* is old, the

actor quickly completes the transformation to the old Su Shi on the stage. It is not limited to the real and objective time, but measured by the time that the audience and actors bring into the plot. At the same time, the stage hypothesis can be extended indefinitely in expressing the rich hearts of the characters. In space, assumption creates a new space through the rapid transformation of time and space and the comprehensive use of lighting gathering places, that is, where Su Shi is deep.

“Su” doesn’t end with Su Shi’s death. After Changshou put on modern costume monologue, it reflects the dialogue across time and space. Su Shi appeared in white with wings, and modern people danced with Su Shi with red wings.

#### 4. Conclusion

The director creatively handles the theater space and uses expressive artistic vocabulary beyond the stage setting to make the theater space dynamic, let the audience enter the theater space, and let the audience advance from the overall theme of the drama to the assumed time and space, that is, Su Shi’s era and the place where he was displaced. When the lights are on, Su Shi and the fictional character, Changshou, go to Bianjing to take the exam, and a beam of lights shines on the actors. Their actions and lines “Hurry up, slow down. hurry up, slow down” constitute a new hypothetical time and space, from which audience can appreciate the tension of freedom and emotional expression. Educator Mr. Xu Xiaozhong said, “Thinking character is the inherent character of drama art”.[6] (P111) Besides, the audience’s attention and thinking are naturally attracted by the drama.

Su Shi, as people know from his poems, is free and easy, optimistic, broad-minded and careless. Inherent cognition, when Su Shi was demoted again and again, he became farther and farther away, and he was more helpless, powerless, disappointed and unwilling. This drama, whether it is the script or the interpretation of the actors, whether it is the experience of watching the drama or the beauty of the dance, has impressed the audience.

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