

"New" Landscapes in the New Era on the Artistic Exploration of Small Theater Drama—"Star River Hotel"

Peifeng Wang*

School of Arts, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

**Corresponding author: 1287447353@qq.com*

Keywords: New era drama, Grand narrative, Music narrative, Star River Hotel

Abstract: Small theater dramas' subjectivity and rebelliousness might guide complicated semantics into an open correlation in the real creation. This paper investigates the innovation and integration that new-age theatrical creations can make to be more responsive to the market and to break the current status quo of the lack of theatrical creativity and operation power. The paper does this by researching and analyzing the narrative style, music design, and the application of unfamiliar effects in the original musical "Star River Hotel".

1. Introduction

People's lives are overflowing with literary works in various media at a time when the theater industry is slightly weaker and information development is more diverse. The traditional art of theater has been gradually criticized for its "decline," with its unsatisfactory and homogenized entertaining experiences frequently failing to satisfy the audience's preconceived expectations. The theater "has almost completely disappeared from the public life of Chinese society" due to the extreme scarcity of theatergoers^[1]. After many years of growth and development, traditional realism theater is already nearing its pinnacle. Numerous classics, such as "The Thunderstorm", "The Wilderness", and "The Teahouses" are products of the realist theater of Stanilavsky, which is also the principal theater style in China. However, the realist theater that adopted the grandiose narration mode has become obscure and difficult to understand due to the passage of time, the idea of the theater's audience gradually rejuvenating, and the insufficient efforts of the realist theater's creators for the sake of the literary value of the scripts. Even the classics are too far removed from the present due to the passage of time and the realities of the works' inability to be connected with the present. The audience resists the rationalizing effect produced by the topic and aim of the grand tale itself as their spiritual quest progressively surpasses their material wants and the typical realist play style becomes harder for them to accept.

In post-modernism, the anti-magnificent narrative has gradually become a mainstream viewpoint; the realist drama which traditionally follows "classical unities" and adopts the method of grand narrative has slowly become less popular in the creative end, market end, and audience end. The reality-building energy of grand narratives should not be underestimated, and there are not a few

works that interrogate reality and give answers. However, the test of creators' innovative ideas and artistic techniques is still on the way. "Star River Hotel", a small theater play in the context of the new era, is a musical play derived from a work of the same name by the Shanghai Rainbow Chamber Choir, which tells the story of a nameless, faceless traveler who has lost everything and goes to the North Pole after his father's funeral. This paper will take "Star River Hotel" as an example to explore the "new" landscape of small theater art exploration in the context of the new era.

2. Seeing the smallest of things: mapping the reality of fairy tales

Going back to the origins of modern drama and theater, the term "grand narrative" refers to the expression of grand history and reality with its grand establishment, giving form and inner meaning to the existence of history and reality. It is also a contemporary method of narrating in search of purpose and completeness^[2]. On the one hand, a grand narrative is a kind of configuration of the process of development of human history from the beginning to the end. Alternatively, the grand narrative serves as an idea and evidence of how human society and civilization have developed. It is driven by the hope that human civilization will advance and is invariably linked to the state of social development at the time; in other words, it is an idealized framework for society. Traditional drama uses the grand narrative as a framework for story construction, filling in the various elements of drama beneath it. In contrast, pioneering drama opts to deconstruct to enhance the critique of drama and investigate the possibilities of the stage. "Star River Hotel" adheres to the grand narrative mode in terms of the narrative approach and the significance of the issues to be explored in the story. The play addresses the grand thesis of "how to face the life of a person who has been knocked down by the death of his life" using a philosophical examination of the subject.

"Star River Hotel" is a romantic story that resembles a fairy tale. The protagonist, following his father's burial, seeks solace from his emotions and suicidal thoughts by following fate to a snowy meadow in the Arctic Circle. The traveler struggles with his survival instincts as the car breaks down, witnesses a graveyard, and, as he approaches death, discovers a magical hotel - Star River Hotel. According to the traveler's monologue, which goes like this.

"Now is October 27, 1982, at 17:27. I have just finished attending my father's funeral, and I am traveling alone in my car in the far north. I've lost everything I could, first Annie, then my father; now I'm utterly alone. Well, there was this car to keep me company, an old Jeep with a Christmas bell hanging below the rearview mirror, rented at lunchtime, feeling almost as old as I am, and having to take a half-hour break to drive a single kilometer. Santa Claus? Yeah, if it's Santa Claus driving this piece of shit, I can see him having a hard time getting out of here, too. Legend has it that there's an tavern on this snowy plain called Star River Hotel. Anyone who goes there forgets everything and falls into the Milky Way to become a star. Screw it, I just want to find a proper tree to hang myself, it's too cold Maybe if I walk another half hour in this snow I'll freeze to death, where is this a gray graveyard (Traveler sees wooden sign) Star River Hotel?"

Within the tavern, there is a special rule about exchanging memories for resources. The innkeeper and the multitude of maids persuade the guests to begin exchanging their memories for resources. It is enjoyable to live in such a unique environment, which is unreal, and it also advances the plot of such a fairy tale. The grand narrative's main idea is carried out in such an easy and engaging way that the epic sense of the story is bestowed upon a character who everyone can relate and find common ground with. This not only helps the audience accept the grand narrative more readily, but it also clarifies the idea the drama is trying to convey, solves the issue of the grand narrative's difficulty in being accepted by younger audiences, and adds depth to the living narrative that would otherwise be lacking.

As the story is being constructed, "Star River Hotel" casts its protagonist, the traveler, as a middle-

aged man who is everywhere in life, such as the boss who, as the stars recede and dawn approaches, asks, *"Do you remember who you are? What's your name? What do you like? What do you do for a living? Why did you marry Annie? Why did you come here? And most importantly, who are you, child?"* When the traveler replied, *"Who am I? I am the son of my father and mother, I am the husband of my wife Anne, I am a traveler, I am nothing, I am nothing, I am"*, providing the traveler with a commonality that exists among the masses in terms of setting, giving the character a lived-in background and characterization. The play's protagonist, the traveler, experiences the nearly inevitable passing of a person's life due to the loss of a father in middle age, the divorce in one's prime, and the death of a mother while one is a teenager. Simultaneously, the traveler has no particular social background, name, or occupation to improve the audience's similarity with him. This highlights his qualities as a "human being" and diminishes his social identity. Stated differently, the message of "Star River Hotel" is to convey to the audience that everyone can be a traveler and that they will experience similar circumstances.

In terms of line design, it is divided into real and imaginary, communication objects, not only real, natural, quite realistic style of dialogue, such as:

"Meteor: Boss! Did he tell a story? Did you tell the story?"

Traveler: I told it.

Meteor: Ah, no story to listen to today again.

Traveler: You want to hear a story?

Meteor: I want to hear a story!

Boss: You're not going to die until tomorrow anyway, so tell me another one.

Traveler: What's your name?

Meteor: I'm Meteor! This is my tail!

Traveler: I'm a human, and I don't have a tail anymore.

Meteor: Human! That's rare!

Traveler: How about this, you get me a drink and I'll tell you a story, okay?

Meteor: OK!"

There are also dialogues that have both reasoning efficacy and literary significance, such as:

"Black hole: Tear apart the memories that cause you pain! Rip apart every person who passed away in your life! Shred everything that makes up you! Just tear these apart and you will no longer be in pain, you will be happy! Forget everything, fall into the Milky Way, become a star that shines eternally, and turn into dust between the stars in the river of stars!"

Traveler: no, that would be a cowardly act, I am no coward, I bravely chose my death!

Black hole: Fate has guided you here, fate has called you to forget! I can feel your pain, one by one the important people in your life are leaving you, and you desperately hold on to the only memories that remain, even though they cause you pain, even though you are crushed by them, and like Scrooge you die without letting go!

Traveler: You mean to forget is to submit to the will of fate?

Black hole: Everything in this world will be forgotten, everyone who has appeared in your life, your relatives, your loved ones, your friends, the cats or dogs you have had, everything that has appeared in your life, will be forgotten! When you die you will also be forgotten, you will become a warm and cold star until no one in the world remembers you, all evidence of your stay in the human world will be annihilated, and you will become my sustenance, merging with me to enjoy eternal life!"

Different events and scenes have different approaches taken by the lines, but overall the language style is relatively harmonious. It not only skillfully distinguishes the various emotions of the characters in various scenes and events, but it also changes style in response to the plot's development, integrating the characters' growth into the details, tearing them apart, and healing them spiritually. New flesh and blood grow in the wounds that have been torn, and the pain of the travelers is also

healed through repeated tears.

The director chose the unadopted "Burning Stellar! From Fat Cat Man" as the basis for the storyline adaptation. He expanded on Cat Stellar's plot to make him a wise man-like figure, and once more, he distinguished himself from the show's actual wise boss by using his witty and appropriated characterization to add entertainment and dramatic effect as well as capitalize on the strangeness effect of the difference. The comet watcher is the subject of the play as well. To make the plot more palatable and understandable, the comet watcher is given more of Annie's characterization (the comet watcher in the play is the spiritual embodiment of the traveler's not-quite-deceased ex-wife, Annie), and the play expands the comet's quiet, sad, and unapproachable temperament as opposed to the quiet, sad, and unapproachable temperament of the comet depicted in another unadopted track, "The Comet Watcher".

In addition, the director requested that each actor give up some of the exaggeration that comes with playing a dramatic role, interpret the role in a way that is relatively lifelike, locate a corresponding group of people in real life for the abstract planets, satellites, and other roles, or express the characteristics of the characters in contrast, like the dwarf planet in the play, which the public often perceives as being dull and stable. The director, however, gave the actor playing the part advice to interpret the dwarf planet as someone who lives in his world, avoids social interactions, and becomes a little boisterous after getting to know someone. Such a clever performance design not only adds interest to the viewing experience but also has an immediate effect on the group portrayal when coupled with the mature musical narrative.

3. Weaving in and out of reality: melodic and emotional tension

Additionally, "Star River Hotel" introduces several novel ideas in the ways that the music is tabularized, the musical narrative and its supporting effects, the mood is created, and the immersive experience is enhanced.

In drama, music typically takes the shape of a soundtrack, which helps to emphasize the mood, shape the dramatic effect, and enhance character portrayal. In contrast, music is often used in musicals to tell the story, express the content, and advance the plot. For instance, the sung lines in the dramas have mostly supplanted the lyrics in the New York Broadway Musicals, the West End Musicals in London, and the Japanese and Korean Musicals as the top musicals of West and East Asia. Meanwhile, their musical and vocal styles differ from those of traditional operas. "Star River Hotel" combines and integrates the characteristics of drama and musical theater. The music in drama is the color enhancement to the plot and performance, while the music in musical drama is the main factor of the drama. The professionalism of music leads to the high threshold of watching musical drama, which requires the audience to have a certain degree of music appreciation and general knowledge of music; and the proportion of music in drama is subordinate to its color enhancement effect.

First of all, in terms of the music's functionalities, "Star River Hotel" blends the lines' narrative and descriptive quality with the music's emotional impact and atmospheric quality. For instance, the "Wandering Asteroid Waltz" is used in the play to depict the traveler's lovely and carefree recollections of his early years spent with his parents and his former spouse.

*"It was a twilight
Annie was carrying a kite
and fell in a wheat field
I followed the shadows of the trees
and found her
I ran home in a hurry
Dad, he said*

Dinner at seven
Beans and sausage tonight
After dinner we'll dance
Until ten o'clock
We'd go round and round and round and round
Day after day, year after year
I don't even have to think about the future
I didn't have to wonder what the future held, what we'd eat tomorrow
Anyway, my father would arrange everything
Mother would take care of everything
Anyway, Annie knocked on the door every day
Three o'clock in the afternoon."

The music plays while the scene changes multiple times, starting in the inn's lobby and ending with the chorus and second verse of the album's song of the same name. The scene seamlessly transitions from the tavern to the traveler's memories of his high school prom and childhood farm, using the music to hop around in time and space and compressing the memories that might require a certain amount of space into a two-minute verse. This is in addition to the choreographed role reversal. The use of music builds a "bridge" between the virtual and the real, connecting childhood and youth, making full use of the generality of the musical narrative, condensing the length while promoting the development of the plot, and being loved by the audience in terms of visual and audio effects.

Naturally, Meyerhold contends that music's deconstruction of the tableau's absoluteness is both necessary and warranted, and "Star River Hotel" does not give up on the tableau-sizing effectiveness of music in musical theater. "A good show has to follow the rules of music theory, which implies that every typical show has a general score of its own. This general score aids in the audience's comprehension of the play's many sections and immerses them in the musical environment of the production."^[3] With its musical approach, it unites the play's entire musical design. It also integrates spoken words with lines and uses music to propel the character's mood shifts and forward the plot—as demonstrated by the traveler's solo during his first self-introduction.

"I am a total loser, my relationship and job have all flown away. I used to go to church once a week, now I have no illusions about God. I drink, I'm irritable, I'm useless, there is no way out of my life, my father, who understood me best, has left me, and the car I just rented is nowhere to be found."

The opening scene presents the audience with a very realistic portrayal of a middle-aged, disillusioned man; the two short lines of the chant here use the first person to answer the questions and mocking attitudes previously posed to the traveler by the boss and the crowd of waitresses. This fully illustrates the traveler who has lost his job, lost his father, and is self-destructive, giving the audience a very realistic portrayal of a middle-aged, disillusioned man as the initial portrayal of the character is portrayed in the opening scene. The music is used in a tableau format for the presentation. Once the traveler has completed his oratorio with the song "Unwelcome! Stranger", the same tune is repeated, but this time the mood is happy as the boss and maids sing. This leads to the setting of the song for the boss, the maids, and their party, who are represented by the stars and have existed for a very long time, as well as the shift in attitude toward the traveler from initially being unwelcome to gradually accepting the traveler in the days that follow.

The auxiliary effect of music in the narrative is also presented in "Star River Hotel", such as the traveler in the event of a confrontation with the black hole, the use of the "Black Holes and Hot Tubs" track, the track uses a piano solo and effects sound effects first pad, constantly using chords to climb up the scale, while the traveler and the black hole on the forgetting of painful memories of the confrontation, the end of the prelude into The intro finishes with a vocal section that alternates between female and male vocals, layering the tension on top of each other. As the confrontation

intensifies, the traveler's obstinacy in not wanting to leave his memories behind and lose himself, and the black hole's desire to strip the memories of their sustenance escalate, and the singers and dancers whisper in the back of the room, which is illuminated in dark blue. As the traveler and the black hole confront each other in the foreground in an area of light delineated by strong spot and surface lighting, the organ added to the chorus of "Black Holes and Hot Tubs," the use of short, literal lyrics, and the simplicity and power of the tune echoing the main theme of "Star River Hotel" create a sense of epicness, as the traveler faces the most important choice of all. When the traveler is faced with the most important choice point - "whether to forget all the painful memories and fall into the Milky Way to become a star" - it creates a very fatalistic and audio-visual shocking experience for the audience.

In terms of immersive experience, "Star River Hotel" blends stage action design and singing. For example, during the song "Happy Off-Duty," the audience is simply off-duty stars who have emerged from the auditorium and are interacting with the audience, making the audience feel like they are accompanying the stars on their off-duty adventures. The maids of honor welcomed the audience on stage, and the stars sang to each other in the auditorium. The entire theater, including the stage, becomes a part of "Star River Hotel"; the drinkers here are the audience instead of the audience, and the barrier separating the stage from the audience is eliminated in favor of an odd but authentic "Star River Hotel".

4. Contextual displacement: arriving in the "unfamiliar"

To "strip an event or character of that which is self-evident, familiar and immediately obvious, so as to create surprise and curiosity about it," and thus to "give the audience a position from which to analyze and critique the event depicted," is how German playwright Bertolt Brecht originally used the term "strangeness" in drama.^[4] From start to finish, "Star River Hotel" creates a weird scenario that permeates the plot, scene transitions, and conceptual setups, transforming the stage from traditional, the story from formulaic, and the characters from unreachable.

"The subjectivization of drama inevitably leads to abstraction, and abstraction inevitably leads to visualization."^[5] Scene changes are an integral part of stage design and greatly influence the stage's overall visual impact. "Star River Hotel" uses a combination of stream-of-consciousness and realist theater techniques to create a more fluid, organic, and spontaneous scene change. It also gives the stage more room to shape itself through the scheduling of lighting, music, character actions, and narrative rhythms. Simple items, chairs, and a variety of drinking utensils provide the impression of a Western-style hotel lounge in Star River Hotel. There was no plan to change or remove the scenery, except the play's conclusion, when it was entirely removed. The play uses lighting to divide scenes, music to set the mood for specific plots, and lines to connect plots before and after the logical connection to make the entire play jump out and jump in more naturally. The main storyline is combined with numerous flashbacks, such as recalling the ex-wife part of the use of lines to guide, music padding with dance design to build flashback scenes; encounter comet part of the weakening of the main scene, in the front of the stage to open up space alone, with the hotel hall such a large space wrapped in the traveler and the comet exchanges with the small space, to the hotel's internal surroundings of two people exchanging position in the hotel on the outside of the external; the encounter with the comet alters the focal point, establishing an additional space at the forefront of the stage for travelers to engage with the celestial body. This designated area resembles a hotel lobby, extending beyond traditional communication spaces and encompassing interactions both within and outside of the hotel. In contrast, encountering the black hole is portrayed as a direct vertical movement, with the hotel scene through the lighting from warm tones to cold tones, the main body of light weakened to emphasize the fixed point of light area as well as the front and back of the field division, the hall area into a bath scene, it completed the scene jump. "Star River Hotel" likens the area to

multiple river streams; the streams are intertwined and harmonious, yet they are also separate and easygoing, creating a well-organized and diversified stage.

Except for the traveler, who serves as the main character, every character in "Star River Hotel" has more than one identity at once. Such dual identities are prevalent throughout the play; for instance, the comet viewer is both the personification of the traveler's ex-wife, Anne and a symbol that the audience might adopt as a "companion". All-encompassing. The "older, wiser man" in the family and the traveler's father who has passed away are represented by the Boss. Stellar the cat corresponds to the traveler's lost cat and the role of the "childhood playmate". As a play that employs group portraits many times, "Star River Hotel" gives each character a hidden identity that the audience can embody, thus shortening the distance between the audience and the stage, no longer being blocked by a fictional worldview, but truly finding a part of themselves in the characters, a person who can build a character that fits into the group portrait by their life backgrounds, emotional experiences, logic, and thinking. The characters are no longer blocked by a fictional worldview but truly find a part of themselves, a part of themselves that can be integrated into the group by their life background, emotional experiences, and logical thinking. The drama effectively solves the issue of flattening non-major roles, which group dramas frequently face, while also giving the audience more emotional entry points and giving us, who are used to being objectively evaluated, the chance to subjectively examine ourselves. The drama opens up more possibilities in the horizontal dimension of each character, allowing each to have multiple perspectives worth delving deeper into. In this instance, there are not a thousand "Hamlets" in the minds of a thousand people, but countless different selves, all appearing in the same "Star River Tavern".

The "alcohol" setting is just one of the many ideas the show has established to create a make-believe, fairy tale vision that simultaneously reflects reality. The term "blackout" refers to the brief loss of memory that occurs when someone gets intoxicated in real life. Every time you sip a glass of wine from Star River Hotel, a portion of your traumatic memories will go away; after three glasses, you will experience total amnesia. This environment not only provides the traveler with an option to resolve the objective of his traumatic recollections, but it also quietly resonates with reality and lessens the sensation of a rift between the made-up fairy tale and the reality of real life. At the same time, Star River Hotel has the rule of "staying with memories", as the maid puts it.

"Maid A: This store only receives extraordinary visitors.

Maid B: You'll have to trade your memories if you want to stay.

Maid C: Happy memories in exchange for a glass of wine.

Maid D: Sad stories for a night's stay."

The "sincerity for sincerity" in real life is reflected in this environment, which is based on the enchanted effects of the hotel's wine. On the one hand, such a setting obstructs the route of personal development for the traveler. However, the goal is to avoid drawing too much of this fairy tale's seeming distance from reality and instead give it a realistic feel.

In contrast, "Star River Hotel" is not limited to the stage. In the previously mentioned "Happy Off-Duty" design, the audience is situated in a forest on a snowy plain. It is via this forest that the group of stars arrives at the hotel after work, and the audience inevitably joins the group of stars, becoming a part of the entire scene from the outset. As "The Drunkard's Toast" comes to a close, the audience lifts their glasses and sings along with the performance.

"To dwarf planets that don't amount to much

To comets that go by in the blink of an eye

To the boss!

To the maid of honor!

To Star River Hotel!

To ourselves!

Ourselves!"

Everyone on and off the stage is a traveler with their grief, and everyone has the right to cry and drink, creating an environment of equal celebration. The "fourth wall" is absent from "Star River Hotel," which upends the preexisting narrative while maintaining a natural air of mystery. The "fireplace" of Star River Hotel story serves to slightly acquaint the audience with the wonder of the unknown world while also transforming it into a chilly wind on the snowy plains. By gently warming the audience and evoking surprise from the undried water spots on the floor, the "fireplace" in Star River Hotel story "moistens things silently," allowing each spectator to find solace for their souls in the fairy tale it creates.

5. Conclusion

"Star River Hotel" explores more avenues for the development of contemporary theater in the creation of drama and stage practice while also carrying the thinking and questioning of the grand narrative as a kind of theater with a dream story akin to a fairy tale and drawing on the experience of realist and avant-garde theater. In the modern era, theater creators should focus on the nuanced aspects of their work while enhancing the audiovisual impact and performance experience. The grand narrative mode of storytelling requires a more contemporary context, so text creation and stage practice must be closely combined. Innovation is required to keep up with the times and make up for any shortcomings; only by fusing the traditional and the modern, the grand and the tiny, the serious and the lively, and the needs of various markets for various audiences can theater be more effectively "brought back to the public's view."

References

- [1] Xu Ben. *Theater and Public Life: Havel's Tragic Imagination and Public Politics* [J]. *Literary and Artistic contention*, 2012, 3: 12-19.
- [2] Shao Yanjun. *How to Carry Out "Grand Narratives" After the Disintegration of "Grand Narratives"? --The Pursuit of "Epic" and Its Dilemma in Recent Years* [J]. *Southern Cultural Forum*, 2006, 6.
- [3] (Su) A. Glatkov. *Meierkhol'd Talks* [M]. China theatre Press, 1986.
- [4] Brecht. *Brecht on Theatre* [M]. China theatre Press, 1990.
- [5] Zhou Anhua. *Sound and Picture Inflated and Meaning Generated: On the Presentation of Contemporary Hong Kong Drama* [J]. *Theatre Arts*, 2006, 6: 66-71.