UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

CREATA 2026

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE on CREATIVE PRACTICES in FILM, THEATRE and ANIMATION

Theme

Innovation, Culture, and Collaboration in the CREATIVE ARTS

PROCEEDINGS

3rd & 4th FEBRUARY 2026

HYBRID | Online & Physical

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA | Fakulti Filem, Teater dan Animasi

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA | Institut Seni Kreatif Nusantara

The Fusion of Tradition and Contemporary: Chinese Nuo Masks and Physical Performance in the Xi'an Theatre's Production of 'Zhu Erdan' (2020)

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese Nuo Masks, as a core feature of Nuo Opera, serve as a vehicle for religion, folklore, and art, renowned for their unique visual expressiveness and artistic symbolism. Currently, combining such traditional cultural elements with modern theatrical styles has become an important trend in the development of contemporary Chinese theatre. The physical theatre 'Zhu Erdan' (2020) is a production by Xi'an Theatre and directed by Li Yao. It combines Chinese Nuo Masks with physical theatre. This study aims to analyze the interdependent and cooperative relationship between Chinese Nuo Masks and physical theatre, and to form a new performance aesthetic in the context of contemporary theatre creation. The study combines semi-structured interviews with the director and one of the actors with content analysis of the performance recordings. The findings reveal three important aspects: First, the Nuo Masks and the actor's physical performance form a close partnership, transforming from a static cultural symbol into a dynamic theatrical character. Second, the fixed nature of the Nuo Masks and the fluidity of the body complement each other, creating an innovative theatrical expression. Third, this combination creates an innovative performance aesthetic that preserves the essence of traditional culture while harnessing the expressive power of contemporary theatre. This research provides a theoretical analysis of 'Zhu Erdan' and offers a valuable symbiotic mechanism for the creative transformation of traditional culture in contemporary theatre.

Keywords: *Nuo Masks, Physical Theatre, Zhu Erdan*

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese Nuo Masks are an important element of Nuo Opera, a genre of traditional Chinese theatre. Nuo Masks have been continuously inherited and innovated throughout the history of Chinese theatre. They transcend their function as mere props, representing a high degree of fusion between religion, folklore, and art. Nuo Opera, mentioned here, is one of China's oldest and most mysterious

folk cultural phenomena. In Nuo Opera performances, actors wear Nuo Masks to perform sacrificial rituals for exorcising ghosts, warding off plagues, and eliminating disasters. The entire process is shrouded in mystery and is considered a 'living fossil' of Chinese theatre, holding significant importance for its development (Wang, 2004). Actors wearing masks can be seen as gods or objects, while those removing them can be seen as people. Nuo Masks create a mysterious, bizarre, and absurd atmosphere, becoming an important cultural symbol connecting traditional and contemporary aesthetics, continuously attracting the interest of modern audiences (Gao & Weng, 2017).

In the early 21st century, physical theatre officially entered China, exhibiting characteristics of 'localization.' Physical theatre initially imitated Western forms. With development, it gradually integrated traditional Chinese theatre and culture, forming a localized physical theatre with Chinese elements (Luo, 2022). 'All theatre is physical'(Murray & Keefe, 2016, p. 49). Physical performance uses the actor's body as its primary medium. In theatrical creation, physical performance can externalize the hidden inner activities and distinct personality traits of characters, making it the most effective means of character development. In physical theatre, the generative logic of performance begins with pure physical movement. Every contact, every gesture, and even the overall flow of movement is almost entirely a direct reaction and creative development of the actor's physical existence and potential expressive power.

Traditional Nuo Masks, as a cultural and spiritual symbol of China, bear the cultural memory and spiritual continuity of the Chinese nation. Chinese leader Xi Jinping emphasized that artistic creation needs to uphold innovation, and outstanding works are an important reflection of a nation's cultural innovation capabilities and level (Ma, 2021). The combination of traditional Nuo Masks and physical theatre, which uses the body as its primary narrative method, represents an important direction for the creative transformation and innovative development of contemporary Chinese theatre.

Against this backdrop, the 2020 production 'Zhu Erdan' combines Nuo masks and physical performance, reconstructing a traditional classic story with a fresh perspective on contemporary theatre. This work is adapted from 'Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio: Judge Lu' by the Qing Dynasty writer Pu Songling. The story tells of the scholar Zhu Erdan, who accidentally meets Judge Lu of the underworld. After receiving a heart of intelligence, Zhu Erdan quickly passes the imperial examinations and obtains an official position. However, Zhu Erdan is not satisfied and becomes increasingly greedy, ultimately asking Judge Lu to replace his wife's head, leading to a tragic end (Theatre, 2022). The Xi'an Theatre Company, founded in 1953, is the first professional theatre performance group in Northwest China (Theatre, 2022). 'Zhu Erdan', produced by the Xi'an Theatre Company, is their latest work combining Nuo Masks and physical theatre. This production premiered in Xi'an in 2020. Created during the COVID-19 pandemic, this theatrical work has been invited to participate in numerous theater festivals since its premiere, including the 2020 Beijing International Youth Theater Festival, the 10th Wuhan International Theater Festival, and the 2021 Daliangshan International Theater Festival. On September 20, 2023, the work 'Zhu Erdan' won the Outstanding Performance Award at the 10th Wuhan International Theater Festival (Theatre, 2023).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the collaborative relationship and performance aesthetics between

Chinese Nuo Masks and physical theatre in the work ‘Zhu Erdan’. The paper will explore the performance style formed under this relationship, analyzing how the work conveys the spiritual core of traditional culture while conforming to the aesthetic expression of contemporary theater, providing a concrete, practical approach for the contemporary transformation of traditional Chinese performance elements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings are expected to reveal a collaborative relationship between Nuo Masks and physical performance in ‘Zhu Erdan’, a collaboration that drives innovation in performance aesthetics through interaction on three levels. The discussion section will elucidate these findings, highlighting, for example, that the transformation of Nuo Masks from static cultural symbols to theatrical roles may be the most fundamental innovation, while the actor's physical expression, through precise limb control, becomes an important driver of the mask's emotional expression. Specific examples include the coordinated performance of Nuo Masks and physical movements in the ‘heart-changing’ ritual, their complementary meanings during role transformations, and the visual tension they jointly construct in the carnival scenes. These findings are corroborated by director interviews and performance video analysis, further strengthening the argument for the collaborative approach between traditional and contemporary art elements.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the creative integration of Nuo Masks and physical performance in contemporary theatre. The anticipated findings will provide theatrical creators with a collaborative approach that demonstrates how appropriate transformation of traditional cultural elements can not only preserve cultural essence but also generate artistic innovation. The research confirms that through this collaborative approach, traditional Nuo Masks can interact positively with modern performance language, achieving a win-win situation for both cultural inheritance and artistic innovation. This research has the potential to promote multifaceted development in contemporary theatre creation, provide a reference model for the modern transformation of other traditional art forms, and offer theoretical support for constructing modern performances with cultural subjectivity. Future practical applications can extend this approach to more traditional performing arts such as dance and drama, further enriching the aesthetic language of contemporary theatre.

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