

The Interpretation of the Modern Spirit of Chekhov's Drama on the Contemporary Stage

-- Taking Butusov Theater as an Example

Wenzheng Wei^{1,a,*}

¹College of Liberal Arts, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, 610066, China

a. 1678924458@qq.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: Chekhov's plays have long been very popular in modern theater, especially in the major theaters of Russia. Many theatrical masters have adapted his classic texts. However, some adaptations have a strong avant-garde and experimental color, and the creator's consciousness is too strong. So it is easy to ignore the fundamental of the text, in other words, the modernity problem. This paper takes Russian director Yuri Butusov's adaptation of Chekhov's plays as an example to study how the contemporary drama stage interprets the spirit of modernity in the text. This paper applies the relevant theories, which are all reflected in the Butusov Theater, including Meyerhold's cubist stage concept, the "contextualizing cubism" proposed by the British scholar Amy Skinner, and Bakhtin's carnival theory. Butusov deeply explores the modern spirit of Chekhov's drama and presents it with his unique directing art, which is also an alternative expression of the classic text.

Keywords: Yuri Butusov, Chekhov's dramas, modernity, directors' art, avant-garde theater

1. Introduction

From the point of view of dramatic literary criticism, the modern content of Chekhov's plays is mainly concentrated in existentialist philosophy, ecological aesthetics and other fields, including a series of problems brought about by the social changes in Russia under the transition of the old and the new. Besides, Chekhov's contribution to modern drama is embodied in: the first use of the structure of four-act drama, weakening the dialogue and action of the characters, diluting the conflicts between the characters and so on.

In terms of drama creation, the adaptation of Chekhov's plays integrates the personalities and experiences of different creators to present a more diversified expression. But sometimes overemphasis on authorship may dissolve the depth of Chekhov's text. For example, when Stanislavsky adapted *The Cherry Orchard*, although he grasped Chekhov's commitment to the expression of ordinary daily life and presented it in a realistic way, he ignored its symbolic meaning. Chinese director Lin Zhaohua collaged *The Three Sisters* and *Waiting for Godot* together, and adapted Chekhov's text into a theater of the absurd, but the connotation of the original is covered by the absurd spirit of nihilism. Most of the existing studies on adaptation focus on the director's art, but there are still gaps and shortcomings in the research on how the director interprets Chekhov's spirit.

Yuri Butusov is a famous Russian avant-garde director with a passion for adapting classics, including Chekhov's *The Seagull*, *The Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya*. By analyzing Butusov's directing art, this paper focuses on existentialism philosophy to analyze how the spiritual character and living state of Chekhov's characters resonate with modern people. This paper writes about these three aspects to discuss, the stage installation, performance art and story plot.

Nowadays, under the influence of postmodernism, some dramas blindly deconstruct classics, dissolve depth, and present a trend of excessive entertainment. Although Butusov's plays are postmodern, he carried forward the connotation of Chekhov and reinterpreted the modern spirit of Chekhov's drama. The study of Butusov's adaptation of Chekhov's plays is of great significance in the field of drama and literature. For drama, it can not only explore how to revitalize classic texts on the contemporary stage, but also correct some defects of postmodern drama. For literature, through cross-media adaptation, we can explore how to make the classic tradition glow with new vitality.

2. Methodology

This paper uses the method of theoretical research. Firstly, Meyerhold's cubist stage concept and the "contextualizing cubism" theory can be used in the Butusov's stage art. Secondly, Bakhtin's carnival theory can be used to understand the character's performance and internal logic.

2.1. Meyerhold's Cubist Stage Concept and Amy's "Contextualizing Cubism"

Meyerhold transplanted Picasso's cubism in painting into the stage presentation of drama and expressed the aesthetic concept of modernism. Cubism would not strive to present a mirror-like reflection of reality, but rather would show the process by which the mind forms a visual perception [1]. As for Meyerhold's cubist stage concept, it mainly refers to the use of collage and reorganization, so that the work is extended in the same space to multiple expression contexts.

On this basis, Amy Skinner uses "contextualizing cubism" to further explain Meyerhold's stage concept. It can be summarized as "embedding the canvas into conscious time and space elements using moving space and multiple presuppositions; Juggling with depiction and surface; The use of collages and the relationship between canvases and other media" [2].

2.2. Bakhtin's Carnival Theory and Dionysian Spirit

Bakhtin's carnival theory of folk humor culture with carnival as the core regards "revelry" as "the eruption of life consciousness in the marginal state of life". It is this folk humor culture with carnival as the core that has become a temporary transcendence and effective circumvention to the system and ideology of daily life [3]. These folk cultures spontaneously fight against the official seriousness and holy spirit, subvert the traditional order by irrational means, and people break the norms and release their instincts through carnival. Therefore, carnival is an experience buried deep in the human heart, with irony, humor and passion.

In addition, the carnival itself has a strong sense of dramatic performance, which can be used as a theatrical prototype, dating back to the primitive Dionysian sacrifice.

3. Analysis of Modern Spirit of Chekhov's Drama on Butusov Theater

Chekhov's plays convey the spiritual connotation of The Times and arouse the spiritual resonance of modern people. One main type of character he creates is the embodiment of idealism, who has the pursuit of a better life, and is dissatisfied with the vulgar status quo but unable to change. This prototype can continue to today's society and become the epitome of a generation. This is also one of the main reasons why Chekhov's plays have spread and become classics.

The conflict in Chekhov's drama is "not the external contradiction between the drama characters, but the paradox of life itself. All the suffering and absurdity of the characters come from the conflict between them and their environment, but they cannot get rid of the established absurd life" [4]. How to face the infinite time and universe with limited life and confirm the meaning of existence is the fundamental problem contained in Chekhov's drama [5]. This is also the philosophical proposition of existentialism. Chekhov's characters agonize over why they exist and how they should exist. Although they are trapped in the mediocre reality and their actions are blocked, Chekhov does not present the nihilism, meaninglessness and illogic of life completely like the absurd drama. He does not *deliberately* exaggerate pessimism, but confirms the necessity of suffering, and thus the meaning of life. Chekhov's themes of love, work, aspiration, hope, how-to-be, and, above all, the urgency of wishing to live-and of living-as you wish to live [6]. Therefore, hope is the base color of Chekhov's drama, and labor is the last way out for the characters in the play.

Yuri Butusov has inherited and re-created Chekhov's modern spirit with his own directing art.

3.1. "Collage" Stage

3.1.1. Modernist Installation

Based on the cubist stage concept, Butusov does not reproduce the real life scene, but highly condenses the time and space in Chekhov's drama. He is accustomed to using cardboard, graffiti, ropes and other elements to piece together the stage, forming an open space, with a hypothetical character. The display of drama time and space confirms that Chekhov's drama works have a kind of superspace-time characteristic. It is precisely because of Chekhov's accurate grasp of the special period of "the turn of the century" that his plays can also flash value even if they are placed at the turn of another century after a hundred years [7].

In *Uncle Vanya*, the original text describes the house as a maze with twenty-six large rooms, from which anyone can *walk* out without seeing anyone. Space is the externalization of psychological state, and empty houses are the portrayal of isolated and lonely characters' hearts. In order to maximize the ideographic function of the space, Butusov built a stage using cardboard with stick figures to form a wall. A number of doors were drawn on the cardboard through which the characters entered and exited. The set does not participate in the narrative and depict the real life, but it does help to present the character's inner predicament.

Even more noteworthy is *The Seagull* stage setup, Butusov breaks the poetry by not recreating the real estate. Flowers and fruits are messy and grandiose, as if the surface is indulging in pleasure, but it is vulgar life. The *swings* are made of crude ropes, on which the characters hang precariously, alone and without a place to rest. Even the stage set up for Cosgar's play-within-a-play in the first scene is made of cardboard with rough stick figures. This cardboard with abstract paintings is a portrayal of Cosgar's heart. Dark clouds and rain represent his inner distress and gloom, while Nina is like the sun dispelling the haze.

In modernist drama, scenery is no longer just an ornament, but an expressive function. These devices have no actual meaning in themselves, but they interact with the characters, become a reflection of their inner states, and communicate with the audience. Viewers need to understand their messages in a particular context.

3.1.2. The Breaking of the "Fourth Wall"

Chekhov's intention is to make people blindly immersed in pessimism, but to realize the essence of boring life, the important thing is to live in the vulgar reality. Therefore, when the negative atmosphere is at its peak, Butusov will directly cut off the emotion. He is keen on *destroying* and dismantling the stage, and often intervenes in theatrical performances as a director and audience

member to break the “fourth wall”. This is partly reflected in the use of the stage. Due to the “collage” nature of the stage, Butusov split and rebuilt the stage without ending the curtain. The performance is forced to “break”, the audience out of the negative atmosphere, realize that this is only a play, but everyone is a role in the play.

In the first act of *The Seagull*, Cosgar dismantles his own stage out of frustration. Then, director Butusov rushed directly to the stage and tore up the cardboard, completely destroying Kosga’s stage. Unlike the end of *Uncle Vanya*, where Sonia tore down the house, this is a violent outburst from the director without any emotion. At the end of the scene, the actor and the director dance to rock music, and the backstage staff change scenes in front of the stage. At this time, Butusov not only liberated the emotions of the audience, but also expanded the boundaries of the stage and realized the integration of the viewing and performance. The audience is no longer a spectator, as if it has become a participant in the drama. At the end of *The Three Sisters*, an artificial wall is built, and the three sisters keep telling their dream of “going to Moscow”, while the wall is gradually piled up until the characters are blocked. It is a silent communication that reminds the audience that the play is coming to an end. It is time to break the illusion and return to life.

3.2. Abstract Body

3.2.1. Carnival Performance

The physical (sculptural) expression of the actors is a common feature of all Butusov’s plays [8]. Through *exaggerated* and grotesque body language, coupled with loud shouts, Butusov gave the actor’s performance the characteristics of carnival, and with certain violent factors and the characteristics of improvisatory comedy, the comedy spirit of Chekhov was fully played.

Popularity and catharsis are the important characteristics of Butusov’s plays. The three sisters are relatively gentle and tolerant characters. Though they have aspirations of going to Moscow, but they do not pursue or resist them. In the strong contrast of carnival, their inner desires are exposed and more impactful. Butusov asks the actors to stand on a table and repeat the lines from the first act. Among them, Irina carries a large drum, Martha waves a flag, and Olga sits sideways. They tell their own situation, the words are increasingly intense, the body movements are gradually increasing out of control, and the emotions are pushed to the top.

There is a classic play in *The Seagull*. After Cosgar fails and leaves in disappointment, there is a sudden group *carnival*, and Arkakina leads the other characters to shout Cosgar’s name. They put on a show to find Kosga, but the protagonists of the show are not Kosga, but themselves. Everyone is doing the best they could, scrambling for the microphone in an orderly fashion, dancing in unison, to the exclusion of Cosca. There is something funny about the performance of the actors in this scene, as if it were a joke on Cosgar. The weight of tragedy is diluted, and the atmosphere of lighthearted playfulness conceals the tragedy of Cosgar, but the absurdity is accentuated.

3.2.2. Isolated action

Chekhov’s characters are isolated. “No matter what happens, no matter what is discussed, people think of themselves first, they talk about themselves... Therefore, Chekhov’s dialogues are often irrelevant and do not answer the question” [9]. The characters are lonely, isolated, and often hostile to each other, carrying out existentialist philosophical ideas. In this case, the interaction between the actors is also reduced, and the body movements are more independent. Each actor has their own signature movement, and they express themselves through their body.

In *Uncle Vanya*, Uncle Vanya and Sonya are the creative characters in the play, the people with whom Chekhov projects complex emotions of appreciation, worry and love. They tend to be athletic on stage, with Uncle Vanya showing abstract, rhythmic body movements, and Sonia often running or

jumping rope on stage. At the beginning of the play, the director shows the chaotic mental state of them, and they are trapped in a crisis of existence and nothingness. Uncle Vanya keeps dancing in his chair to the nervous music. He talks to the doctor, but he talks to himself. Fragmented scattered sentences reveal his inner loneliness and struggle. And Sonya keeps running around the stage like a headless chicken, without purpose or direction. The repetitive mechanical movement of skipping rope makes her release excess energy and vent bitterness, but she can not get rid of the monotonous life. These abstract actions of actors are isolated, a means of amplifying their inner circumstances. Uncle Vanya and Sonya are essentially the same kind of people who understands each other, but can not really eliminate their loneliness.

3.3. Repetition

Chekhov had created images of suicidal people, but after *The Seagull*, he changed his mind. Death is not the end, the soul “keeps rolling” is a more frightening and universal state of mind than death [4]. To show this state, Butusov innovatively uses the technique of “repetition”. The repetition of the plot can be divided into the following two kinds.

The first is the repetition of the same plot by the same actors. In the second act of *The Seagull*, Nina and Tregolin talk about the seagull, and Tregolin draws inspiration from the seagulls who were killed. He tells Nina the story he has written and then kisses her. But a ghostly figure appears, and the atmosphere turns eerie. Tregolin repeats the story, but each time it brings violence, blood and death. This surreal scene hints at the tragic fate of Nina, who is like the seagull and is fooled by fate. Unable to struggle, she is doomed to die. The same goes for the scene in *The Three Sisters* where Martha and Virkhinen say goodbye. Virkhinen brings her hope and happiness, and Martha repeatedly pursues Virkhinen, not wanting him to leave, but this effort is in vain. The character falls into an inescapable cycle of vulgar everyday life. They can not escape the tragic fate, and even if they struggle and start afresh, they will return to the established end and have to accept it.

The second is the repetition of the same plot by different actors. For example, in *The Seagull*, where Cosgar says goodbye to Nina and shoots himself, four groups of actors play Cosgar and Nina. The first group is Masha and Medvidenko, the second group is Nina and Trigorin, the third group is Dorn and Polina, and the last group is Nina and Kosga. The interpretation of this plot by different actors is a projection of their own characters and their relationships. The tragedy of love is the commonality of these four groups of characters, they can not get happiness in the ideal love. The root cause of this misfortune is the incompatibility and incomprehension between people, and thus the irreconcilable estrangement. As a result, it appears that different actors are playing out the story of Cosgar and Nina, but in reality they are expressing their own existential dilemmas, repeating the same, difficult patterns of survival. Everyone on stage is a seagull. At this time, the differences and barriers between the characters dissolve, the loneliness and pain of the individual merge into the loneliness and pain of the collective, and the characters reach a resonance between the characters and the audiences.

4. Conclusion

This paper probes into Butusov’s adaptation of Chekhov’s modernity from three perspectives: collage stage, abstract body and repeated plot. While expressing his own personality as a director, Butusov deeply studied Chekhov’s drama and carried forward its modern spirit, and helped the classic text to be deeply rooted in the contemporary stage. However, this paper does not make an in-depth analysis of some postmodern features in Butusov’s theater, such as breaking Chekhov’s original poetic atmosphere, or changing from aesthetic to ugliness. Such expressions need to be treated dialectically. Therefore, this paper should continue to analyze whether these problems will misinterpret the original

meaning of the text, whether it will have an impact on the audience's viewing and acceptance, so as to explore how to grasp and choose the original author's intention in the adaptation.

References

- [1] R. Bruce Elder, *Cubism and Futurism: Spiritual Machines and the Cinematic Effect* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press,2018), 176.
- [2] Amy Skinner, *Meyerhold and the Cubism, Perspectives on Painting and Performance* (Bristol, Chicago: Intellect, 2015) , 21.
- [3] ShiXuSheng. *The ceremonies, festival, carnival, the spirit of the drama art prototype* [J]. *Journal of national art research*, 2019, 32 (5) : 76-83.
- [4] Gu Chunfang. *Reinterpreting Chekhov and his Poetic Realism* [J]. *Research of National Arts*, 2019, 33(04):77-86.
- [5] Gu Chunfang. *Reinterpreting the Modernity of Chekhov's Drama from the Perspective of Hermeneutics* [J]. *China Literature and Art Review*, 2021, (12):61-71.
- [6] Shevtsova M. *Alive, Kicking – and Kicking Back: Russia's Golden Mask Festival 2015*. *New Theatre Quarterly*. 2015;31(3):232-240.
- [7] Tang Kexin. *The art of pioneering Director of Chekhov's plays in contemporary Russian Theater* [J]. *Russian Literature and Art*, 2015, (04):59-65.
- [8] Wang Renguo. *An Alternative Interpreter of the Russian Theatre School -- Director Yuri Butusov* [J]. *Drama (Journal of Central Academy of Drama)*, 2020, (01):72-88.
- [9] Chekhov. *Chekhov's Plays* [M]. Jiao Juyin, trans Sea Translation Publishing House, 1980.