

Analyzing the Development Prospects of Song and Dance Drama Art and Integrated Media from The Greatest Showman

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Abstract: As a Hollywood musical film released at the end of 2017, *The Greatest Showman* has earned more than 400 million dollars at the box office worldwide with its outstanding original songs and dance elements. It is a Hollywood musical film with a relatively good box office performance in recent years. Global research on musical drama has increased dramatically in recent decades, gradually forming a complete research system. However, it has not yet attracted enough attention in terms of artistic creation techniques of musicals. This article intends to analyze three aspects: the overall research of global musicals, the study of *The Greatest Showman* drama aesthetics, and the integration of musical, film, and media. Taking *The Greatest Showman* as an example explores the historical development of musicals and the dramatic art in movies and provides practical, theoretical sources for the creation and development of musicals.

Keywords: *The Greatest Showman*, musical, drama aesthetics, fusion of drama and film

1. Introduction

As a Hollywood musical film with mature artistic techniques and presentation forms, the musical creation concept and theatrical aesthetic style in *The Greatest Showman* have formed a unique and symbolic visual repertoire style. Song and dance dramas, as a genre of works that have been born and developed for a long time in Europe and America, were later favored by the Hollywood film industry and once flourished. Although they once fell into a slump due to various reasons, they have once again received widespread attention in recent years through various bold attempts and innovations. The popularity of *The Greatest Showman* also provides a research foundation for the rediscovery of this classic art form.

At the same time, *The Greatest Showman* integrates musical aesthetics with the characteristics of film media by combining song and dance, plot, and film, providing new media for the work to promote narrative, character shaping, theme revelation, and emotional expression, becoming an emerging turning point in the development of the field of musical. This review attempts to explore

the academic development and current situation of related content from the perspectives of overall research on musical dramas, research on the works of *The Greatest Showman* and research on the integration process of musical dramas and film media.

2. Research on Song and Dance Drama

2.1. Domestic Research on Song and Dance Dramas

There has been a significant increase in research on musicals in China in the past 20 years, and their research content can be divided into various categories based on their academic focus, such as the history of musicals, artistic characteristics of musicals, and the sinicization of musicals. The specific research topics can be roughly divided by time. [1] From the 2000s to the 2010s, research mainly focused on the comparison of Western classical musicals and Chinese and Western theatrical forms and discussions on music or dance elements in musicals; From 2010 to 2020, domestic research on musical dramas tended to focus more on the localization of musical scripts and the cultural information carried by musical dramas.

From this, it can be seen that with the increasingly active literary and artistic creation environment, research on song and dance dramas in China has gradually begun, becoming a hot topic of continuous attention in the fields of musicology, dance studies, art studies, drama studies, and other disciplines. With the vigorous development of musicals, the scope and level of theoretical criticism and academic research on musicals are gradually expanding and improving. The relevant research and analysis of musicals in China have gradually transitioned from theoretical research on musicals themselves to the spiritual bearing and development prospects of musicals. Through the study of the development history of Western musicals, discussions have been derived on the role of musicals in the interaction between Chinese and Western cultures and the development of integrated media. Overall, the research on domestic musical dramas has gradually formed a complete system.

2.2. Foreign Research on Song and Dance Dramas

Song and dance dramas were nurtured in the original matrix of European opera, and through development and evolution, they have formed diverse artistic representations today. The development of modern industry has provided a material medium for the prosperity of musicals in the West, so foreign research on musicals continues to emerge according to the social development process of different periods.

The origin of Western musicals can be traced back to Italy in the 17th century. Opera differs from previous forms of artistic expression in the West, and its birth has significant significance in the history of Western music. At this time, there were relatively few research works on musical dramas, and most were in the cognitive stage of new concepts. After the 18th century, opera content was based on life, adding humorous and rustic elements to the drama. After the transformation of dance steps in French musicals, opera performances became more diverse and three-dimensional. After the 19th century, music masters from various countries created many works, and opera became the carrier of artistic works, making music more popular.

The research on the discourse of musical dramas has gradually flourished since the 20th century. Due to the maturity of modern Western opera and its integration into various artistic forms and musical backgrounds, research on it tends to be more detailed, focusing on analyzing a specific musical style and further explaining its political and ideological significance or characteristics of the times. For example, in Nicholas Baragwanath's *The Italian Traditions and Puccini Composition Theory and Practice in Nineteen Century Opera*, through Puccini's research on opera, the genealogy and development history of musicals are sorted out, and the composition and related

theories of 19th-century musicals are systematically studied [2]. The spirit of the times permeated in musicals is analyzed with Italian cultural traditions. As written by Beyond Broadway, *The Pleasure and Promise of Musical Theatre Across America*, explores the development and ups and downs of American musicals by studying Broadway plays with the most distinctive artistic features of musical theater [3].

In summary, the relevant research on musical dramas in the West has actually formed a comprehensive and comprehensive overall result in the dual development of era and drama style. The works on musical dramas have shown characteristics such as from overview to concrete, from generalized cognition to individual style discussions, and from the works themselves to the real background.

3. Research The Greatest Showman Movie

3.1. Research on the Creative Background of The Greatest Showman Movie

The Greatest Showman is an American musical film released in 2017, directed by Michael Gracey and written by Bill Condon. Based on the life of 19th-century American circus legend P.T. Barnum, it presents his legendary entrepreneurial story through song, dance, drama, and visual effects.

Before the 1960s, Hollywood musical films experienced a golden period of development. Hollywood musical film producers worked hard to explore and continuously promote the perfection of Hollywood musical films, resulting in many outstanding works that occupy a pivotal position in the history of Hollywood musical films. After decades of glorious times, Hollywood musicals have inevitably entered a trough. This period has lasted from the 1970s to the present. *The Greatest Showman* was born in this downturn. It takes the circus as the theme, blends gorgeous dance and acrobatics, uses magnificent and multi-style music, and tactfully explores the equality of human nature as if seeking the essence of musicals [4]. In the new century, Hollywood musicals have downplayed the utopian elements in traditional musicals, and more and more subcultures have entered the performance vision of musicals. With the evolution of genres of Hollywood musicals in the new century, the themes of its film music have become more profound and diverse, and *The Greatest Showman* is a vivid representative. The film has no complex political consciousness and bleak historical background, only the enthusiastic dreams of each character for life, infecting the audience with a positive spiritual essence and a relaxed and witty drama plot. The irony and thinking about many social issues at that time also improved the artistry and ideological quality of the film. Its unique creativity and exquisite production amazed the audience. The film's creative team delved into the historical background of 19th-century American society and the circus culture to maintain historical authenticity and create a visually authentic scene. Unlike the consistent love theme of Hollywood musicals, the storyline of *The Greatest Showman* incorporates traditional circus elements. The music in the film does not focus on describing love like previous Hollywood musicals. Instead, it innovatively uses music to promote equality: equality in emotion, equality in art, and equality in personality. Not only that, but *The Greatest Showman* also incorporates acrobatics elements into traditional singing and dancing, cleverly using the relationship between sound and picture to help the audience understand the content of singing and dancing. It flexibly uses camera switching, lyrics, and various singing forms such as solo, duet, chorus, and round singing to narrate the storyline.

In recent years, Hollywood blockbusters and some commercial films have developed rapidly, which is both a challenge and an opportunity for Hollywood musicals. As a new star in Hollywood musicals, *The Greatest Showman* has injected fresh blood into the Hollywood musical industry despite its weak strength. Its breakthroughs and innovative integration from multiple perspectives demonstrate the vitality of Hollywood musicals, playing a significant role in promoting the

diversified development of Hollywood musicals.

3.2. Research on Dramatic Aesthetics of *The Greatest Showman* Movie

As a crucial clue element in the work, dance plays a vital role in highlighting the dialectical relationship between reality and reality and enhancing the intuitive perspective [5]. The visual effects of *The Greatest Showman* use rich colours and gorgeous dance designs to create a dreamy and dramatic scene. At the film's beginning, Barnum and Charity dance on the moonlit roof, using a lingering duet dance to show the whole process of falling in love getting married, and then giving birth using abstract techniques to invisibly and naturally promote the development of the storyline. It is in stark contrast to the subsequent solo dance by Charity in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows of the huge mansion. It not only shows the beauty and harmony of the relationship between the two at this time but also highlights the inexplicable depression and loss in Charity's heart when Barnum leaves with Lind. The film did not choose to express Charity's loss in straightforward lines but cleverly used a solo dance to contrast with the previous double dance. Let the sense of depression go deep into the 'audience's hearts abstractly. The most enjoyable part is the performance when Barnum invites Philip to join the circus in the tavern. This dance combines the elements of jazz and tap. Abstractly expresses the psychological changes of the two in this psychological game through the change of their positions and the camera lens. In addition to the excellent game between them in this dance, other characters and props in the tavern also played a crucial role. The bartender, wine glasses, coins, tables and chairs, and peanut shells played their respective auxiliary roles. The bartender is the intermediary of the two-person game, which also adds fun to this dance. Peanut shells represent Barnum's circus culture. At the end of the performance, the camera returned to a flat and symmetrical composition. They clinked glasses to complete the deal. A dance between Anne Wheeler and Philip in the film fully reflects the insurmountable gap between them because of their skin colours and status in this relationship. Anne used ropes, hoops, and other props in the circus to keep evading, while Philip kept chasing. This dance vividly expresses the relationship between chasing and fleeing, active and passive between them. The film's excellent choreography and performances add to the dynamics and expressiveness of the drama.

In addition, music is also the soul of this movie. At the beginning of the creation, the creative team of *The Greatest Showman* once wanted to present the play in the form of collecting other classic songs. It was not until the middle of the production that Benj Pasek and Justin Paul decided to use original music as the musical backbone of the film [6]. The original music of *The Greatest Showman* has a beautiful melody and emotional lyrics. Like dance, it not only promotes the development of the storyline, exaggerates the situation, but also closely connects the inner world of the characters with the audience. The film begins with *The Greatest Show* and ends with it, forming an echo from beginning to end. The film uses montage-style artistic techniques, starting with a dream and clever camera cuts, ending with a dream come true and a grand circus performance, making the story a perfect closed loop. *A Million Dreams* goes from Barnum and Charity's child duet to an adult duet, from childhood to marriage and having children. The longest timeline in the film perfectly crosses with the time of one song, and the lyrics present the sweet relationship between them. The two closely linked songs *Never Enough* and *This is Me* push the story to a climax. After Barnum invited Lind to perform, he was deeply fascinated by this so-called real art in the upper class. He even shut out the troupe members who performed together in the past and refused them to participate in the banquet with various excuses. At this time, the disappointed Lettie Lutz led the rest of the troupe to pass through the banquet under the accusations and abuse of others and returned to the circus to perform. This song perfectly embodies the theme of the whole film and draws out the dramatic conflict. At this time, the intensification of dramatic contradictions and the

narrative function of music reached their peak in terms of commonality and communion [6]. After experiencing Lind's betrayal, his wife's disappointed departure, and the loss of the circus, Barnum is devastated and gives up on himself in the tavern. At this time, the members did not mind Barnum's behavior before but came to the tavern to support and cheer for him. *From Now On* ranges from Barnum's solo to everyone's chorus, the colors range from dark to bright, and the instrumental performance ranges from single to rich. It reveals that Barnum crossed the hurdle in his heart in this song and found his original heart. It also means the resolution of dramatic conflicts and contradictions. The producers use unique original music and exquisite choreography to perfectly integrate the plot with music and dance and fully display the characteristics of musicals.

Chinese scholar Tian Yuxia pointed out that the film has solid literary support in addition to dramatic and dazzling singing and dancing scenes [7]. Through a well-constructed storyline, the film brings the audience into the fantasy world of Barnum Circus. Taking Barnum's courage to pursue his dreams and transcend traditions as the main line shows the challenges and adversities, he faced in starting a business. The film's compact plot and emotional ups and downs make the audience fall into the story and cannot extricate themselves. It also subtly incorporates natural history and fictional elements, reconciles the inertia of literature and drama, and increases the interest and imagination of the plot. Through the creation of typical characters and exquisite storylines, it profoundly reflects the real social problems in American society in the 19th century: discrimination caused by class, race, and physical defects, and the distinction between high and low art brought about by cultural capital. This gives the film a delicate literary conception and realistic function under superb dramatic art.

Character creation is another important aspect of drama aesthetics. *The Greatest Showman* movie has created many vivid characters. Each character has a unique personality and motivation. The film gives viewers a new sense of self-identity by portraying circus master Barnum and his eccentric crew. Barnum, the protagonist, is not only a businessman but also a dreamer and family man. His complexity and inner conflict add to the character's believability and dramatic tension. The characters of other circus members in the movie also have their characteristics, and their stories are intertwined with colourful, dramatic plots. The growth and transformation of these characters represent the identity needs of different groups, making the aesthetic experience of the film from simple audio-visual pleasure to a deeper spiritual pleasure [8]. *The Greatest Showman* movie also subtly links original music and character images. *The Greatest Show* represents the circus people who never give up and finally succeed. *Never Enough* represents Jenny Lind who will never be satisfied and will not stop. *Come Alive* represents the awakened P.T. Barnum, and *The Other Side* represents Philip Carlyle in the aristocratic class. The film's title song *This is Me* represents those marginal characters who were not accepted by society at that time and no longer hide themselves but stand up bravely to express their dissatisfaction and show their true selves.

4. A Review of the Integration of Drama and Film Media

4.1. Research on Film and Media Characteristics

Film art is widely popular as a means of entertainment and media. Investigating the reason; we can find that film art has its unique charm; both the technical means, the content, and the audience groups have characteristics. From the perspective of technical means, the development of camera and projection technology has played a decisive role, and both cast the strong comprehensive characteristics of the film. What is strong comprehensiveness? The first is the fusion of the senses. Enlarge the audio-visual, using the perfect combination of image images and dubbing to integrate the auditory, visual, psychological and other senses. The second is the synthesis of space and time. Basan commented: "The screen is not a picture frame, but just a shading frame that reveals the part

of the event to the audience” [9]. The presentation of the screen pictures by the director brings imagination and speculation to the audience. The psychological extension of visual experience promotes the development of the plot and connects the dynamic static pictures through projection technology. The third is the synthesis that breaks down the boundaries of art. The film integrates novels, performance, architecture, painting, and other arts, integrates various arts, and gives full play to the strengths of different kinds of art to form a good film art. From the perspective of content, the general length of the film is 90-120 minutes. Compared with the TV series, the compressed length makes the story content compact, and the sense of rhythm is strong, bringing the dense excitement to the audience so that the audience can be deeply immersed in the plot. And with the progress of The Times, the theme of the film changed from the shallow to the deep. The earliest film in the world was played on December 28, 1895. Arrived at the train station by the Lumiere brothers only shot the existing pictures and scenes in real life, and then evolved into a complete storyline with the development of the film industry. Finally, from the point of view of the audience group, today’s film themes are relatively close to the people, and the content is mostly based on life, with artistic creation and a wide audience. As Lu Yidu said: “ Movies are a dream. Facing the screen of flashing light and shadow, the audience began a dream journey of selflessness” [10]. The film affects the direction of public opinion precisely because of the role effect of the audience; the viewers can substitute the film in connection with their own situation, thus arousing the resonance of the audience.

4.2. Current Combination of Drama, Film and Television

The combination of drama and film contributed to the birth of song and dance film, which has different development at home and abroad. In general, Chinese song and dance films have three remarkable characteristics: the use of 56 ethnic minority song and dance resources, combined with rich opera resources, and the separation from song and dance to integration. China’s earliest musical and dance film was also the first sound film *Song Girl Red Peony*, released in 1931. The film combined lots of Peking Opera scenes and was immature because it was the first musical attempt, but it was well received. Then there were song and dance films led by singers and assisted by dancers represented by Liu Sanjie, which integrated national culture and played national inheritance with southwest folk songs. The further development of Chinese musical and dance films results from imitating Hollywood musical and dance dramas. The grand and brilliant scene arrangement and the magnificent sound momentum make Chinese musical and dance films enter a small climax. Then comes a long-term gap. In July 2021, there was another song and dance film, but *The Step in July* was released within two days. Through statistics, we are not difficult to find that there is still much room for progress in Chinese song and dance films. As a kind of rare film, we still need to give play to our national characteristics, learn from the relevant experience of song and dance films from other countries, forge ahead with the profound cultural heritage, and strive to achieve the creation of more song and dance films with Chinese characteristics. Foreign song and dance films are developing more rapidly and are constantly producing excellent works. The United States and India have achieved a lot. Song and dance films, as one of the important types of American films, are widely welcomed by people worldwide. The first musical film was born in 1927, *The King of Jazz* directed by Alan Crosland. Since then, the wave of Hollywood musical and dance films has been launched. After World War II, due to the needs of different groups of people, musical films began to become more lifestyle. From 1927 to 2023, many excellent song and dance films emerged in the United States without blank gaps, which always cleverly integrated music and dance into film art. As Nie Jia said, “ Music is the flow of the soul, and dance is the release of the soul, so the artistic element of song and dance can be naturally applied to film” [11]. Indian song and dance films are more popular, interspersed with many traditional Indian songs and dances, using song and

dance narrative to cover a large area, not only making song and dance play a role of entertainment highlights but also not independently create the plot of the works. Dave Anan said, “ Indian films are song and dance films. Music is a part of a film, and good songs and dances are the essence of the film script” [12]. From buying other song and dance films to researching and creating song and dance films with Indian characteristics, Bollywood has been exploring continuously since 1930, making the production of Indian song and dance films the first in the world every year.

5. Results and Discussion

This article first analyzes the current research status of musicals both domestically and internationally by studying the research process of song and dance drama, a summarized drama, in the evolution of the times. It recognizes that the development of musicals, both domestically and internationally, is closely related to factors such as social background, material economy, technological development level, and audience ideology. And its related research has also expanded its research scope and deepened its research level with the development of song and dance dramas. At the same time, it can be seen that although the research situation at home and abroad varies slightly with the development process of musical dramas, the overall trend is gradually becoming fully mature.

In analyzing the content and theatrical aesthetics of *The Greatest Showman*, the author believes that the exquisite dance arrangement, original songs, and character shaping have contributed to the success of this musical film. It cleverly blends modern music, dance art, and theatrical aesthetics, ultimately presenting an outstanding and grand audio-visual feast. By shaping distinctive typical characters and reconciling the relationship between literary and dramatic elements, this article fully embodies the artistic value of dance films. It analyzes the three aspects of dance, music, and characters in order to provide a reference for the integration of drama aesthetics and film media.

By analyzing the significant characteristics of film as a medium and the current situation of the combination of drama and film and television media, the author realizes that film media has the characteristics of technological decision-making, comprehensive content, and a wide audience. As a high-quality media form, movies provide entertainment for people worldwide. With the development of the times, the development of movies has made rapid progress. There are new innovations and breakthroughs in both form and content. At the same time, the author found that there is a significant gap in the creation of music and dance films in China, and the gap period is relatively long. In contrast, the quality of music and dance films in the United States and India is relatively high. The author believes that China should continue to develop music and dance films with Chinese characteristics and occupy a place on the world stage.

6. Conclusion

Through the study, it is not difficult to find that although domestic song and dance films have an increasingly complete and mature theoretical basis, the output of song and dance films is not satisfactory, and the practice of song and dance films is still not much, which still needs to be improved. However, excellent classic song and dance films such as *The Greatest Showman* in foreign countries emerge one after another. As the mother of song and dance films, it can continue to practice and innovate, which has not only a unique aesthetic style but also inspiring content. China should continue to learn and draw lessons from excellent song and dance films, integrate our own cultural advantages, and actively spread Chinese traditional culture to the world while learning the expression techniques and artistic styles of foreign song and dance films. In the near future, China will not only further enrich the theory of song and dance film, but also break through the shackles to realize the prosperity of song and dance film practice.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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