

# On drama that does not have a story as its soul

Author: Qian Jiuyuan

Authors affiliation: Anhui University of Arts, Hefei, Anhui Province,  
China 230001

## **Abstract:**

More than 2,000 years ago, Aristotle's assertion in his *Poetics* that plot is the soul of tragedy should not be generalized as the standard for all theater worldwide, nor should it be believed that drama must necessarily have a story-driven plot as its core. In fact, within the treasure trove of world theater, including Chinese opera, there are numerous works that do not revolve around story plots as their soul.

This paper attempts to propose a new classification of world drama based on whether the plot dominates the entire work and whether the plot constitutes the essence or soul of the drama. Broadly speaking, world drama can be divided into two categories:

Drama with a plot as its soul—also called "plot-driven drama" or "Aristotelian drama," represented today by spoken drama (theater).

Drama without a plot as its soul—also called "non-plot-driven drama," which includes operas, dance dramas, musical dramas (including Chinese opera), and other genres that, structurally, fall into this category.

This paper analyzes why the concept of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul" appeared so late in the development of dramatic theory. It argues that applying a "Four-level Subdivision Method" to analyze plot helps us better grasp the essential characteristics of narrative in drama.

Additionally, the paper explores the classificatory status of so-called "plotless" dramas within dramaturgical taxonomy.

## **keyword**

Aristotle; The Plot-Soul Theory; Dramas Without Plot as Soul; Dramas With Plot as Soul; Four-level Subdivision Method

## **main text**

### **(一) The concept of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul" was put forward**

More than 2,000 years ago, Aristotle, summarizing the ancient Greek tragedies that were not far removed from his time, stated that the plot is the soul of a tragedy, or what is known as the "The Plot-Soul Theory". The philosopher himself stated unequivocally: "Plot constitutes the essence of tragedy; to put it vividly, it is the soul of tragedy."<sup>1</sup> While this groundbreaking statement was specifically directed at ancient Greek tragedies, does Aristotles immense prestige justify extending "The Plot-Soul Theory" to all theatrical forms? Should we therefore assume that every genre of drama follows the same principle of plot-driven storytelling as classical Greek tragedies?

We know that tragedy wasn't the entirety of ancient Greek drama. At least comedy also existed in that era. Whether Aristotle considered comedy to share the same soul as tragedy narrative structure remains uncertain. Therefore, despite Aristotles godlike stature, we should exercise caution when attempting to generalize his conclusions about Greek tragedy across all forms of ancient Greek drama.

Ancient Greek drama was not static. The entire Western theatrical tradition, profoundly influenced by it, has evolved through continuous development. A closer look at history reveals that Western theater has long since departed from its original form in ancient Greece. Following Aristotles era, Western drama developed along three main paths: the first was the evolution of dance dramas; the second involved musical integration, giving rise to operas and musicals; while the third maintained the essence of ancient Greek tragedy, focusing on authentic portrayals of real-life scenarios—this ultimately shaped what we Chinese now call "spoken drama."

Western theater today has undergone significant transformations from ancient Greece. This raises a crucial question: Do post-Aristotelian dramas—including tragedies—still adhere to the "The Plot-Soul Theory" ? From a scientific perspective, this article contends that we should cast a bold question mark. Aristotles assertion that plot constitutes the soul of tragedy clearly implies the existence of dramatic forms where narrative structure serves as the core element. This naturally leads us to ask: Does the world actually contain any theatrical expressions that do not rely on storylines as their foundation?

In reality, applying Aristotles "The Plot-Soul Theory" of tragedy to encompass all theatrical forms — including opera, ballet, and musicals — has long proven inadequate. A striking fact remains: throughout history, the global treasury of dramatic works (including Chinese opera) has contained numerous pieces that do not center their essence around narrative storytelling.

To this end, this paper formally proposes that the drama of our world can be divided into two major categories: one is "Dramas With Plot as Soul", also known as "Plot-Driven Drama" or

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics* [M]. Beijing: Commercial Press, 1996: Chapter VI.

"Aristotelian Drama"; the other is "Dramas Without Plot as Soul", or "Non-Plot-Driven Drama".<sup>2</sup>

What specific criteria can support the concept of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul"? Or, which types of theater qualify as such? This article holds that this issue can be considered from two perspectives. One is the perspective of individual works, that is, which specific dramatic works can be classified into "Dramas Without Plot as Soul"; the other is the perspective of dramatic genres, that is, whether certain dramatic genres can be incorporated into the category of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul" as a whole.

## (二) The Scope of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul"

### 1. Works of the "Dramas Without Plot as Soul" genre

In the world's national drama works, there are works that do not take the story as the soul, and we can easily find such examples.

#### (1) *The Marriage of Figaro*

Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro* presents a plot full of twists and turns. The story unfolds as follows: Figaro, the count's servant, falls in love with Susanna, the countess's maid. The lustful count, who has long coveted Susanna, tries to sabotage their wedding by attempting to take her for himself. Determined to pursue their happiness, Figaro and Susanna team up with the countess to stage a public humiliation of the count, ultimately allowing them to hold their wedding ceremony without interference.

However, we shouldn't judge solely by the plot itself. If we simply extract the storyline and examine it superficially, you might get lost in the narrative. Only by considering the entire performance of the work and viewing it from multiple angles can we truly understand that *The Marriage of Figaro* isn't primarily story-driven. In Mozart's operas, the plot serves the music.

Mozart excelled at crafting distinct characters through varied musical expressions. In the opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, he portrayed over a dozen personalities, using fourteen arias to vividly depict their musical personas and psychological states. Rather than relying on dialogue, the composer employed music as the driving force for narrative progression, achieving dramatic expression through music.<sup>3</sup>

"Rather than relying on dialogue, the composer employed music as the driving force for narrative progression, achieving dramatic expression through music." – this is a specific manifestation of the dominant position of music in this opera. When discussing Mozart in *A History of European Music*, Zhang Hongdao put it more clearly:

<sup>2</sup> The concepts of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul" and "Non-Plot-Driven Drama" are basically synonymous in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Cao Ying. On the Artistic Features of Mozarts Opera — Taking *The Marriage of Figaro* as an Example [J]. *Art Evaluation*, 2018, (17):2.

Mozart emphasized the immense role of music in shaping characters and reflecting their inner lives.... He believed that musicians should first be musicians before considering becoming dramatists themselves. He repeatedly expressed this view with clarity, stating: "In an opera, poetry must absolutely yield to music," and "Music holds supreme supremacy, making one forget all else" (Letter dated October 13, 1781 ). He also remarked: "I cannot express my feelings and thoughts through poetry or color, for I am neither a poet nor a painter. But I can convey them through sound, for I am a musician." (Letter dated November 8, 1777)<sup>4</sup>

Music holds absolute dominance in this context, with the narrative serving merely as a vehicle for its expression. Can we realistically expect such an approach to produce drama works centered on storytelling? Theoretically and practically, this method proves impossible. Therefore, operas created through the "Mozartian" approach should fundamentally be categorized as theater works that are "Dramas Without Plot as Soul".

## (2) *The Rite of Spring*

*The Rite of Spring*, a masterpiece in the history of ballet, can hardly be said to have much of a plot.

The ballet *The Rite of Spring*, composed by Stravinsky in 1913 and choreographed by Nijinsky, is a masterpiece rooted in the composer's dream about an ancient Slavic ritual. In his vision, a young maiden surrounded by wise elders danced until death to awaken spring. Inspired by this dream, Stravinsky crafted the script using a ritualistic structure. Over time, this iconic work has been adapted and reimagined by generations of choreographers, cementing its status as a timeless cultural icon.<sup>5</sup>

*The Rite of Spring* is divided into two acts. The first act, entitled *The Adoration of the Earth*, is set against the backdrop of spring's arrival. As the earth gradually awakens, a group of men and women fall into contemplation. Then, the maidens dance a lively spring dance to celebrate the coming of spring.

The second act, named *The Sacrifice*, takes place at night and depicts a mysterious gathering of the maidens. The elders select one of the maidens as a sacrifice to the sun god, seeking protection for the earth. The chosen maiden dances frantically before the altar, expressing emotions of struggle, despair, resistance, and liberation, until she finally collapses and dies from exhaustion. The elders then hold high the maiden's body and offer it to the sun.

It is evident that the primary artistic appeal of *The Rite of Spring* lies in the dance itself. Its story framework is merely an extremely simple primitive sacrificial ritual, serving mainly as a pretext for the dance performance.

<sup>4</sup> Zhang Hongdao, ed. *A History of European Music*[M]. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 1983: 137-138.

<sup>5</sup> Hou Xueyan. Exploring the Unique Narrative Laws of Dance Art from Different Versions of the Dance Drama *The Rite of Spring*[J]. *Forum of Arts*, 2019, (04): 88.

### (3) *cats*

The musical *Cats*, which runs for more than two hours and includes more than 20 songs and countless dance clips, has a simple story:

The musical *Cats* tells the story of the Jellicle Cats, who hold an annual ball where one cat is chosen to ascend to the Heaviside Layer and gain a new life. The main authority to make this choice lies with Old Deuteronomy, the leader of the cat tribe. To secure rebirth, each cat goes all out to showcase themselves at the ball. Every cat has a distinct personality: some are innocent and childlike, some love playing pranks, some are witty and humorous, some are utterly evil, and so on. Among them, the most striking is the "Glamour Cat". In her youth, she was radiant, but unwilling to live a mediocre life, she left the tribe to venture alone into the outside world. Eventually, unable to endure life beyond the tribe, she chose to return — only to find herself no longer beautiful, but shabby and unkempt, rejected by all the other cats. Overwhelmed by regret and sorrow, she sings *Memory* with deep emotion. It is this song that deeply moves all the cats, and in the end, she is chosen to ascend to heaven and gain rebirth.<sup>6</sup>

The plot framework of *Cats* is set as follows: the Jellicle Cats hold an annual ball, where all cats present themselves to their leader, and finally the leader selects one cat to gain the chance of rebirth. This extremely simple plot serves merely as a pretext for showcasing singing and dancing performances. It is essentially structured like a talent show: different cats take turns to perform their own songs and dances. The main part of the entire musical consists of *cats* with various personalities, conducts, occupations, and living environments taking turns to perform on stage. For example, Gus the "Theatre Cat" delivers a monologue as a has-been star, Skimbleshanks the "Railway Cat" is eulogized as a technical expert, and Macavity the "Evil Cat" displays his villainy, among others.

That *Cats* does not take the plot as its soul is also reflected in the fact that the tragic story of Grizabella, the "Glamour Cat", is merely narrated through her own singing rather than being "explicitly" presented through on-stage actions. Moreover, the personalities of all the cats in the musical are not revealed through the twists and turns of the plot, but mainly through their singing, dancing, and movements on stage. Even Grizabella's final selection for rebirth can be fully understood as her talent outshining others, making her performance the most touching part of the "talent show".

### (4) *Thriller*

Michael Jackson's *Thriller* is hardly regarded as a play, but it is actually the story of a devil seducing a beautiful girl.

The plot of *Thriller* unfolds with crystal clarity. The story begins when Michael Jackson accompanies a young woman to a cinema, where the film's narrative structure creates a

<sup>6</sup> Ren Juan, Zhang Haibin. A Brief Discussion on the Artistic Features of the Musical *Cats*[J]. *China Musical*, 2024, (01): 61.

"play-within-a-play" effect. During the midnight scene where Michael Jackson confesses his love to the girl, he transforms into a monstrous entity. While the moviegoer remains enthralled, the terrified young woman exits the theater in a panic, forcing Michael Jackson to follow her. They wander aimlessly through the streets, with Michael Jackson weaving eerie tales while dancing. The girl not only pays no heed but seems utterly captivated by the spectacle. As they approach a haunted cemetery, resurrected zombies begin swaying around the terrified woman. Michael Jackson's demonic form materializes, merging with the undead in a chaotic dance. Panicked, the girl flees into a house where she shivers in terror. Michael Jackson swiftly pursues her, only to reveal his human form again as the terrified young woman clings to her fragile hope. It was over. As the couple walked out of the small room holding each other, Michael Jackson, as if to fulfill his scheme, turned toward the audience with the girl and eyes that glowed with a golden, demonic glare. At the same time, there came an off-screen voice of the devils' triumphant laughter.

Since *Thriller* has a clear story, why not think of it as a play? It must be because the audiences' subjective intention to watch Michael Jackson's singing and dancing is so strong that it obscures the appreciation of the story.

In a strict theoretical sense, some of Michael Jackson's works can be considered as theatrical works, but they should be classified as "Dramas Without Plot as Soul".

## **(5) Celebrating Tranquility and Prosperity: Immortals' Birthday Tribute**

Edited by the Editorial Committee of Collection of Ancient Drama Texts, *Copied and Collated Versions of Yuan and Ming Zaju from the Maiwangguan Library* (included in *Collection of Ancient Drama Texts, Fourth Series*) was published by Shanghai Commercial Press in December 1958. In its table of contents, as many as eighteen works are marked with the note "Compiled and performed by the Ming Dynasty Jiao Fang (Imperial Academy of Arts)". They are: *Treasures Hall: Yuanzhen Celebrates the Longevity of the Emperor*, *All Immortals Celebrate the Peach Banquet*, *Celebrating the Emperor's Longevity: The Golden Mother Presents Peaches*, *Three Sages Descend to the Red Steps to Celebrate Longevity*, *All Divine Beings Celebrate the Lantern Festival*, *Celebrating the Emperor's Longevity: Nations Come to Pay Homage*, *Eight Immortals Compete for the Jade Plaque While Crossing the Sea*, *Celebrating a Bountiful Year: Five Ghosts Disturb Zhong Kui*, *River and Songshan Gods: Ganoderma for Celebrating Longevity*, *Purple Weave Palace: Celebrating Everlasting Spring and Longevity*, *Celebrating Ten-Thousand Longevity: Five Dragons Pay Homage to the Sage*, *All Heavenly Immortals Celebrate the Longevity Gathering*, *Celebrating the Winter Solstice: Sharing the Peace Banquet*, *Celebrating Tranquility and Prosperity: Immortals Pay Homage to Longevity*, *Celebrating a Thousand Autumns: The Golden Mother Congratulates on Extended Years*, *Guangchengzi Congratulates on the Equal-to-Heaven Longevity*, *Yellow-Browed Elder Bestows Blessings for Extended Years*, and *Moved by Heaven and Earth: All Immortals Pay Homage to the Sage*.

These works are contained in the sixth case of *Collection of Ancient Drama Texts, Fourth Series*. Judging from their titles, they are nothing more than works about celebrating longevity, feasting, singing and dancing in times of peace and prosperity. Let us take the play *Celebrating Tranquility and Prosperity: Immortals' Birthday Tribute* as an example to prove this. The plot of

this work is as follows:

### **Act 1**

The Ancient Immortal of the South Pole enters, and dispatches a Green-robed Lad to invite all immortals to the fairy garden to discuss matters of celebrating the Queen Mother of the West's birthday.

Han Zhongli enters and introduces himself, recounting his journey to immortality.

Li Tieguai and Han Xiangzi enter, describing the scenery of the fairy realm.

Zhang Silang and Zhang Guolao enter, introducing themselves and expounding on the principles of immortality.

Lan Caihe and Cao Guojiu enter, introducing themselves and describing the life of immortals.

Lv Dongbin enters, introducing himself and recounting his path to becoming an immortal.

All immortals gather to discuss the birthday celebrations. Lv Dongbin proposes inviting the Eight Lower Grotto Immortals to join the festivities.

### **Act 2**

The Mountain God and the Willow Spirit enter one after another. Both wish to celebrate the Queen Mother of the West's birthday but lack an imperial decree. Thus, the Willow Spirit goes to seek help from Lv Dongbin.

Immortal Haichan enters, introduces himself and his journey to enlightenment, and mentions that he will gather immortals to discuss the birthday celebrations.

Ren Fengzi and Chen Qizi enter, introducing themselves and their experiences of attaining immortality.

Wang Qiao and Bi Zhuozi enter, introducing themselves and recounting how they became immortals.

Chen Tuan, Liu Ling, and Xu Shenweng enter, introducing themselves and briefly describing the immortal life.

Immortal Haichan and the immortals from the lower realms discuss the birthday celebrations.

Lv Dongbin arrives to invite the Eight Lower Immortals, and they deliberate on what gifts to present.

The Willow Spirit, entrusted by the Mountain God, obtains the imperial decree for the birthday celebrations from Lv Dongbin.

### **Act 3**

The Tiger, Deer, Ape, and Crane spirits enter and crack jokes.

The Mountain God enters, exchanges greetings, and speaks humorously.

Lv Dongbin and the Willow Spirit enter. Lv Dongbin sings of the scenery of the fairy mountains and recounts how he enlightened the Willow Spirit.

They discuss how to celebrate the birthday, singing praises of the good harvest, the peaceful year, and extolling the imperial grace and virtue.

Lv Dongbin departs, and the mountain spirits prepare for the birthday celebrations.

### **Act 4**

The Ancient Immortal of the South Pole waits for the arrival of all immortals.

Han Zhongli (holding a jade vase with golden lotus flowers), Li Tieguai (with a smoke gourd), Han Xiangzi (with an iron flute), and Cao Guojiu (carrying a golden plate) enter together. They meet the Ancient Immortal of the South Pole and each describes their gifts.

Zhang Guolao, Lan Caihe, and Zhang Silang enter together, each with their gifts, and describe them.

Immortal Haichan, Ren Fengzi, Chen Tuan, and Chen Qizi enter together, praising the peaceful harvest and each presenting their gifts.

Wang Qiao, Bi Zhuozi, Liu Ling, and Xu Shenweng enter together, each describing their gifts.

The Mountain God, along with the Tiger, Deer, Ape, and Crane spirits, enter, recount the virtues of the Queen Mother, and each present their gifts.

The Willow Spirit enters and speaks humorously.

Lv Dongbin enters, praises "the Blessings of Today," and describes his gifts. All the immortals present their offerings to celebrate the birthday.

Lv Dongbin offers eternal spring wine, followed by pine, bamboo, plum, and peach. Four fairies (representing pine, bamboo, plum, and peach) enter together and sing songs of praise.

The Ancient Immortal of the South Pole delivers a speech.

All immortals bow. The Heavenly Messenger delivers the imperial edict. The ceremony of praise comes to an end.<sup>7</sup>

From the plot summary above, it's clear that the drama *Celebrating Tranquility and Prosperity: Immortals' Birthday Tribute* revolves around celestial beings from the Upper Eight Caverns, Lower Eight Caverns, and mountain spirits and tree monsters converging to celebrate the birthday of Queen Mother of the West. Despite its large cast and grand scale, the narrative lacks depth, with a monotonous and tedious storyline progression. The recurring act of inviting deities to the banquet mirrors a repetitive pattern in plot development, essentially resulting in stagnant storytelling.

## 2. Genres of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul"

This article argues that opera, ballet, and musical theater should not primarily focus on narrative storytelling. At least institutionally, these art forms have already established plot development as a secondary element. They are the types that use plot as a means to express the charm of singing and dancing—even though the appeal of their plots can sometimes be quite strong, or rather, even though plot in these dramatic genres exists not merely as a means.

Those who insist that operas, dance dramas, and musicals, like spoken dramas, take plot as their soul should at least ponder three questions carefully. First, since there are already stories told through spoken dramas, why bother telling stories through operas, dance dramas, or musicals? What is the actual narrative capacity of operas, dance dramas, and musicals? Third, is the "plot" in operas, dance dramas, and musicals the same as the "plot" in spoken dramas? Below, we will explore mainly around these three questions.

<sup>7</sup> The synopsis of this play is compiled by the author based on the version included in *Collection of Ancient Dramas, Fourth Series* (Case 11, Volume 82), edited by the Editorial Committee of Collection of Ancient Dramas and published by Shanghai Commercial Press in December 1958.



## (1) Opera

While the narrative element in operas can be quite strong, this paper argues that for an opera to be truly an opera, the artistic appeal of singing should be in a dominant position. A spoken drama like *Hamlet*, without any singing or even the slightest musical element, can still be moving in performance because its story is inherently compelling. Since the spoken drama *Hamlet* is already so touching, why is there a need to stage an operatic version of *Hamlet*? If one merely wants to appreciate the narrative elements, there should be no need to watch the opera *Hamlet*—they could simply go to a spoken drama theater. However, in real life, people often want to see both the spoken drama *Hamlet* and the opera *Hamlet*.

This paper holds that the opera *Hamlet* offers a new understanding of the spoken drama *Hamlet*; it reexamines the story of avenging one's father through a new perspective—a lyrical perspective, a musical perspective, a perspective of singing. The opera *Hamlet* is no longer content with merely imitating the story of the Danish prince's revenge as it would unfold in real life. Instead, it incorporates the creators' own musical interpretations, reflections, and passions regarding the events of the story.

Telling stories is by no means music's strength; music has very limited narrative capacity. Where do we get such confidence to claim that operas are story-centered? It is acceptable to include some storytelling, and we cannot deny that music and singing have certain narrative functions. But if you say there exists a type of music that can tell a story as perfectly as a spoken drama, aren't you being ridiculous?

Narrative like storytelling, especially long-winded discourses, is not suitable for opera. Opera enters the plot through specific events, without resorting to memories, reasoning, or other rational means. This is not to say that opera cannot use narrative devices. If a musician animates their recitation with emotion rather than details, the effect can sometimes be extremely wonderful, because details can only be conveyed through endless narration.<sup>8</sup>

When a play is adapted into an opera, it often has to sacrifice some of its storylines, which is an important manifestation of the weak narrative ability of opera. In the process of being adapted into an opera with the same name, the storylines of the play have to give way to musicality. The following are some typical examples.

The play *Tosca* features vivid details, clear logic, and a plot that unfolds layer by layer. However, when adapted into an opera, some details must be removed to simplify the plot, thereby making room for music to fulfill its lyrical needs. For instance, in the first act, the original work depicts the escaped revolutionary Angelotti hiding in the church long beforehand. He overhears the conversation between the sacristan and the painter's servant, thus learning background details such as the painter's life experience. After the painter appears, a large portion of the text is devoted to explaining how the two came to know each other. In the opera, this plot is revised to have the two already acquainted, resulting in a more compact structure.

Let us further compare the different treatments of several scenes in the play *Othello* and the

<sup>8</sup> (US) Paul Henry Lang. *Music in Western Civilization*[M]. Gu Lianli, Zhang Hongdao, Yang Yandi, Tang Yating, trans. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2014: 344-345.

opera *Othello*.

The opera *Othello*, the 25th opera composed by Verdi, which he spent seven years completing at the age of 67, consists of four acts. Among them:

Act II: The scene where Iago makes Othello spy on Cassio "pleading" with Desdemona. The opera skips the original lines between Cassio and Desdemona, presenting only a distant view.

Act III: The scene where Othello demands the handkerchief from Desdemona. The opera omits Othello's lengthy monologue on love, condensing it into two arias—first lyrical, then dramatic.

Act IV: The scene where Othello strangles Desdemona. The opera omits Othello's long lines.

Othello's final monologue. The opera omits the narrative lines and emphasizes the lyrical arias.<sup>9</sup>

As can be seen above, the story in the opera *Tosca* is different from that in the play *Tosca*, and much of it has been erased.

Spoken drama neither excludes singing nor music. It is acceptable to include a few dispensable interludes in a spoken drama work, or even to accompany the entire story with some form of background music, but none of this can alter the nature of spoken drama. Music in spoken drama is occasional, partial, and background-like, whereas opera musicalizes the entire work in terms of its structure. For instance, in operatic works, even dialogue is transformed into a singing form—that is what is meant by "in terms of structure." In opera, singing is not accidental or dispensable, nor is the music in the play of a background nature.

In fact, the inadequacy of opera's narrative capacity can also be seen in terms of story themes. The themes of spoken drama can be all-encompassing, and they continue to expand and extend, with a strong sense of avant-garde; this is determined by its inherent characteristics, as it can reflect the world like a mirror. Music, however, is different, because it is not and cannot be an honest mirror of real life. Therefore, the story themes of opera have obvious limitations, which is an inevitable result of its weak narrative capacity. Opera favors existing themes, such as myths and folk tales, because myths and folk tales are familiar to everyone. They easily serve as a ready-made backdrop for actors to display their singing talents, eliminating the need for actors to laboriously, even inadequately, narrate details to the audience on stage.

... It can thus be seen that Western audiences are often more tolerant of the semantic nature of opera in terms of subject matter. This leads composers to often draw material from existing literary works or folk literature, as these stories are already familiar to the public and have a well-honed narrative framework.<sup>10</sup>

If you try to have an opera stage a Sherlock Holmes detective story, I don't think that would be very suitable. Or if you adapted *Murder on the Nile* into an opera, I suspect it would be extremely difficult. Otherwise, you would have to smooth out some of the plot, making concessions in the storyline; otherwise, it would likely leave the singers and musicians exhausted with little to show for it.

An opera should not be a story with singing and music, but rather a form of singing with a storyline.

<sup>9</sup> Qian Yuan, Lin Hua. *An Introduction to Opera*[M]. 1st ed. Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, 2014: 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Qian Yuan, Lin Hua. *An Introduction to Opera*[M]. 1st ed. Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, 2014: 7.

## (2) Dance Drama

After discussing opera, talking about dance drama seems somewhat easier, for dance drama also excels at expressing emotions, and its narrative capacity is even weaker than that of opera.

Thanks to the function of lyrics, opera still has relatively strong narrative ability. Dance drama, however, mainly uses the actors' physical movements as the medium of expression and, in principle, excludes verbal language. A typical example of this is ballet.

Dance is an art of the human body. It is an artistic form that expresses people's thoughts and emotions and reflects social life, with rhythmic, refined, organized and artistically processed body movements and poses as its primary means of expression.<sup>11</sup>

In short, since dance drama abandons verbal language, it relies almost entirely on physical movements for performance—even on those movements that, while rather visually appealing, are quite odd, like standing on tiptoe. This makes the narrative capacity of dance drama even inferior to that of opera. This remains the case even when it incorporates some pantomimic gestures.

The special expressive form of "pantomime" is also a manifestation of dramatic elements. As is known to all, dance is an art of the body, where actors have no lines. Therefore, when expressing important plots, various pantomimic gestures are often incorporated for explanation. For example, in the first act of the classical ballet *Swan Lake*, according to the plot, the Queen would say to the prince at his coming-of-age banquet: "You have reached adulthood and need to choose a princess to be engaged to." Such a simple sentence is difficult to convey through body language, and it is here that pantomimic gestures play a crucial role—the actress playing the Queen uses arm movements to point to the prince beside her and then to her own ring finger. Through these two simple gestures, the audience can intuitively understand what the Queen is expressing to the prince, which also lays a reasonable groundwork for the subsequent development of the plot. The use of pantomimic gestures is extremely important and necessary, as this silent dialogue allows people to fully perceive the dramatic conflicts beyond the plot itself.<sup>12</sup>

Pure movements can also tell stories, and pantomime is a case in point. However, there is a significant difference between the movements of dance drama performers and those of pantomime artists: the former must be rhythmic and musical, while the latter can be movements that mimic real-life situations. This is why pantomimic movements are somewhat stronger than those of dance drama in telling stories. Dance drama can be regarded as a type of pantomime, and ballet can even be seen as a rhythmic form of pantomime.

Have you ever seen anyone use pantomime to perform extremely complex stories? Chaplin's so-called silent films pushed the narrative capacity of pantomime to its extreme. But were Chaplin's storylines really that complex? I don't think they were. Precisely because pantomimic performances are clumsy in narration, pantomime has to exaggerate movements, involuntarily

<sup>11</sup> Xu Wenxia, Sun Juan. Basic Dance Tutorial[M]. Zhengzhou: Zhengzhou University Press, 2007: 3.

<sup>12</sup> Wang Ruixue. The Integration of Dance and Dramatic Elements: A Case Study of the Classical Ballet *Swan Lake*[J]. *Qilu Realm of Arts*, 2019, (06): 38.

confining itself to a sort of comedic performance. In fact, dance drama, especially ballet, also involves extreme exaggeration of real-life movements—dancers even have to walk on tiptoes all the time. How, then, can such a form tell stories that are full of twists and turns or rich in intricate details?

In ballet, just like in traditional Chinese opera, certain stylized movement routines have developed. For example, when the male lead first meets the female lead, he might point to the female lead's face with his hand, then draw two circles on his own face, and finally place his fingers to his lips as if kissing—all to express the love of love at first sight. Another example: pointing to the other person with an arm, then circling a hand above one's head twice to invite them to dance together. Some people consider these as signs of ballet's strong narrative capacity, but I feel quite the opposite. While these stylized routines do have a certain narrative or indicative function, they are not only rigid and inflexible but also require annotation from a specific cultural context. This itself reflects the strain in their narrative capacity.

Thus, dance drama is quite similar to opera: the artistic appeal of the genre lies in dance, not in narration. Like opera, dance drama—especially ballet—is even more restricted in its choice of story subjects. Ballet should not choose subjects with overly complex plots, nor should it preferably choose stories that are too novel; it should not compete with spoken drama for the title of "avant-garde." Ballet is better off choosing subjects that are already well-known to the public, or stories whose content requires no detailed explanation (so that the audience can roughly guess the gist from the performers' physical movements), or even subjects that have already been well-performed in spoken drama.

In short, I think it can be said that dance drama is a type of dance with a storyline. Therefore, those who cling stubbornly to the idea that "dance drama is about telling stories through dance" should reflect deeply on this.

### **(3) Song-and-Dance Drama**

The nature of song-and-dance drama can generally be understood by referring to opera and dance drama. Singing is the dominant element in opera, and dance is the dominant element in dance drama; thus, in song-and-dance drama, the integrated form of singing and dancing naturally becomes the artistic purpose of this genre.

Overall, because song-and-dance drama incorporates both singing and dancing as artistic means—sometimes even more flexibly—its narrative function should be stronger than that of pure opera or pure dance drama. For example, musicals can be regarded as a type of song-and-dance drama. Musicals can employ a variety of elements such as songs, dances, performances, and lines, telling stories and shaping characters through music, dance, and performance.

Dance, singing, and lines together constitute the language of musicals. The primary means of expression in drama is lines, and as one of the narrative means in musicals, lines have the same basic requirements as those in spoken drama. However, in terms of form of expression, the presentation of lines in musicals has its own uniqueness.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Hai Yan. The Uniqueness Embodied in the Lines of Musical[J]. *Art Education*, 2018, (20): 105.

Musicals not only incorporate elements of opera and dance drama, but their singing and dancing are also more flexible and diverse, not as rigid as those in opera or ballet. They even include some elements of spoken drama, which enhances their narrative capacity.

However, this article argues that, overall, song-and-dance drama still focuses primarily on expressing emotions through singing and dancing. It is not as adept at narration as spoken drama, nor does it take the storyline as its soul. The reason remains the same: if the storyline were truly the soul, why would there be a systematic inclusion of singing and dancing?

Chinese traditional opera is also a form of song-and-dance drama, a unique one specific to the Chinese nation. Just think: in the Huangmei Opera adaptation of *Thunderstorm*, when Zhou Ping finally shoots himself, in such a state of agony and despair, he still has to curl his fingers into a "orchid finger" to pick up the pistol and collapse "gracefully" with a dance-like movement. Can a story told in this way be the same as a story in a spoken drama? Even in such a painful and desperate plot, singing and dancing are not forgotten—so much so that the characters' movements are "gracefully" distorted to accommodate them. Yet some people insist, with their eyes closed, that Huangmei Opera takes the storyline as its soul. Can they really not feel the slightest sense of incongruity?

### **(三) Plot of Drama from the "Four-level Subdivision Method" Perspective**

Since dramatic works that do not take plot as their soul have long existed in such a universal way, why did the concept of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul" emerge so late? This concept should have appeared more than 2,000 years ago! This article holds that the reason for this situation is not only related to our inappropriate understanding of Aristotle's discussions on tragedy, but also to our insufficiently in-depth research on the issue of plot.

Indeed, it is high time to conduct in-depth exploration into the concept of plot. Once the internal structure of dramatic plot is clarified, many ambiguous issues in drama theory should be readily resolved. For this purpose, this article puts forward the "Four-level Subdivision Method" as a modest contribution, aiming to unlock many unsolved mysteries within the plot.

#### **1. Interpretation of the "Four-level Subdivision Method"**

Some works merely conduct a general structural analysis of the plot and then stop there. For instance, the so-called "Four-Stage Method" divides the plot into four "Plot Stages": "the Beginning Stage, the Developing Stage, the Climax Stage, and the Concluding Stage"; there is also the "Three-Stage Method," which more simply splits the plot into three segments: "the Beginning Stage, the Middle Stage, and the Concluding Stage"; and there is even the "Five-Stage Method," which categorizes the plot into the more complex five parts: "the Beginning Stage, the Rising Stage, the Climax Stage, the Falling Stage, and the Concluding Stage."

The "Four-level Subdivision Method" proposed in this article analyzes the plot as follows. For example, with reference to the "Four-Stage Method", we can divide the plot into four major "Plot

Stages", which we may call "the Beginning Stage, the Developing Stage, the Climax Stage, and the Concluding Stage" respectively. In this way, each "Plot Segment" contains one or several "Dramatic Events". Let us now use William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*<sup>14</sup> for illustration. This article holds that the plot of *Hamlet* can generally be analyzed as follows (see Table 1: Schematic Table of the "Four-Level Subdivision" of the Plot of *Hamlet*).

The "the Beginning Stage" of *Hamlet*'s plot is marked by *Hamlet*'s melancholy after learning of the "Dramatic Events" of "his father's sudden death" and "his mother's remarriage." Then comes the "Dramatic Events" of "the ghost of his father crying out for justice": Hamlet encounters the ghost of his father, who tells him that he was murdered by Claudius, prompting Hamlet to prepare for revenge. In other words, the "the Beginning Stage" of *Hamlet*'s plot mainly includes three "Dramatic Events": "the Father's Sudden Death," "the Mother's Remarriage," and "the Ghost of the Father crying out for Justice."

In the "the Developing Stage" of *Hamlet*'s plot, the first "Dramatic Events" is Hamlet's act of feigning madness to deceive his enemies and test the loyalty of those around him – which we could simply call "Feigning Madness". The second "Dramatic Events" involves Minister Polonius and the new king Claudius designing a scheme to verify the authenticity of Hamlet's madness. The third "Dramatic Events" should be Hamlet's counterintelligence strategy, a "Play within a Play" that tests Claudius deception. The fourth "Dramatic Events" occurs in Act III, Scene IV when Hamlet Mistakenly Kills Minister Polonius. While there may be alternative classifications, the core of *Hamlet*'s "the Developing Stage" generally consists of four dramatic events: "Feigning Madness", "Testing Madness", "Play within a Play", and "the Mistaken Killing of Polonius".

The climax of *Hamlet* unfolds through four pivotal "Dramatic Events". First, in Act IV, Hamlet is exiled to England. During his journey, he uncovers Claudius's plot to kill him with a false weapon. He cleverly escapes the trap and eventually returns to Denmark—a sequence known as "the English Escape". Second, also in Act IV, Ophelia—Hamlet's lover and Polonius's daughter—goes mad and drowns, an event called "the Lovers' Death". Third, in Act V Scene I, "the Cemetery Conflict" occurs, involving Hamlet's confrontation with Laertes at Ophelia's grave. Fourth, "the Laertes Duel" marks the climax, depicting the entire duel between Hamlet and Laertes.

The "Conclusion Stage" of *Hamlet*'s plot can be summed up as a "Dramatic Event" called "Denmark's Rebirth". This "Dramatic Event" consists of two "Dramatic Actions": first, "Narrating the Tragedy" – Hamlet's friend Horatio tells the whole story to Fortinbras, Prince of Norway; second, Fortinbras takes over Denmark, which can be called "Denmark's Change of Rulership".

Schematic Table of the "Four-Level Subdivision" of the Plot of <i>Hamlet</i>			
Plot Stage	Dramatic Event	Dramatic Action	Dramatic Movement
the Beginning Stage	"the Father's Sudden Death,"	omit	omit
	"the Mother's Remarriage,"	omit	omit
	"the Ghost of the Father crying out for Justice."	omit	omit
the Developing Stage	"the Feigning Madness"	omit	omit
	"the Testing Madness"	omit	omit

<sup>14</sup> (UK) William Shakespeare. *Five Tragedies of Shakespeare*[M]. Zhu Shenghao, trans. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2016.

g Stage	"Play within a Play"	omit	omit
	"the Mistaken Killing of Polonius"	omit	omit
the Climax Stage	"the English Escape"	omit	omit
	"the Lovers Death"	omit	omit
	"the Cemetery Conflict"	omit	omit
	"the Halertes Duel"	"Conspiring for the Duel"	omit
		"Preparing for the Duel"	omit
		"the First Round"	omit
		"the Second Round"	omit
		"the Accidentally Drinking Poisoned Wine"	omit
		"the Third Round"	omit
		"Death of the Queen"	omit
		"the Assassinating the King"	omit
the Concluding Stage	"Denmark's Rebirth"	"the Narration of the Tragedy"	omit
		"the New Life in Denmark"	omit

Figure 1. Schematic Table of the "Four-Level Subdivision" of the Plot of *Hamlet*

When analyzing a theatrical work, the fundamental narrative structure of its "Dramatic Events" should generally be clearly established. For professional researchers—including theater directors and performers—the analysis should delve deeper. This means that after identifying all the "Dramatic Events" in the play, one must examine each event's specific "Dramatic Actions", and further break down these actions into their most basic "Dramatic Movements".

For example, let us now go a step further and focus on what "Dramatic Actions" are contained within the "Dramatic Event" of the "Halertes Duel". This article holds that the "Halertes Duel" roughly includes such "Dramatic Actions" as "Conspiring for the Duel", "the Preparing for the Duel", "the First Round", "the Second Round", "the Accidentally Drinking Poisoned Wine", "the Third Round", "the Death of the Queen", and "the Assassinating the King".

- "the Conspiring for the Duel" refers to Laertes, tempted by Claudius, planning to duel with Hamlet.

- "the Preparing for the Duel" means King Claudius sends someone to convey Laertes' challenge, Hamlet accepts the challenge, both sides prepare their weapons, and the treacherous King Claudius also prepares poisoned wine.

- "the First Round" is the process in which the two duelists start the formal fencing match.

- "the Second Round" overlaps with "Accidentally Drinking Poisoned Wine": Hamlet wounds his opponent in the first round, and the king, eager to get rid of Hamlet, offers wine to him, but Hamlet does not drink it. During the second round, Queen Gertrude, unaware of the danger, accidentally drinks the poisoned wine.

- In "the Third Round", Laertes stabs Hamlet with the poisoned sword, and Hamlet, also unaware, stabs Laertes with the same poisoned sword.
- "the Death of the Queen" occurs when the queen dies from the poison at this moment, warning that the wine is poisoned with her last words.
- In "the Assassinating the King" dramatic action, Laertes reveals the king's conspiracy before his death; Hamlet then stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword, and Hamlet himself also dies from the poison.

In "the Halertes Duel", each "Dramatic Actions" comprises a series of "Dramatic Movements". For instance, the "First Round" includes audience attendance, the kings' pre-match remarks, and swordplay involving attacks, defenses, and evasions. "The Assassinating the King" dramatic action further incorporates additional elements: forcing the king to drink poisoned wine before his death, which completes the entire sequence.

Each play contains several "Plot Stages"; each "Plot Stage" includes one or several "Dramatic Events"; each "Dramatic Event" consists of one or several "Dramatic Actions"; and each "Dramatic Action" generally comprises a series of "Dramatic Movements". These "Dramatic Movements" can be physical movements, verbal movements, and this level encompasses all the characters' words and deeds throughout the entire play. With this, is our understanding of the composition of the plot clearer?

In short, the so-called "Four-level Subdivision Method" takes "Dramatic Events" as the link, subdividing from the major transitions of the plot all the way down to specific dramatic movements. Among these, "Dramatic Events" are the core. If we fail to identify the specific "Dramatic Events" contained in the plot progression, the analysis tends to be vague and general. On the other hand, if we decompose every specific event in a play into detailed "Dramatic Movements", it may become overly trivial. Therefore, one can make appropriate choices based on their own needs.

## **2. This is one thing and that is another**

In my humble opinion, the "Four-level Subdivision Method" should help us gain a deeper understanding of the essence of story plots through in-depth analysis. For instance, if we start with "Dramatic movement" – the lowest level in the "Four-level Subdivision Method" – whether in traditional spoken dramas or various modernist spoken dramas, their "Dramatic movements", including verbal movements and physical movements, all imitate the norms of daily life. However, this is not the case with the "Dramatic movements" in operas, ballets, and musicals; they are non-ordinary, romantic, or rather stylized. This distinction between the "Dramatic movements" of spoken dramas and those of operas, ballets, and musicals is the fundamental reason why spoken dramas differ from the latter. I would even liken it to the difference between the DNA of apes and that of modern humans.

Compared with realistic spoken dramas, theatrical genres such as operas, ballets, and musicals inherently possess romantic characteristics. Therefore, we cannot equate the stories in spoken dramas with those in operas, ballets, or musicals. The distinction between "Reality" and "Romance" as discussed here does not primarily refer to the entire dramatic work. Instead, it exists in the most fundamental "Dramatic movements" of the work and is an "innate" difference



between different types of dramas. It can thus be seen that the distinction between "Reality" and "Romance" in "Dramatic movements" under the "Four-level Subdivision Method" model is not the same as the distinction we usually talk about between realism and romanticism, or at least not entirely the same.

The research on "Dramatic movement" under the aforementioned "Four-level Subdivision Method" tells us that the "Dramatic movement" in spoken drama refers to the words and deeds of characters that imitate real-life forms; while the "Dramatic movement" in operas, ballets, and musicals consists of singing and dancing that are not part of daily life. For the former, its narrative means themselves are realistic, and its medium inherently has a realistic nature; for the latter, their narrative means are inherently romantic, and their medium possesses romantic characteristics. Sometimes, means can also determine essence. The difference in "Dramatic movements" between spoken dramas and operas, ballets, and musicals – that is, the difference in means and medium – determines their essential distinction.

Audiences should be able to understand the story plot clearly from the performance of a spoken drama itself. However, if an audience member who is unfamiliar with the plot goes to watch a ballet version of *Hamlet*, they will likely be confused, more or less. Therefore, audiences of operas, ballets, and musicals should enter the theater with prior knowledge of the plot, which is unnecessary for audiences of spoken dramas. This means that if the storyline of a spoken drama can be a reproduction of real events, operas, ballets, and musicals should be understood as expressions of emotion toward that storyline with prior knowledge of its details. The former focuses on reproduction, emphasizing the presentation of the storyline itself; the latter focuses on expression, emphasizing the sublimation and emotional refinement of the known storyline.

In short, if the audience remains confused about the storyline after a spoken drama performance, it should be regarded as a failure, unless the playwright deliberately intends to convey something through an unclear story. In principle, it is unacceptable for a spoken drama work to fail to tell the story clearly, even if it is a very complex one. However, if after an opera performance, someone who was unfamiliar with the plot beforehand only has a general impression and understands the rough outline of the storyline, that is already quite good. As for a ballet performance, it may not be uncommon for an audience member who had no prior knowledge of the plot to be vague about the entire story after watching it, and the cast and crew should not be overly blamed for this.

According to the "Four-level Subdivision Method", if we use the difference in "Dramatic movements" to distinguish the differences in storylines between different theatrical genres, then the story in the ballet *Swan Lake* is not the same as the story in the spoken drama *Swan Lake*. Similarly, the story in the opera *Hamlet* cannot be said to be identical to that in the spoken drama *Hamlet*. In a similar vein, the story presented in the Peking opera *The Legend of the White Snake* and that in the spoken drama *The Legend of the White Snake* cannot be treated as the same; at the very least, they are not entirely the same.

### **3. The Bottom Line of Plot in Drama**

This paper holds that in a work, even if the plot is reduced to a mere means, it must exist objectively; otherwise, according to the traditional definition of plot, the work should not be called a dramatic work.

Take *Peony Appreciation in a Fragrant Garden* by Zhu Youdun of the Ming Dynasty as an example. Japanese scholar Aoki, Masaru commented on this play as a "pure song and dance drama". What exactly does the word "pure" mean here? It should mean that the work consists only of singing and dancing without any plot at all. However, if that is the case, why is it called a "drama"? Could it be that in Aoki, Masaru's view, a "song and dance drama" can be completely devoid of a plot? Therefore, the statement of "pure song and dance drama" is somewhat confusing and self-contradictory.

This article argues that it would be inaccurate to claim *Peony Appreciation in a Fragrant Garden* lacks narrative structure, as this would negate its status as a drama. The plot summary of the play is as follows. Given the plays extremely simple plot with minimal dramatic tension, we employ a "Three-Stage Method" based on its natural progression, dividing it into three stages: "the Beginning Stage; the Middle Stage, and the Concluding Stage".

#### **A、the Beginning Stage**

Four Huadans (young female roles) take the stage, saying that it is springtime and they are going to practice their musical skills to perform for the imperial court. The Zhengmo (principal male role) enters with a child, introducing himself as a court eunuch in charge of garden flowers and music teaching. He then sings seven songs in praise of palace life and the scenery within the court. After meeting the Huadans, the flute-playing dan, pipa-playing dan, singing dan, and dancing dan perform their arts one by one, with the Zhengmo giving instructions to each. Later, he urges the four Huadan to work hard on their skills for their performances in the palace.

#### **B、the Middle Stage(1)**

A Jing (painted-face role) playing a child enters first, followed by five Huadans. The Zhengmo takes the stage and sings two songs, respectively praising the garden scenery and the joy of palace life. When he sees the Huadans, he asks why they have come to the garden. The Huadans reply that they came to look for the child and have some fun. They mention that the peonies are about to bloom and ask the Zhengmo when the flower-viewing feast will be held, to which he responds with a song. The Huadans then ask the Zhengmo to elaborate on the methods of cultivating peonies. After the Huadans perform singing and dancing, the Zhengmo gives them guidance.

#### **C、the Middle Stage(2)**

A Fumo (secondary male role) enters, stating that he has sent five scouts to check on the blooming status of the peonies in the garden. The scouts come on stage, and the Fumo questions them about the peonies in full bloom—their colors, forms, the birds and insects attracted to their fragrance, and the scenes of people holding feasts to admire them.

#### **D、the Concluding Stage**

The Zhengmo takes the stage, announcing that a feast is being held today to admire the peonies. The Fumo recites the ci-poem "Man Ting Fang" (Full Courtyard Fragrance). The Sezhang (leader of musicians) enters, and the group performs music accompanied by fifteen songs, each praising a famous peony variety such as "Bao Lou Tai" (Treasure Pavilion), "Qing Tian Xiang" (Celebrating Heavenly Fragrance), and "Zi Yun Fang" (Purple Cloud Fragrance). The Zhengmo concludes with praises of peace and prosperity.

We may now apply the "Four-level Subdivision Method" for analysis. (See Table 2: Schematic Table of the "Four-Level Subdivision" of the Plot in *Peony Appreciation in a Fragrant Garden*)

<b>Four-level subdivision table of the story plot of "<i>Peony Appreciation in a Fragrant Garden</i>"</b>			
Plot Stage	Dramatic Event	Dramatic Action	Dramatic Movement
the Beginning Stage	Four Huadans (young female roles) take the stage	saying that it is springtime and they are going to practice their musical skills to perform for the imperial court.	omit
	The Zhengmo (principal male role) enters with a child (child actor)	The Zhengmo (principal male role) enters with a child, introducing himself as a court eunuch in charge of garden flowers and music teaching.	omit
		Sing the first song	omit
		Sing the second song	
		Sing the third song.	
		Sing the fourth song.	
		Sing the fifth song.	
		Sing the sixth song.	
		Sing the seventh song.	
	The art education of The Zhengmo	Meeting a female lead actress	omit
		Instructs a female opera performer who on playing the bamboo flute.	
		Guide the Huadan in playing the pipa.	
		Instructs a female opera performer who on singing	
		Instructs a female dancer who in dance	
		Instructs all the female lead performers	
the Middle Stage(1)	The male lead and female lead take the stage.	A Jing (painted-face role) playing a child enters first, followed by five Huadans.	omit
	The Zhengmo sings	Sing the first song	omit
		Sing the second song	
	The zhengmo and the Huadans discuss matters	When the Zhengmo sees the Huadans, he asks why they have	omit

	concerning the child.	come to the garden. The Huadans replied that they came to look for the child and have some fun.	
	The male lead and the female performers discussed matters related to the banquet.	They mention that the peonies are about to bloom and ask the Zhengmo when the flower-viewing feast will be held, to which he responds with a song.	
	The male lead discussed with the female actors how to plant flowers.	The Huadans then asked the Zhengmo to elaborate on the methods of cultivating peonies.	
	The master teaches the art.	After the Huadans perform singing and dancing, the Zhengmo gives them guidance.	
<b>the Middle Stage(2)</b>	The secondary actors make their entrance.	A Fumo (secondary male role) enters, stating that he has sent five scouts to check on the blooming status of the peonies in the garden.	omit
	The flower spy conveyed the message that the flowers were blooming.	The scouts come on stage, and the Fumo questions them about the peonies in full bloom—their colors, forms, the birds and insects attracted to their fragrance, and the scenes of people holding feasts to admire them.	
<b>The Concluding Stage</b>	The host announces the banquet information.	The Zhengmo takes the stage, announcing that a feast is being held today to admire the peonies.	omit
	The stage manager's lines or the dialogue spoken by the minor characters in traditional Chinese opera.	The Fumo recites the ci-poem "Man Ting Fang" (Full Courtyard Fragrance).	omit
	All instruments play together	Sing the first song	omit
		Sing the second song	
		Sing the third song.	

		Sing the fourth song.	
		Sing the fifth song.	
		Sing the sixth song.	
		Sing the seventh song.	
		Sing the eighth song.	
		Sing the ninth song.	
		Sing the tenth song.	
		Sing the eleventh song.	
		Sing the twelfth song.	
		Sing the thirteenth song.	
		Sing the fourteenth song.	
		Sing the fifteenth song.	
	The host announced the end of the banquet.	The Zhengmo concludes with praises of peace and prosperity.	omit

Figure 2. Four-level subdivision Table of the story plot of *Peony Appreciation in a Fragrant Garden*

As can be seen from the Table, although the "Dramatic Events" in each "Plot Stage" of *Peony Appreciation in a Fragrant Garden* have a strong sense of repetitive stagnation—repeatedly featuring actions and movements such as the characters' entrances, singing and dancing, and dance practice—they are, after all, progressing along the timeline. Therefore, *Peony Appreciation in a Fragrant Garden* certainly has its own plotline; however, this plotline has almost entirely reduced to a means of linking song and dance performances, and has almost completely lost its own value for appreciation.

To add a brief note here: if the word "pure" in Japanese scholar Aoki Masaru's comment that this play is a "pure song and dance drama" refers to the fact that the play is entirely focused on song and dance, with its storyline reduced to a purely instrumental device for connecting these song and dance segments, then such a comment is understandable.

In conclusion, we should abandon the vague and seemingly contradictory notion that certain works are "pure musicals". Even if a plot is diluted, as long as there exists a narrative thread, it cannot be called "pure" – it can only be termed a "drama", at least in terms of formal structure. If something is "purely" devoid of a plot, lacking even a superficial plotline, it should not be reluctantly called a "drama."

## 4. Non-story "plot"

It is worth noting that in the history of world drama, there are even so-called "non-plot" plays.

*The Fairys* stands as ballet history's first narrative-free production, pioneering modern dance artistry. This storyless masterpiece transports audiences into a dreamlike realm through four solo pieces, one duet, and two ensemble dances. The performance opens with celestial maidens forming an elegant tableau, then gracefully follows them as they chase a young poet around a forest pond,

guiding him through enchanted landscapes. Composed of seven musical works including Chopin's Preludes, Nocturnes, Waltzes, and Mazurkas, the music and dance create a seamless fusion that immerses viewers in a dazzling spectacle. Most intriguingly, when the curtain falls, all the dancers return to their original static poses—like a poetic whisper: "This was but a beautiful dream!"<sup>15</sup>

This observation invites deep reflection: If a work is "plotless" or "completely devoid of storyline", why is it still classified as a "dance drama"? Can dance dramas truly exist without narrative? Can a production that lacks both plot and storyline still be called a "drama"? The article contends that while the stage production *The Fairies* contains elements woven throughout its entirety, these are no longer literary narratives. They should rather be understood as expressions of psychological and emotional depth.

The reason why *The Fairies* is still referred to as a "drama" lies in its core structure resembling traditional literary narrative frameworks. These musical and dance performances reveal the elusive aspects of human nature and the depths of the human heart. If we must define this essence as a "narrative," it fundamentally differs from conventional dramatic plots. Perhaps we can only call such a plot a "Drama-like Plot" and refer to the entire performance as a "Drama-like Performance".

.....*The Fairys* is not a description of the plot.... Inspired by Fokkin, this "musical ballet" based on the emotions suggested by the music and designed according to the changes of its melody, rhythm and harmony became popular in Europe and America after the 1930s.<sup>16</sup>

When analyzing *The Fairies* through the "Four-level Subdivision Method" of narrative structure, we observe a striking phenomenon: the play lacks any coherent "Dramatic Events". While its choreographed movements—specifically ballet routines—do form a series of actions, such as group dances or solo performances, it becomes difficult to identify any concrete "Dramatic Events". This indicates that despite the abundance of stage movements and actions in *The Fairys*, they fail to constitute what we would typically call "Dramatic Events". Without these essential dramatic elements, how can we even speak of a coherent storyline?

Not only does *The Fairys* lack concrete "Dramatic Events," but the characters themselves remain undefined, making it impossible to discern their relationships. They don't even have names. We can only roughly tell through the play's set that the characters should be somewhere in the forest, but cannot determine their specific "Given Circumstances."

Now, the theoretical debate has returned to a recurring issue. When it comes to these "Plotless" or "Drama-like Plot" works, should we exclude them from the realm of "Drama" or keep them within its conceptual framework? According to traditional theatrical conventions, performances lacking even basic narrative threads should no longer be called "Drama." Yet some still label them as such. If this practice gains academic recognition, the definition of drama would need broadening, and perhaps even the concept of "Plot" in theater itself requires redefinition.

Due to space limitations, this article cannot delve deeper into this topic. However, I would like to emphasize the following key points. First, not only can literary narratives weave together

<sup>15</sup> Long Fei. Fokine and His *Les Sylphides*[J]. *Party & Government Forum*, 2015, (07): 42.

<sup>16</sup> Jiang Shudong. Inheritance and Innovation between *La Sylphide* and *Les Sylphides*[J]. *Art Education*, 2013, (07): 107.

dance performances, but even vague emotional elements—those akin to narrative threads in literature—can be woven into a grand performance when developed over time. Second, if we accept "Plotless" ballet as a form of drama, it implies that narrative is not necessarily the soul of theater and may even be entirely absent from dramatic works. The extreme case of *The Fairys* validates our concept of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul" through its demonstration of this principle.

However, that said, classifying *The Fairys* – which is "Plotless" – into the category of drama, even though this would be highly favorable to the basic argument of this article, the author does not dare to take pleasure in it. At the very least, these new forms of work should be distinguished from traditional dramatic works.

Large-scale stage performances have a tendency toward integration, and such integration indeed requires a connecting main thread. But whether this main thread can only be a plot, only a literary story line, is a point that merits exploration. Furthermore, the exploration of various elements that can serve as the connecting thread in large-scale performances should also be of considerable exploratory value.

#### (四) Concluding remarks

The concept of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul" carries significant historical and theoretical implications. For instance, regarding the birth period of Chinese opera, there has been historical debate: some argue it emerged during the Han Dynasty, while others maintain it originated in the Song-Yuan era. These disputes essentially reflect disagreements over the essence of storytelling. Now, if we categorize world dramas into two major types based on whether their narratives serve as the soul of a work, I believe this approach becomes much easier to resolve. If we accept that *Donghai Huanggong* (The Yellow Duke of Donghai) is a Han Dynasty piece with subtle narrative elements, then we can confidently assert that "Dramas Without Plot as Soul" had already taken root in the Han Dynasty.

The article further argues that the concept of "Dramas Without Plot as Soul" carries practical significance in creative practice. It theoretically liberates genres like opera, ballet, and musicals from their millennia-long fixation on storytelling. From this point forward, the creators of operas, dance dramas, and musicals—those Mozart-like musicians, those Beethoven-like composers, those Puccini-like artists, as well as the creators of ballets such as *Swan Lake*—can boldly and confidently pursue their dreams of music and dance on the theatrical stage.

China's numerous traditional Chinese opera performers can also confidently say "no" to those spoken drama directors who impose wrong ideas on them.

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