

Presentation about the influence of Hans-Thies Lehmann's "Postdramatic theatre" on Chinese contemporary theatre

by Li Yinan and Peng Tao

The Chinese translation of *The Post-dramatic Theatre* was published by Peking University Press in 2010. It was translated from German into Chinese by Li Yinan, Professor of Theatre Studies at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. In order to describe and to analyze the new theatre phenomenon since the 1980s, Hans-Thies Lehmann borrowed terminology from diverse fields - literature theory, linguistics, philosophy, physics, and biology. What he describes in the book was quite new to China. For quite a few terminology there was even no corresponding Chinese words. In 2010, Mr. Lehmann was invited to give a lecture about *The Post-dramatic Theatre* at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. The whole Academy paid high attention to this chance of exchange. Plenty of students, professors attended this lecture. Mr. Lehmann gave a clear explanation of the concept of "post-dramatic theatre". Interestingly, a dramatic scene happened during the lecture. When Mr. Lehmann explained about the relationship between Bert Brecht and the Post-dramatic Theatre, a young Chinese student stood up and accused his "error". The student believed Brechtian Theatre to be pure agit-prop plays. The student further accused Lehmann's concept of post-dramatic aesthetics as a kind of "formalism" that would blur class conflicts. During the eight years after Mr. Lehmann's book was translated into Chinese, it caused diverse controversy in the Chinese theatre world. The book has been criticized by some conservative Chinese scholars for its "formalist" viewpoints, while attracting great interest of some young theatre makers. Li Jianjun, a young theatre director says for example, "I was influenced greatly by the book. It gives me an overview of the post-dramatic scene, which differs from the traditional representational dramatic theatre and its principles. Through this 'lens' I begin to observe and think about the contemporary Western theatre works. This process of thinking helped me to find my own working methods, my own motives in my artistic

practice. When I started to direct theatre pieces, I also referred to the book sometimes.” Li Ning, visual artist, choreographer and director of physical theatre says, “I did not know how to describe my work before I read the book. When I first read it, I was not impressed by its theoretical system because I did not read it carefully enough. My greatest impression was – I can located myself now. It was like finding my position in google map.” Choreographer Wen Hui says, “I read the book in 2012. It was one of the very few books about contemporary theatre that I can find in China. I remember my excitement when reading it. I also bought one for a friend of mine in Hongkong.” Wang Mengfan, young theatre maker who graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Art, China says, “I first read the book in the Winter of 2011, after attending the lectures on Contemporary Western Theatre Arts taught by Professor Li Yinan at the Central Academy of Drama. I did not really understand the book before I started to make theatre. The book gave a proper name for the new theatre, no matter in Europe or in China; in other words, it showed me my position in the context of Western theatre.”

2: THE POST-DRAMATIC THEATRE attracted great interest of Chinese independent theatre makers – Li Jianjun, Li Ning, Wen Hui, Wang Mengfan... The aesthetic concepts it introduces also help to understand the Chinese independent theatre (beginning in the 1980's). The Chinese translator of THE POST-DRAMATIC THEATRE used a specific term “juchang” in her translation to describe the non-dramatic theatre works, which stress upon performativity and *Örtlichkeit*. Juchang is also the term that the Chinese independent theatre makers use to describe their own works. Another reason that the independent theatre makers use the term “juchang” (but not “drama”) might be their resistance to the dominance of mainstream dramatic theatre. Zhang Xian, one of the pioneers of Chinese independent theatre says, “I define almost all my works as juchang, including many ‘counter-interviews’, I call them speech-action-theatre. I also define my creative actions in places of everyday life as juchang.”

3: The publication of Lehmann's POST-DRAMATIC THEATRE corresponded, propelled forward and laid the theoretical fundament for the development of the

aesthetics of new theatre. Scholars as well as audience no longer wonder if the pieces they see should be called “theatre” or not, but pay attention to the social and artistic aspects of the work. Because of the lack of financial resources, independent theatre makers have to play in unconventional places – tent theatre takes place in the temporarily constructed tents; Artists of Caochangdi Working Station play in the same space they live; The Grass Stage in Shanghai utilizes all places they can afford – auditoriums, hotel lobby, galleries, schools; Li Ning performs in construction sites in the suburb of his hometown Ji’nan. Zhang Xian, whose texts are not allowed for stage, extended the meaning of juchang to an extremely wide extent to include all forms of occupation of public sphere (interview, internet writings, flash mob, etc.) as juchang. The independent juchang artists’ position - far away from the center /outside of the mainstream leads to their reflection upon the center-periphery discourse. After 2000, Living Dance Studio/Caochangdi Work Station became a crucial point of Chinese independent theatre. Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang opened up their living space to young theatre artists from all parts of China. They share this space for living, rehearsals as well as performances. Theatre was extended into everyday life. What united these people was the concept of “home”. The private “home” and the everyday life space became their tool of resistance against the government-dominated public sphere as well as the dramatic theatre system. In 2007, Li Yinan, the translator of POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE took up the position of Chief Dramaturg of the Caochangdi May Festival, where she introduced Lehmann’s book into China through series of lectures. The book encouraged the young Caochangdi artists to work independently, in all sorts of spaces. Li Jianjun, for example, transformed a bus into performing space (in his piece “25.3 km”). In recent years, Li Yinan directed students’ theatre pieces for the Central Academy of Drama – YouMou/Have, Have Not (2015), Jia/HOME (2016)、Shuihu (2017) . These pieces gave impetus to fundamental conceptual changes in Chinese theatre education. In the relatively conservative Academy system, the students began to understand theatre with an open and active mind and started to produce their own theatre works.

4: After the publication of POST-DRAMATIC THEATRE in China, Mr. Lehmann was invited to China to give series of lectures. He used this opportunity to support the Chinese independent theatre makers directly. He saw productions by Li Jianjun and Li Ning in Wuzhen and expressed his appreciation. Through his promotion, these marginalized young artists assured their places in the mainstream Chinese theatre world. This year, Mr. Lehmann takes up the position of the Academic Consultant for the first Factory Theatre Festival in Laiwu. He was also invited to the internationally noted Wuzhen Theatre Festival. In the IATC Youth Forum at the 2017 Wuzhen Theatre Festival, Mr. Lehmann gave 10 advices to the young generation of theatre critics. These advices of Mr. Lehmann inspired the Chinese young theatre critics greatly.

The year 2019 will be the 20th anniversary of the publication of THE POST-DRAMATIC THEATRE. After its publication, the book raised debates in the Western world of theatre studies. The prediction – that theatre would develop on the path of non-representation / non-mimesis has been questioned by some scholars. However, there is a huge difference between the Chinese and the Western discourses about the book. In contemporary China, independence theatre makers are being severely oppressed. From the global point of view, Asia as the former oppressed colony of the West is also seeking for new ways to fight for space and voice. In the fight of the oppressed for the public space, THE POST-DRAMATIC THEATRE left us with valuable inspirations. So, thanks Mr. Lehmann, thanks for his contribution to Chinese independent theatre.