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## **Interview with Liu Xinglin**

Liu Xinglin is a renowned and award-winning Chinese stage designer. He won the Honorary PQ 2015 Award for Performance Design. He is Professor of Stage Design at The Central Academy of Drama, Beijing, China and he was the curator of the Chinese national exhibit at PQ 2015. In this interview with Joslin McKinney he reflects on his long-standing involvement with PQ and the way this feeds in to his practice as a designer and as a teacher of scenography.

*Joslin McKinney (JM): I am very interested to know your thoughts on the value of the Prague Quadrennial as an international celebration of design and exchange of ideas about developments in theatre.*

Liu Xinglin (LX): Thank you. I am glad to talk with you about the Prague Quadrennial. It presents trends in scenography from across the world and this has long been of interest to me as a practitioner and as a teacher in stage design.

*JM: You were the curator of China's national exhibition and of China's student exhibition at the Prague Quadrennial. In both exhibitions you emphasised the combination of tradition and contemporary exploration. What would you say are the main characteristics and aesthetic principles of traditional Chinese stage design? And what significant trends in contemporary exploration have you noticed?*

LX: The most important value of the traditional Chinese stage is that it is a complete system, which allows the [traditional Chinese stage] to understand, to interpret the world. It doesn't directly depict a real environment; instead it presents a stylized or abstracted visual image. "Show one, represent ten" means that one thing or image, if it is focused and concise, can refer to other things, other situations. And it is interdependent with the actor's performance. The world created by the traditional Chinese stage corresponds to the real world [the stage does not replicate the real world, but it is parallel and can respond to the real world].

In fact, this is not only true on the stage, but also in many traditional art forms, for example poems, painting, architecture and so on. All of them have affected our aesthetic judgment, have stimulated further artistic creation, enriched our spatial

consciousness, and supplied distinctive visual symbols, which then determine our stance on art. In the face of increasing globalisation, these are unique resources in the creation of art and have lasting vitality as a nation's cultural inheritance.

When working on the contemporary stage, it is important to explore and interpret the spiritual content of the performance by refining symbol or metaphor; focusing on a purity of space for an unrestrained expression. It is about recognizing and then re-thinking the nature of art within the seemingly complex contemporary phenomenon of stage technology and form. And through that, we might discover some interesting revelations, and find that both the traditional Chinese stage and the contemporary world theatre attempt to understand and explore some similar aspects.

*JM: Have social and cultural changes in China had an impact on theatre and stage design in particular?*

LX: The development of the Chinese economy and the changes in society and culture during the last thirty years has undoubtedly enriched the perception of art and also supplied technology to support it. It is a booming time with theatre buildings springing up, with large-scale performances being shown frequently and with the upgrading of theatrical technology. The exploration of performing arts and stage style is very active right now. We also feel the impact of such fast changes and we have met with unprecedented conflicts and challenges from the influence of globalisation. The questions that confront us as designers include: How do we keep the balance between economic profit and artistic standards? Is the adoption of new materials and technologies the same as a renewal of creativity? We are in a time now where we can easily have access to all the visual images, day after day, so what is the particular value of the stage image? How should stage design or scenography reflect the rich historical resources from a contemporary angle? How do we echo contemporary society in the context of the performance, and is an artist's knowledge and creativity enough to respond to this complex environment? We can't ignore these questions.

*JM: And how have these changes influenced the way student designers are taught?*

LX: On the one hand, the traditional teaching model and context are no longer able to adapt to today's developments. Schools and universities have had to set up new experimental courses, including introducing modern art phenomenon and genres; visual concepts and training that is very different from the traditional easel painting training. These new courses emphasize the interpretation of the script and concepts of space. On the other hand, traditional teaching content and experience still has a great value. The changing of time and society means we have to re-examine and update what is possible for education.

*JM: How is taking part in the Prague Quadrennial valuable to you as a designer and as a teacher?*

LX: Senior Chinese artists have been taking part in PQ since 1987. Over 20 years generations of scenographers, artists and theatre people attach importance to PQ as an international exchange platform. But, for various some reasons, it has not always been easy for Chinese colleagues to participate, for example SARS in 2003<sup>i</sup> and also some political issues. However we have tried our best and follow closely PQ's activity which has played a key role in enriching the development of Chinese scenography. For me, I have taken part in PQ from 1991, even during the 2003 Chinese SARS outbreak when I only arrived in Prague for the last few days of the exhibition. Why are we so focused on PQ? Because it is an important way of picking up trends in the international scenography community. Although there are other exhibitions, such as World Stage Design, which is organized by OISTAT, PQ still is the most authoritative and most representative international exhibition. Whether it is to show their work on this global platform, or just witness other people's work and participate in various projects, it helps to improve our concepts and methods. Artistic creation and awareness of the possibility of development is made possible by extending our horizons and being inspired by others. China has an old saying: "View a thousand swords and understand what is the best"<sup>ii</sup>. For me, the value of the Prague Quadrennial is expressed in this saying.

*JM: What changes and trends have you noticed at the PQ over recent years?*

LX: I have noticed that interdisciplinarity, crossing boundaries, hybridization, interaction, have all appeared in PQ over recent years. These indicate the new trends and character of PQ in different aspects of the event.

Theatre arts occupy a particular space-time in the arts which contradicts the traditional exhibition form. I have noticed PQ's history is the progress of overcoming the contradictions between the live event and documentation. Duplicating the original set or presenting the performance through video can immerse the audience in the dramatic scene. PQ has been emphasizing the interdisciplinary interaction since 1999 by using live and interactive exhibitions. Replacing the original title 'The Exhibition of Scenography and Theatre Architecture', with the new title 'The Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space', has led to a broader extension of the concepts of scenography. And in recent years, the PQ exhibition has gradually evolved into a permanent research platform and professional information center with various forums held between the quadrennials.

The location of the PQ2015 exhibition, in historical architecture and in public space in the old town instead of the normal exhibition space, represented a significant change of the concept of space. The combination of exhibition and old town is well-matched with the concept of contemporary site-specific performance as well. In addition to international exhibitions from countries and regions, performing space, ephemeral architecture, and student exhibitions, new sections for Objects, Makers, and Tribes and space laboratories were present at PQ 2015. All of these together show the continuation and expansion of PQ since 1999 and the tendency to emphasise the present moment (live, presence, temporality, ephemerality) and also interaction.

In recent years, another trend at PQ is a gradual reduction in stage models and production photos, instead perspectives such as space design or visual arts are now becoming mainstream themes. My understanding is that not only do different kinds of art influence each other, but the progress of social media and media technology has made it easier to experience performances more than past years. It is inadequate for scenography exhibitions to merely record or duplicate performances. If we say that twenty years ago PQ aimed to 'exhibit theatre through stage design', the emphasis now is on presenting and discovering all elements of performance arts. It attempts to create a new environment in an exhibition condition that lacks the original physical materials and the spiritual aspect of the original performance space. Of course, there are still issues to be explored, such as how to meet the needs of the international participants in

exchanging creative work, or how to maintain the distinct characteristics of PQ from other large international art exhibitions.

*JM: Your design for The Peony Pavilion won the Honorary PQ 2015 Award for Performance Design. Can you explain how we can see the combination of tradition and innovation in this design? In what ways have you applied new aesthetic ideas to traditional Chinese theatre Opera?*

LX: What is enlightening for me in Chinese traditional theatre is the idea that limits can lead to limitlessness, i.e. we use 'small' to express 'large' while we use 'less' for 'more'. This is the same principle of traditional Chinese aesthetics, but it also coincides with the innate artistic character of theater. In my view, this purity is not simple, instead it is to do with control and selectivity. And these concerns include the stage designer's expectation of the acting and its potential. The design of "Peony Pavilion" presented these aesthetic principles based on the concept of a symbolic space. At the front is the real world; the heroine's narrow living space and this is juxtaposed with the broad garden space beyond. The heroine's space is only about three meters deep downstage, whilst the garden space occupies nearly three times the upstage area. By leaving a large area of empty space the composition is attempting to seek a meeting point, in visual form, between the artistic spirit of Chinese traditional art and contemporary aesthetics.

Traditional Chinese sung theatre <sup>iii</sup>performance occupies a much larger proportion of productions than spoken drama, dance theatre and the Western style of opera in China. The past two decades, I have had lots of opportunities to design for traditional theatre

After sitting in the theatre immersed in the music and those long lasting arias for a length of time, I have found those emotional signals, hidden under the complex form, became clearer and recognizable. And through that I begin to feel a correspondence between my inner world and the spiritual message expressed by a 1000 year-old work. In this way the cultural tradition, sometimes obscure becomes more immediate and tangible.

I believe there is a kind of cultural gene in the traditional theatre. It is far more lasting than its superficial form. It makes me feel that when I design for a traditional theatre piece, it is not a job or a career. It is not just a cultural dialogue between the old culture and myself. Actually through the traditional aesthetic principle, I understand what the stage is or can be. In fact all these traditional cultural elements I've talked about are not a closed system that stands on its own. There are a lot of meeting points or

correspondences between this traditional system and contemporary art. The abstraction and purity in Chinese traditional theatre reminds me of other art forms and architectural theory – the “less is more” from Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and minimalist music by Phillip Glass, also Robert Wilson’s work. Although the context of their work and Chinese traditional theatre forms vary, the essence is related - there is a similar internal relation. From all these, we can feel the extension of traditional Chinese aesthetics into contemporary work and arrive at the same place that modern sensibilities demand. In my practice, I hope to discover a new way through looking back at Chinese traditional cultural forms from a contemporary aesthetic perspective.

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<sup>i</sup> Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). An outbreak in China in 2003 led to major restrictions on travel in order to contain the virus.

<sup>ii</sup> The meaning of this saying is that it is necessary to study many forms in order to become a master.

<sup>iii</sup> Traditional Chinese theatre, which is mostly sung, is often referred to as Chinese opera, but it is a very different from Western concepts of opera that Liu also mentions here. Liu has worked extensively in both these styles.