

Li Yu on the performing arts

Translated by Man Sai-cheong

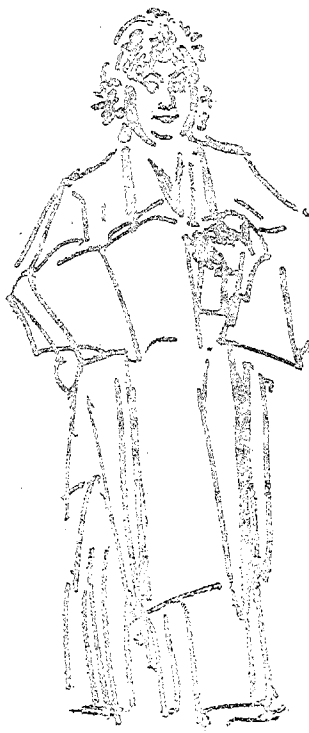
The many-faceted talent of Li Yu (1611-1680?), represented in a short story in Renditions No. 1, is here shown in his comments on drama. Himself playwright and impresario, Li kept a roaming troupe and staged his own plays, of which he wrote at least ten. Thus he transcended the confines of a merely literary approach and saw drama in terms of the performing arts with all sections of the community as audience. The following are excerpted at random from his book A Temporary Lodge for My Leisured Thoughts (閑情偶寄) and translated by Mr. Man as part of his work toward the degree of Master of Philosophy at the University of Hong Kong.

Theatre for all

Drama is not the same as other forms of literary writing which are meant for the scholars and literate class and so justify a certain degree of abstruseness. Drama is meant to be performed before the literate and the illiterate alike, and for the enjoyment of uneducated women and children. Therefore immediate comprehensibility is preferred to intellectual profundity.

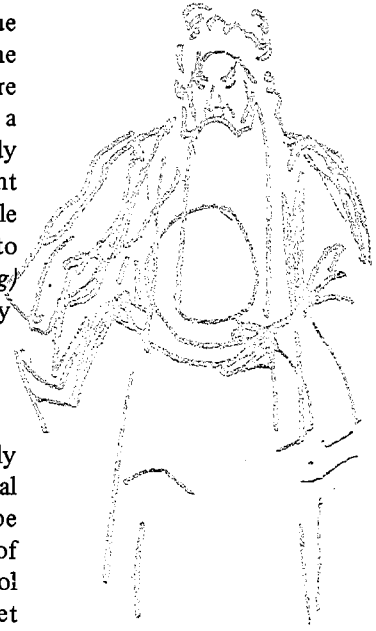
The organic whole

Organic wholeness and spontaneous delight are two indispensable qualities of a play. Organic wholeness is the internal spirit of drama while spontaneous delight is its external manifestation. If these two elements are lacking, the drama is like a clay man or a clay horse, with only the shape of living beings but without the breathing of life. It is so because the writer only pads out his work sentence by sentence and the spectator has to remember the play section by section. If he is slightly negligent or inattentive, he will not be able to recall what the previous song was about. When he is watching the second act, he will never anticipate what is to come in the third. If the play is written in a disjointed manner, it will make the eyes and ears of the audience sore. Thus in writing drama, it is desirable to show no signs of disjointedness and to avoid being pedantic. In order to achieve unity and wholeness, not having simply one act after another and character following character, the elements of the play must be as vitally linked as the blood and arteries are in the body system. Even for events or situations apparently unrelated, there should be interlocking tissues in the middle so that the exquisite ingenuity is revealed only at a later stage. The play should be well-knitted like the hidden fibres of a lotus root, invisible unless the root is chopped, or like a cocoon, the artistry of weaving only revealed when it is unthreaded. This explains the indispensable quality of being organic in drama.



Distinguishing the roles

The crudest and basest language can be used in drama, but it must fit the characters who speak it. It is imperative for the dialogue of a 'hua-mien' or painted face to be crude and vulgar, whereas the words of the songs of the 'male' and the 'female' roles must be more carefully couched and refined. A 'male' role (*sheng*), whether it be a gentleman or an official, and a 'female' role (*tan*), be it a young lady or an elderly mistress, must as a rule use language of cultured refinement and leisurely elegance. Even if the 'male role' is a servant or the female role is a maid, he or she must choose words with some care, in order to be distinguished from the words and tone of the 'painted face' (*ching*) and 'comic roles' (*ch'ou*). The male and female roles are distinctly different character-types from the painted and comic roles.



Qualification of dramatist

A dramatist needs to be knowledgeable and well-read. Not only has he to be versed in the classics and their commentaries, philosophical works, history, poetry, parallel prose, ancient prose; he should also be familiar with the works of Taoism and Buddhism, different schools of thought, all sorts of occupations and even the primers for school children such as *A Thousand Characters* and *A Hundred Names*. Yet when a dramatist actually makes use of these materials in his writing, they should be so fused with his own ideas that no trace can be found of direct allusion. Occasionally he has to use conventional proverbial sayings and allude to ancient events; these have to be done with such art that it appears artless and completely uncontrived. It must seem as though the ancients are seeking out the dramatist, not being sought after.

Different vocal attributes

An actor who can produce guttural sounds that are clear and elevated is capable of the role of a 'cheng sheng' 正生 or 'hsiao sheng' 小生 (young male). One whose guttural sounds are shrill and soft, whose singing is full and round is the material of a 'cheng tan' 正旦 or 't'ieh tan' 貼旦 (female lead and additional female character.) Those having similar qualities to a smaller degree are fit to play the role of 'lao tan' 老旦 (elderly female). One whose guttural sounds are clear and loud but less rich are good for 'wai' 外 and 'mo' 末 (extra male roles) whereas one whose guttural sounds are tragically heroic to the verge of being distressed and broken will be good for the role 'ta ching' 大淨 (chief choleric male). For those playing the roles of 'ch'ou' 丑 (clown) and 'fu-ching' 副淨 (secondary choleric male), their vocal apparatus requires no specific attributes, they only have to be sprightly in disposition and clever in speech.

李笠翁曲話

Language of drama

The language of drama is not only different from that of poetry but should be exactly opposite. The value of poetry lies in its refinement and elegance; crudity and vulgarity are condemned. So the language of poetry has to convey the meaning implicitly and not explicitly. The language in a play is different. Its dialogue is based on the daily speech of the man-in-the-street and its story is told straight and plain. If a play has to be thought about carefully and pondered over deeply before it can be understood or appreciated, it cannot be considered as drama of a high quality.

Contemporary taste

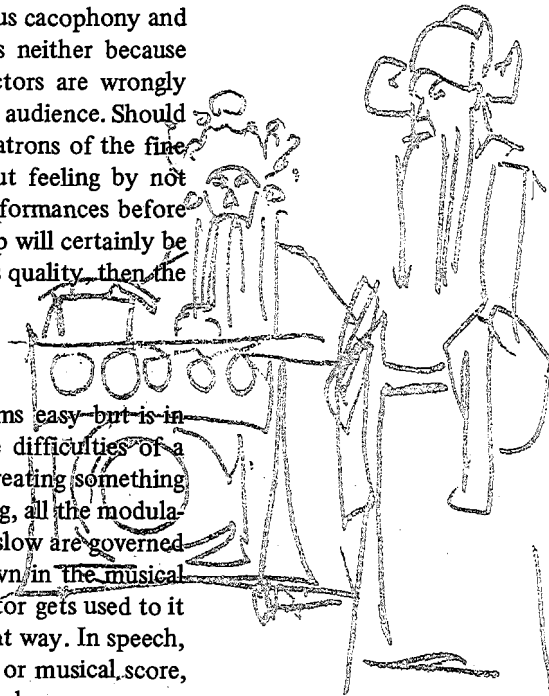
The current taste of the audience and the prevalent practice of the actors centre on hot and noisily exciting plays. The cold and calm lyrics and the elegant tune are shunned like the plague . . . I think, what matters most in drama, is not whether it is cold or hot but whether it faithfully reflects human behaviour. If the partings and reunions, sadness and joy of a play are all appropriate manifestations of human nature, it can move the audience to tears, provoke their laughter, excite their anger and hold them in thrilled suspense. Even though the stage is in dead silence, drums and clappers unbeaten, the audience's applause can still be thunderous.

Power of the patrons

At present the theatre is drowned by thunderous cacophony and melodies of high quality have long been silent. It is neither because singers are born at the wrong time nor because actors are wrongly directed by their teachers. The fault actually lies in the audience. Should there be among those holding important posts a few patrons of the fine arts, they can boycott those plays which are without feeling by not requesting their performance or by booing their performances before they are finished. This act of disapproval from the top will certainly be emulated by all and sundry. If the audience demands quality, then the actors will not dare to stage plays negligently.

Difficulties in recitation

Singing seems difficult but is easy, speech seems easy but is in fact difficult. This is because by understanding the difficulties of a problem, we shall find it easier to tackle, whereas treating something slightly will certainly bring about difficulties. In singing, all the modulation of rise and fall, the tempo of the quick and the slow are governed by regulations and patterns, all explicitly written down in the musical scores and strictly taught by the teacher. Once an actor gets used to it through training, he will then naturally follow the right way. In speech, pitch and tempo are governed by no formulated rule or musical score, and everything depends on the instructions of the teacher.



Learning to sing

If a song is to be finely sung, an actor must look for an enlightening teacher who can explain clearly its meaning. When his teacher cannot do this, then the help of a man-of-letters should be sought, so that the meaning of a song is understood before it is sung. In the process of singing, the song must be informed with the right spirit to bring out exactly the mood of the character in the situation. With such an effort, even with the same style of singing and the same song, the tonal variation and phrasing will result in a voice of special flavour while the movements of the eyes and head will attain an expression of special grace, both different from the offerings of ordinary actors.

***'Muscles and joints'***

The gongs and drums of the orchestra are the muscles and joints of a play. If they are hit at the wrong time or with the wrong degree of force, they may mar the merit of the play in a performance. There are also principles underlying their use, principles which only those well experienced in the acting profession may be aware of. The effect is particularly detrimental should unwarranted interruption come at such crucial moments as when a speech is not yet finished or a song has just started Therefore the rhythm of the gongs and drums, be it quick or slow in tempo, light or heavy in force, must be treated with care.

'Feel' of a song

The 'feel' of a song is what the song is about, its plot and emotion. Once we know the plot of a play and the place of the songs in it, then we understand the meaning of the songs and they can be sung each with the right mood And fine differences in mood can then be produced by subtle modifications of articulation. This is what I call 'the feel of a song'.

Playing the female role

When a male actor is playing the role of a woman, he has to put on coquettish airs, otherwise he will not look like a woman. On the other hand, when a female actor is playing the role of a woman, her primary concern is to be natural and avoid overacting; once she overacts, then she will resemble a male actor playing that of a female.

Pace of speech

When an actor delivers a speech on the stage, there are occasions when he does not pause where he should and on the other hand comes to a sudden stop where he should not. Again, he may disconnect words that run together and contrariwise join together what should be separated. This is what we call varying the pace of speech. The subtlety of this effect may be conceivable but not communicable by words, can only be learned by imitating but not taught by writing Varying the pace of speech is to an actor what graceful elegance is to a lady's posture.