

# Cross-cultural dialogue and identity formation in performing arts: engaging diverse audiences in small theatres and live venues

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**Abstract.** In the social environment dominated by multicultural integration and digital media, small and medium-sized theaters have gradually become an important field for intercultural dialogue and identity construction. This study selected five small theaters in Sydney, Toronto, and Berlin as samples and explored the influence mechanism of performance content and space design on cultural knowledge through performance records, field observations, and in-depth interviews with 150 audience members. The study found that plays that integrate local cultural narratives with universal themes such as family separation and hope for survival were most likely to trigger emotional resonance, and immersive stage design increased youth participation by 35%. The intimate design of the theater space significantly enhances the collective emotional experience and promotes the formation of shared memories among audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Research shows that small and medium-sized theaters can effectively build a platform for cultural dialogue and provide a practical path for identity reconstruction in a pluralistic society through the arrangement of characteristic rooms and interactive performance design.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural performance, audience identity, immersive theatre, small venues, intercultural dialogue

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## 1. Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization, transnational population flows, and the development of digital technology continue to reshape cultural boundaries, and small and medium-sized theaters, with their unique spatial attributes and operational models, have become an important vehicle for promoting multicultural dialogue. In this study, five independent theaters in Sydney, Toronto, and Berlin were selected as observation samples, and through audience behavior tracking, in-depth interviews, and dynamic spatial analysis, the influence mechanism composed of cultural narrative and physical environment on identity was systematically explored. Data analysis showed that when the performance content not only retained local cultural symbols (such as the use of dialects accounting for 28%), but also incorporated universal themes such as family separation and survival difficulties, the emotional resonance index of intercultural audiences increased by 38%. The theater adopts a circular stage layout and variable seat design, so that the audience interaction frequency reaches 2.3 times that of the traditional frame stage, greatly enhancing the collective formation effect of cultural memory. The study also found that the open discussion session after the performance increased the convergence frequency of audiences from different backgrounds by 67%, providing a dynamic field for identity reconstruction [1]. These practices verify the unique value of small and medium-sized cultural spaces in building social inclusion, and their flexible curatorial mechanism and immersive experience design provide a reference operation paradigm for the innovation of the urban public cultural service system.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Cross-cultural dialogue in performing arts

Intercultural communication in the performing arts stems from the unique threshold property of theater—when different cultural symbols collide in live performance, it often stimulates the field of dialogue beyond the everyday. From the collision of different cultures in the colonial period to modern international joint creation, this artistic practice has always carried the gene of civilizational integration. In immersive physical theater, for example, actors construct a multi-voiced narrative through dialectical slang, stage installations integrate elements of African drumming and East Asian calligraphy, and the audience participates in

reconstructing the scenario through impromptu interaction [2]. This threefold deconstruction strategy effectively eliminates cultural hegemony and turns theater into a laboratory for testing cultural misinterpretations and building consensus. Unlike traditional cultural exhibitions, contemporary intercultural performances pay more attention to establishing dialogue mechanisms in conflict scenarios, such as exploring refugee identity through the adaptation of ancient Greek tragedies and deconstructing power relations in post-colonial contexts with the help of Noh opera programs [3].

## 2.2. Identity formation through spectatorship

The logic of constructing the relationship between spectacle and performance is based not only on the content of the performance itself, but also on the interactive dynamics of the theatrical space. In the realm of multicultural symbiosis performance, groups of listeners with different cultural backgrounds and memories form unique chemical reactions. When audiences encounter a narrative in the theater that resonates with, conflicts with, or intertwines with their own experiences, the chemistry of identity comes into play—either through character substitution to achieve emotional projection or through de-emphasis to trigger reflective awareness. As Figure 1 shows, circular immersive theater breaks the boundaries of traditional performance, transforming the audience and the performance area into an interconnected visual ecosystem [4]. This type of spatial design forces audiences to watch the stage simultaneously, but also inevitably observe the changes in expression and bodily reactions of their neighbors. Taking a contemporary dance theater exploring immigration issues as an example, the performers impromptu invite the audience to participate in the unpacking ceremony, activate collective memory through the exchange of objects, and finally form a temporary emotional community under the theater dome. This dynamic identity-building mechanism demonstrates that the performing arts can catalyze intercultural understanding in specific spatial conditions, and its effect is far more than one-dimensional cultural display [5].



**Figure 1.** Audience arrangement in an immersive theatre setting (source: workroom.fastfamiliar.com)

## 2.3. Small theatres as cultural interfaces

Small, non-institutionalized theater spaces often feature stronger community interaction due to their curatorial autonomy. This kind of space naturally possesses the attribute of cultural experience, which can dissolve inherent divisions such as race and gender. Thanks to movable seating and immersive sightlines, the theater space can be freely transformed according to the performance theme—or transformed into a community sanctuary for Southeast Asian immigrants or a temporary shelter for transgender people [6]. One independent theater has implemented a “story bank” program: inviting delivery workers to transform delivery boxes into memory containers to collect urban migrants’ survival stories and ultimately present them as object theater. This type of community-rooted creative mode makes theater a base of practice for disadvantaged groups to rebuild their power of cultural discourse, and continually stimulates the kinetic energy of cultural participation through periodic workshops [7].

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Site selection and participant profile

Five small theatres in Sydney, Toronto, and Berlin were selected as observational samples based on the inclusion criteria of ongoing intercultural performance programs and audience diversity. These theatres have an average capacity of fewer than 200 seats and host more than 50 original plays per year, primarily aimed at immigrant communities and ethnic minorities. Over the three-month research period, 150 viewers were monitored, ranging in age from 18 to 65, representing more than 20 nationalities and diverse professional backgrounds [8]. A questionnaire, an in-depth interview, and behavioral observation were used to examine the intensity of identity activation and the pathway of change in cultural cognition during the performance.

#### 3.2. Data collection and instruments

Data were collected using a composite research method: before and after the performance, perceptual scales were administered to measure cognitive changes regarding other cultures; In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 listeners to elicit individualized narratives of emotional resonance and cognitive reconstruction. The trajectory of movement in space and the frequency of audience interaction were recorded through on-site observation. All performances were videotaped, with an emphasis on non-textual elements such as body language symbols and distance adjustment [9]. The research team used Nvivo software to conduct coding analysis on topics such as cultural identity and emotional dislocation, and established a framework for comparison between the cases.

#### 3.3. Performance typologies and thematic focus

The research focuses on six performance forms, including monologue theater, physical theater, and immigrant oral history theater. The theme focuses on issues such as the identity dilemma of separated ethnic groups and intergenerational cultural conflicts. The creative process adopted the mode of intercultural collaboration. For example, a Berlin theater invited Turkish immigrants to co-create the play "Luggage Memory," and an experimental theater in Toronto set up an audience improvisation stage to participate in the production of props. The scenography incorporates cultural symbols provided by the participants [10]. For example, Southeast Asian immigrants' kitchen utensils are used to construct the installation art, in order to test the strength of the influence of the correlation between art forms and themes on the construction of cultural identity [11].

### 4. Results and discussion

#### 4.1. Impact of cultural narrative alignment

The survey data show a significant correlation between audience response and cultural context fit. 64% of respondents reported a strong sense of engagement during the performance, especially among groups with the same ethnic background. As shown in Table 1, the empathy index of audience groups with high cultural fit reached 8.6 points (full marks out of 10), and concentration throughout the performance was maintained at over 75%, with 48% of listeners still able to clearly reproduce key scenes seven days after watching the performance. The corresponding values for the low-fit group were 5.2 points, concentration of 43%, and memory retention of 21%, respectively [12]. It is noteworthy that plays centered on universal themes such as intergenerational family conflicts and discrete trauma gradually establish emotional connections among the 35% of audience members with low compatibility, indicating that the organic integration of cultural specificity and shared human experience can effectively break down identity barriers.

**Table 1.** Survey results on cultural narrative alignment

Narrative Alignment	Empathy Score (0–10)	Emotional Recall After 1 Week (%)	Overall Engagement (%)
High Cultural Alignment	8.6	48	75
Low Cultural Alignment	5.2	21	43

#### 4.2. Role of interactive and immersive elements

The interactive section design significantly enhances the depth of audience participation. Theaters that use immersive methods such as audience voting to change the plot direction and real-time sound creation have a 37% increase in participation index compared to traditional plays. As shown in Table 2, the audience identity reflection index for participating in narrative decision-making reached 7.9 points, and the sound co-creation group scored 7.5 points, which is significantly higher than the 4.3 points for

the traditional performance mode. This “co-creation” model breaks down the duality of attendance and allows 63% of young audiences (aged 18 to 30) to use collective affiliation statements such as “our story” in their questionnaires. It is noteworthy that programs that integrate real-time interaction on mobile devices have a 22% higher audience retention rate than purely offline interaction models, reflecting the natural adaptability of digital indigenous groups to mixed experiences.

**Table 2.** Audience engagement by interactive element type

Interactive Element	Engagement Increase (%)	Identity Reflection Score (0–10)
Story Direction Choice	37	7.9
Live Soundscape Participation	35	7.5
Traditional Static Play	12	4.3

#### 4.3. Influence of venue intimacy and design

The spatial layout of a small theater has a profound effect on the performance. Observational data and the post-performance questionnaire reveal that the physical distance between the auditorium and the performance area directly influences the intensity of emotional resonance. As shown in Table 3, 68% of spectators within three meters of the stage experienced a strong emotional impact, with a satisfaction rating of 4.7 points (out of 5 points), and 71% expressed a willingness to watch the performance again. For viewers six meters away, the index dropped sharply to 29 percent, 3.6 points, and 41 percent. The circular stage design allows for a unique collective field of vision—when the audience watches the performers, they can also clearly perceive the emotions of their neighbors, and this two-way interaction gives 78% of respondents a sense of “community.” An experimental theater used an adjustable seating system to move the audience forward 1.5 meters during the climax of the performance, successfully increasing the emotional resonance of the tearful scene by 23%. This spatial intimacy not only enhances the immediate experience but also contributes to the formation of temporary identity communities through the embodied transmission of cultural memory.

**Table 3.** Seating distance vs. emotional impact

Seating Distance	Strong Emotional Impact (%)	Satisfaction Rating (1–5)	Repeat Attendance Likelihood (%)
< 3 meters	68	4.7	71
3–6 meters	45	4.2	58
> 6 meters	29	3.6	41

## 5. Conclusion

Research shows that small theater has unique value in a multicultural context. When universal themes such as narratives about immigration and intergenerational conflict are presented through specific cultural symbols, even audiences from very different backgrounds can form emotional connections—a play exploring discrete ethnic identities led 43% of non-immigrant audiences to reexamine their cultural identity. Immersive interactive design transforms the audience into the subject of creation. During an impromptu performance in a Berlin theater, the audience modified the plot’s design through a cellphone vote, increasing the group’s full participation after 1995 to 82%. These practices prove that the combination of flexible space allocation and participatory creative methods can effectively bridge cultural barriers. A survey of immigrant cities such as Sydney and Toronto shows that the intercultural communication willingness index of residents in areas with ongoing community theater projects is 19 percentage points higher on average than in regulated areas. This points to the direction cultural policymakers should follow: increasing support for small and medium-sized theaters, developing hybrid performances that incorporate digital interaction, and cultivating a “third space” with a cultural mediation function will become effective ways to build a socially emotional community.

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