Exploring the Possibility of Integrating Opera with Applied Theatre

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Abstract: Opera, as an art form, boasts a rich historical legacy while simultaneously confronting distinctive contemporary challenges. The evolving landscape of performance arts and audience engagement has unveiled unprecedented possibilities through the progression of applied theatre. Thus, in today's dynamic artistic milieu, there arises a compelling need to invigorate opera performances by harnessing insights from applied theatre methodologies. This endeavor hinges upon a comprehensive grasp of the theoretical underpinnings of applied theatre, contextual understanding within the theatrical domain, and a meticulous deconstruction of opera's intrinsic characteristics and mechanisms. This article commences by scrutinizing the defining attributes and current state of both opera and applied theatre. It meticulously dissects the impediments that hinder their harmonious amalgamation. Subsequently, this paper posits multiple potential avenues for experimental exploration. These avenues encompass restructuring the dynamics between audience and performers, redefining expectations, fostering intercommunication among diverse stakeholders, and crafting immersive experiences tailored to specific requisites. In doing so, this research endeavours to enrich the opera milieu by infusing it with the innovative vitality of applied theatre, thereby securing its relevance in the evolving cultural landscape.

Keywords: Applied Theatre, Opera, Interactivity, Educational Function, Integration of Arts

1.   Introduction

The art of theatre is a form of visual and auditory art based on the relationship between performers and spectators, and it has played a significant role in human society throughout history. From primitive rituals to ancient Greek theatre and through the Renaissance period, the performance paradigms of theatre have gradually evolved and solidified over time. Performers convey texts that describe interactions between people and their environments to the audience through language and body language. For a long time, the text was considered the content, and theatrical performance was seen as the form. However, in recent decades, the traditional dichotomy between form and content in theatre has been redefined, and the wave of decentralising the text has revitalised the theatre.

In this historical context, applied theatre, as a new form of theatre that emphasises interactivity and breaks the traditional performer-audience relationship, inherits the function of theatre in influencing and educating individuals, providing richer ways of realisation for it [1]. In contrast, opera is largely a one-way expression aimed at pleasing a certain aesthetic category of audience, with a high

threshold for appreciation. It is closely associated with grand theatres, expansive stages, exquisite singing, and well-trained orchestras [2]. Whether in Verdi and Wagner's timeless classics or in today's more postmodern works, the boundaries between the stage and the audience remain firmly intact. Those in the audience below identify themselves as passive recipients of information, while those on stage assume that the audience's role is to provide feedback after receiving their performance. This exchange of information is the fundamental mechanism of traditional operatic performances and has been a major reason why opera creators have been able to produce new works for a long time.

While some innovative opera designers like Es Devlin, Vicky Mortimer, and Nicky Gillibrand have experimented with scaling down opera performances and enhancing the allure within limited spaces, making the audience interact with stage models [3], the fundamental mechanism mentioned above remains unchanged. On the one hand, this development benefits the highly commercialised opera ecosystem today, but on the other hand, it makes opera composition more challenging. Ancient classical opera works are repeatedly consumed with new methods through various commercial means [2].

Meanwhile, in the development of applied theatre, many activities have utilised music and singing as auxiliary means in practical applications, such as games, entertainment, interactive communication, and performance demonstrations. Some researchers have even explored the use of folk songs and dances in the context of applied theatre, combining theatrical elements and ethnic performances to facilitate scientific outreach and medical assistance more smoothly [4]. In addition, in the more than two decades of development of applied theatre in China, most research tends to incorporate theatre performance elements into teaching specific subjects, known as 'Drama in Education' [5]. In these practices, the introduction of music and singing is almost random, depending entirely on the group of children involved and the educational purposes of the practice. However, the development of 'Theatre in Education' is urgently needed today, which can play a significant role in politics and social life [6]. Therefore, assistance from various art forms should be fully considered. Not only dance, literature, and painting should be often used, but also music and singing, especially opera as a treasure of musical art, should be appropriately applied.

Therefore, combining the content of opera with relevant practices and considerations in applied theatre can enrich the application of applied theatre and provide a new form of expression for opera. This paper discusses the possibility of integrating the two based on their characteristic attributes, integration challenges, and potential experimentation directions.

2. Key Definitions

2.1. Origins, Characteristics, and Current State of Opera

2.1.1. Origins of Opera

Opera, as an art form, has a long history, with its roots dating back to around 1600. Many stories and accounts from the early 19th century describe its origins, particularly in Italy and Germany, where it is believed to have been influenced by enthusiasts and researchers of ancient Greek theatre [2]. The art form shares similarities with the choral performances of ancient Greek drama. For example, Marco da Gagliano (1582-1643) mentioned in the preface of *La Dafne* (1608) that Ottavo Rinuccini and Jacopo Corsi collaborated on the initial version of *Dafne*, which incorporated discussions on how to stage Greek tragedies and introduce choral elements. The famous composer Jacopo Peri acknowledged and completed the musical arrangement, allowing Corsi to perform it in front of nobility and aristocracy. In his preface to *Euridice* (1600), Jacopo Peri further elaborated on this groundbreaking art form, highlighting its unique ability to combine the expressiveness of spoken

language with musical melodies, creating a powerful emotional impact. This fusion of spoken language and music could captivate listeners, evoking strong emotions.

2.1.2. Characteristics of Opera

Throughout the long history of theatre, various forms of performances integrated music, songs, and instrumental music, such as medieval liturgical plays, pastoral plays accompanied by music and songs, and intermedia, all of which required extensive musical design. Music has been inseparable from performances since ancient rituals. Opera emerged as a distinct and remarkable form of musical theatre with two significant characteristics.

Firstly, due to variations in the power of instruments, sometimes singers had to modify their voices to balance with the music. In coloratura singing, ornaments, often extended from dialogue or monologue sentences, could sustain for a long time, showcasing various vocal techniques. In such singing, the symbolic function of language almost disappeared, immersing the audience in the emotions conveyed solely through pure sound [2]. This phenomenon explains why Rossini's works, which emphasised beautiful melodies, intricate orchestration, and splendid singing, remained popular among Italian and neighbouring audiences for an extended period. However, for those who appreciated profound and thought-provoking music, the inability to understand the textual content could hinder their enjoyment. Therefore, in many German operas, composers attempted to express emotions, passion, and ideas through lyrical lyrics while reducing ornamentation. Nevertheless, the inherent characteristics of opera always lead to a reduction in the power of literary symbols. This was an inevitable consequence.

Secondly, like theatre, opera is an art form based on hypothetical regulations. As a result, audiences do not perceive the story as reality but rather focus on the content and the emotions conveyed. Moreover, due to the poetic lyrics and the high emphasis on singing techniques, original scripts were often significantly modified and simplified. Consequently, the storyline often diverged considerably from the original. Some well-known performances, such as Verdi's *La Traviata*, aspects ranging from character titles and depictions to plot settings and connections significantly deviate from the source material. In fact, opera enthusiasts often overlook various inconsistencies in the plot. They may recognise certain parts of the story as absurd, but this does not hinder their enjoyment of the music and singing [2]. It can be seen from an example in the book *A History of Opera* that opera's unique characteristic lies in its ability to make audiences forget language differences, the appearance of performers, and even specific plot details, connecting one musical piece to another with a vague understanding of the story's progress. For example, in Verdi's *La Traviata*, the character Violetta, suffering from tuberculosis, can ignore severe lung damage and continuously perform exquisite and high-pitched singing. This exemplifies the unreality of opera. It is evident from this example, and many others could be used to illustrate that opera, compared to theatre, has stronger and widely accepted hypothetical regulations. Once audiences develop an appreciation for opera, they naturally accept the continuous music and the characters who maintain their composure and sing loudly even in urgent situations.

2.1.3. Current State of Opera

Throughout its history, opera has captured audiences of different ages and social backgrounds, but its inherent characteristics have also posed significant challenges. Here are three key challenges:

Firstly, the inevitable sense of boredom: Despite people's willingness to pay high ticket prices for opulent and musically captivating opera performances, it is almost impossible to avoid the feeling of boredom during the shows. While this emotion has always been present, the diversity of entertainment options and sensory stimuli available today has made it more pronounced. People are accustomed to

engaging with friends and exploring their interests during entertainment. However, in spacious and grand opera houses, audiences are expected to remain quiet, respect the performance, and not leave their seats without permission. This makes opera appear as a high-level art form that requires individuals to conform to established rules, reinforcing the demand for glamorous and musically dazzling performances. Consequently, this further strengthens the barriers to creating innovative opera.

Secondly, motives unrelated to the performance content: For a long period in history, high ticket prices and a high aesthetic threshold made opera performances exclusive to the wealthy. This led to opera being associated with values beyond the performance itself. In many 20th-century films, such as *The Age of Innocence*, opera houses became tools for displaying the characters' aesthetics and social status. Some films, like *A Night at the Opera*, depicted the upper echelons of society attending opera as an obligatory part of maintaining their social norms. The emergence of such works reflects the complex position of opera. When people no longer attend opera for the sake of appreciating the content, the vitality of opera becomes fragile and may not withstand changing times.

Lastly, misuse of opera elements without understanding: In reality, opera elements that are widely received and permeate everyday life are the ones that showcase its glorious culture and fragmented aspects [2], rather than the almost unidirectional and rigid viewing experience in opera houses. Many popular singers and bands with large followings often receive praise for incorporating opera-style elements into their works, with audiences generally not concerned about whether the use of these elements is appropriate or chaotic. *Dream With Me*, a CD album, is one such example frequently cited. Clearly, the consumption of opera art today is not limited to exploiting the value of ancient classical works through various commercial operations but also includes the widespread and often disrespectful misuse of its elements.

2.2. The Origin and Characteristics of Applied Theatre

2.2.1. Origin of Applied Theatre

Applied theatre emerged in late 20th-century Western society. Initially, this term was not a specialised term. Many theatre researchers and social reformers used the term 'applied' to signify their efforts to use elements of theatre to transform the realities of life outside the traditional theatre setting [1]. It can be said that applied theatre is a practice that arose in the context of various social changes and cultural developments, building upon the history of Western theatre but extending its utility beyond the boundaries of the theatre.

In its early days, Greek theatre was a performing art aimed at urging social governance and promoting the development and reform of democratic politics. During the Middle Ages, this role of theatre was largely replaced by the propagation of religious thought, the dissemination of religious culture, and the reinforcement of religious authority. It was not until the feudal monarchies emerged after the Renaissance that this function gradually regained some prominence [7]. During this time, various forms of tragedy, comedy, and drama, later known as classical theatre, still struggled to break free from the constraints of upholding feudal monarchy. However, it is evident that in many works, elements of social criticism and promotion of intellectual change began to appear. Even though the thoughts and intentions expressed in these segments may seem outdated and backward today, they undoubtedly demonstrate that theatre's role in reflecting issues and driving social change remains indelible. Subsequently, Western societies witnessed the birth of theatre that upheld bourgeois humanist ideas and opposed feudal despotism, as well as dramatic works that burst the bubble of noble human reason. Regardless of how far theatre has developed today, its inherent critical nature continues to infuse it with enduring vitality.

Applied theatre is a fresh exploration of this inherent property. On one hand, Aristotle's concept of the 'cathartic' effect of tragedy [8] can be expanded into various forms within applied theatre. On the other hand, new states continue to emerge in the interactive theatrical activities of applied theatre, such as the conflicts between form and content proposed by Hegel. If we categorise the development of theatre into the realm of history, as suggested by Szondi's theory [9], then applied theatre is undoubtedly a product of the current era. Based on the mainstream of applied theatre today, it draws from and utilises the effective theatrical forms provided by traditional theatre for addressing various social, political, and personal issues, creating contexts for discussing specific issues and conveying concerns, with the practical setting often being outside the theatre in some aspect of social life. It requires interaction between the audience and the actors, ultimately achieving specific goals and effects through their collaboration.

2.2.2. Characteristics Applied Theatre

One of the characteristics of applied theatre is its diversity. Applied theatre encompasses many types, including 'Drama in Education', which many Chinese researchers are enthusiastic about. Specifically, it involves teaching specific subject matter through elements of theatre, interactive communication, and performance forms. Through 'Drama in Education', much knowledge and culture that learners may struggle to grasp can be effectively conveyed. Another type, referred to as 'Theatre in Education,' utilizes the medium for diverse groups of individuals with the objective of nurturing personal growth rather than imparting specific subject knowledge [10].

Another characteristic of applied theatre is its practical flexibility. Unlike many applied sciences that instrumentally apply theoretical achievements to practice, applied theatre does not treat theatre theory as a purely theoretical tool [1]. Instead, applied theatre is an activity that is in a constant state of change and innovation. It emphasises a complete connection between theatre and social life, breaking free from various restrictions of traditional theatre, and showcasing the fluidity of relationships between theatre participants, the ambiguity of theatrical actions, and the complexity and variability of theatrical situations and thematic content.

3.   Challenges in Resolving Contradictions and Achieving Integration

3.1.   Performance Venues and Forms

Throughout history, theatre and opera performances have heavily emphasised one party performing for another. Moreover, people are accustomed to watching performers in one designated area while sitting in another designated area for the audience. Performers practice their skills continuously, rehearse, and backstage workers become familiar with operational procedures, working together to prepare meticulously. Ultimately, performance after performance, designed to provide visual and auditory enjoyment to the audience, is presented.

This process can be seen as an established transaction between the organisers, who plan and prepare the performance, and the consumers who purchase tickets. Within this transaction, there are some unwritten and default rules, and breaking them can lead to severe consequences, including the failure of the performance or even collective resistance from the audience. One of these universally acknowledged rules is that many forms of art, including theatre and film, must innovate their content while still meeting certain expectations of the audience. Today, adaptations and reinterpretations of classic performances worldwide, such as the latest *Hamlet* by the Royal Theatre in the UK or *La Traviata* by China's National Art Troupe, not only satisfy the audience's expectations of the classic text in terms of the storyline but also incorporate a plethora of audience-friendly design elements (including costume design and lighting). However, if a creator intends to try a new performance style, such as removing the boundaries between the stage and the audience or dispersing performers among

the audience, these changes must be communicated in advance; otherwise, such a performance cannot reach the appropriate audience.

As mentioned earlier, some current conditions in opera were discussed. The audience's boredom, the solidification of expectations for content, and motivations unrelated to the performance are all heavily influenced by this traditional performer-audience relationship. The difference with applied theatre is that both the organisers and participants actively work to change the existing conditions, as both parties fundamentally anticipate the emergence of new possibilities. Even though the overall direction may sometimes be controlled to some extent, the activities still reveal many surprising effects. Conversely, applied theatre that fails to generate a desire for interaction and has a rigid process is limited in its energy.

This inherent difference stemming from the performing arts tradition makes combining opera and applied theatre challenging. Unless the opera's inherent performance forms and venues are abandoned and valuable and easily transplanted elements are extracted, it cannot be truly adapted for harmonious interaction between the audience and performers.

3.2. Different Types of Participants

Art always has a spiritual impact on individuals. However, their diversity becomes evident as people engage in different situations and perform different actions. People with different backgrounds, personality traits, and ideologies can react very differently, even when facing similar environments and events. Sometimes, even if two people take the same course of action in response to a situation and appear to have similar emotional reactions, the significance and implications of these seemingly identical outcomes can vastly differ due to their different backgrounds and experiences.

Based on this principle, certain art forms or specific artistic works have formed unique audiences and excluded those not belonging to their target audience. As mentioned earlier, opera is one such art form. However, applied drama needs to address this issue differently because meaningful interactions are more likely to occur between individuals with greater differences rather than high degrees of similarity. Heterogeneity makes interpersonal and environmental interactions more influential and meaningful. Many works of art illustrate this point effectively. The classic films directed by Martin Scorsese, such as *The Aviator*, *Raging Bull*, and *Taxi Driver*, provide excellent examples of how diversity among characters and their interactions can have a profound impact on storytelling.

Therefore, the fusion of opera and applied drama cannot avoid dealing with the issue of the audience. Even within the audience attending an opera performance, there will inevitably be individuals who can only appreciate a small portion and do not enjoy the rest. This situation requires opera elements that encourage diverse participants to connect and engage in positive interactions.

3.3. Disruption of Immersion and Authenticity

As mentioned earlier in the discussion of opera's characteristics, opera is a primarily auditory art form that lacks authenticity. Regardless of how the story unfolds on stage, music and singing are essential components. However, in reality, various sounds, including ambient noise, contribute to the authentic auditory experience. Beautiful music and singing represent only a small portion of real auditory experiences. Overly repetitive and purely beautiful music can lead to fatigue. Additionally, due to the widespread availability of various sound devices and live music performances today, it is easier to reach the threshold of this fatigue. People no longer cherish the experience of attending an opera performance as a particularly precious event, as they did in the past.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, every opera performer, regardless of the direness of the current plot or the characters' predicaments, must deliver the best singing to every corner of the theatre. This puts the audience in a complex position: on the one hand, the skilful singing and exquisite

instrumental music immerse them in the story and can even evoke strong emotions, such as highly emotional vocal techniques; on the other hand, continuous singing and playing, combined with plot and character actions sometimes compromised for the sake of singing, can easily lead the audience to lose their immersion under the influence of rationality. This disrupts the ability of opera to effectively combine the plot's inspirational nature with the music's emotional impact.

In contrast, immersion can be greatly facilitated in the practice of applied drama. In many educational disciplines, such as literature, spontaneous imagination and role-playing can greatly help participants understand knowledge and gain insights. In discussions of social issues, immersion is a prerequisite for many participants to express genuine emotions and engage in deep thinking.

Therefore, when combining opera and applied drama, addressing whether participants should feel sufficient authenticity and immersion is essential. Furthermore, if participants need to have these feelings, it is crucial to determine how opera elements can be used to help or hinder them.

4.   Possible Solutions and Worthwhile Directions

To address the conflicts and obstacles discussed earlier attempts at resolution should focus on several aspects.

Firstly, regarding the conventions of audience relationships, the emphasis should be on updating performance venues and eliminating the boundaries between the stage and the audience. This would encourage viewers to have the desire to participate in the performance and gradually develop new viewing habits. As mentioned in Jacopo Peri's preface to *Euridice* (1600), the unique harmonic expressions between melodic music and spoken dialogue, which are exclusive to opera, are important reasons for the high technical threshold of opera performances. Applied drama participants cannot universally incorporate this singing performance into their activities. However, during the activity, participants can be invited to engage in short exercises, allowing them to participate in simple harmonic work or non-singing text recitations. They can also interact with opera singers in certain situations. This way, some of the ritualistic feelings that originally arose from watching the performance can be replaced by ritualistic feelings generated by collective participation. Moreover, many people subconsciously consider the theatre a special place; without it, singing and performing lose the ritualistic feeling associated with the venue. To address this issue, simple use of elements that constitute the theatre environment, such as set design, instruments, and costumes, to create a unique sense of ritual belonging to interactive communication in daily life can enhance its attractiveness through the positive effects generated by interaction.

In a recent cultural festival organised by Opera North in Leeds, accomplished instrument performers from professional opera performance teams interacted closely with young students from Richmond Hill Academy, experimenting with musical instruments and opera singing together. Additionally, community members, including the elderly, patients, and children, engaged in various forms of artistic creation. This was an outstanding event that demonstrated how art can play a role in facilitating interpersonal interactions when people engage in community activities. The event summary highlighted the significant impact of these interactive activities on the participants. Some participants also mentioned in their feedback that this event made them feel the warmth of home. This experience provides valuable insights for promoting applied drama within opera audiences. For example, during the promotion phase of an activity, organisers can emphasise that it is a new form of collective activity specifically designed for opera enthusiasts. If the activity involves discussing a particular social topic, assuming specific scenarios and role-playing for interaction, it can use simple stage design, props, and background music commonly found in opera to assist in setting the mood and encourage participants to try their hand at singing in some cases. Initially, this may seem awkward and uncomfortable, so providing explanations and guidance to help participants relax and engage in the activity is essential. Depending on the fundamental purpose and format of the specific activity,

detailed assumptions should be made for dialogue and interaction. As participants become more familiar with and adapt through repeated attempts, the activity will find its rhythm. The fresh bonds of friendship formed among participants and the exciting experiences of engaging in the activity create a sense of belonging unique to that moment. Participants who initially could not fully engage are influenced by the positive atmosphere and are more likely to immerse themselves in fictional scenarios.

Secondly, concerning the issue of participant heterogeneity, event organisers should focus on more efficient communication. Although communication between individuals always involves various obstacles and losses, using guidance and regulations to facilitate various forms of communication, including verbal language, body language, and eye contact, remains necessary. For instance, imagine there is an activity that aims to analyse the influence of opera rationally. In this case, organisers can create a scenario, assign a role to each participant, and require them to engage in a storytelling game, spontaneously conceiving singing performances, physical performances, and brief recitations based on the operas they have seen. After each storytelling turn, participants can express their feelings about the plot they conceived. In this way, not only will the influences that participants have accumulated over the years be reflected in their singing, but the collision of different ideological thoughts will also promote introspection among participants.

Finally, concerning the issue of immersion and authenticity, the approach depends on the main purpose and format of the specific activity. For example, suppose an applied drama activity takes the form of performance and does not require immersion. In that case, organisers can invite performers with opera skills who can enunciate clearly to add some singing to everyday dialogues, linking fragmented singing segments with everyday speech. This way, the immersion of genuine dialogue is disrupted, and the emotional impact of opera-style singing is diffused by normal speech. The poetic structure of lyrics and the sense of detachment from reality that opera-style singing brings will become more apparent. Additionally, the performance can be presented in a rehearsal-like manner, allowing participants to express their feelings and opinions about the conceived plot after each performance and even attempt to demonstrate how to improve it themselves. This format significantly reduces the seriousness of the performance and creates an impact through plot and interaction. For example, if an activity takes the form of dialogues and requires immersion, a context with inherent opera elements can be created, allowing opera music to appear under reasonable conditions. This allows interaction within an operatic atmosphere, making the activity less dull and attracting viewers to participate in the interaction. Additionally, it makes opera-style vocal segments easier to understand within a specific context, avoiding the misuse of opera elements and operatic fragments.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analysed the differences between opera and applied drama based on their characteristics and current status. It has outlined some possible solutions in three directions: changing the audience relationship and expectations, promoting communication among different types of participants, and creating immersion as needed. Due to the limitations of the generalisation and analysis of both art forms and the lack of related practice, many issues have inevitably not been considered in this paper, and many possibilities have not been discussed. However, in the future, with the progress of related practices and research, opera and applied drama will undoubtedly produce a variety of wonderful combinations, benefiting society as a whole.

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