

# Research on Differences in Audience Experience between Large and Small Theaters in China from an Actor-Audience Relationship Perspective: Postprint

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## Abstract

With the sustained and rapid development of China's theatre economy, more and more audiences have begun to enter the theatre to watch dramas. Based on the actor-audience relationship, this paper uses in-depth interviews to understand and analyze the differences between the audience's experience of the large theatre and the little theatre from the perspective of the audience. The study found that the alteration of the space caused audiences to present different psychological states in different types of theatre and was a central influence on the differences in experience that emerged.

## Full Text

### Preamble

**Research on the Differences of Audience Experience between Large Theaters and Little Theaters in China from the Perspective of the Actor-Audience Relationship**

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**Abstract:** With the sustained and rapid development of China's theatre economy, an increasing number of audiences have begun attending theatrical performances. Based on the actor-audience relationship, this study employs in-depth interviews to understand and analyze the differences in audience experience between large theatre and little theatre from the audience's perspective. The

research reveals that spatial alteration causes audiences to exhibit different psychological states across different theatre types and serves as the central influence on the divergent experiences that emerge.

**Keywords:** the actor-audience relationship, the Big Theatre, the Little Theatre

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, alongside the popularization of the arts, the launch of theatre festivals, and related variety shows, China's theatre economy has begun to grow at a sustained rate, with various theatrical performances delivering rich experiences to audiences. While large theatre performances continue to develop steadily, little theatre plays are also receiving increasing attention. In the post-pandemic era, the question of how to bring increasingly excellent works—possessing both artistic merit and spectacle—to growing audiences through more diverse means has become ever more pressing. Compared with large theatre, audiences in little theatre can readily shed their role as “distant spectators” to become close spectators or even participants. Moreover, when the same play moves from little theatre to large theatre, audience evaluations tend to decline. What, then, are the factors that lead to these differences in audience experience between little theatre and large theatre performances?

## 2 Literature Review

As China's theatre performance market and little theatre have developed, the characteristics of little theatre and its differences from big theatre have attracted scholarly attention from multiple perspectives.

### 2.1 A Literature Review on the Differences between Little Theatre and Big Theatre

Lin Zhaohua's *Absolute Signal* in 1982 marked the starting point for the development of Chinese little theatre. Since then, as little theatre has been staged across the country, many scholars have taken it as their primary research subject, focusing on the characteristics of little theatre and its differences from large theatre. Although the definition of little theatre remains debated in academic circles, the reduction and alteration of spatial attributes is recognized by theatre practitioners and scholars as the most crucial and obvious distinction between little theatre and large theatre.

Wang Xiaoying, a renowned Chinese drama director, noted in 2001 that unconventional performance space constitutes the most intuitive and essential difference between little theatre and large theatre. Based on spatial changes, the blurring of boundaries between performance and viewing areas, and the sharing of space represent the spatial aesthetic characteristics of little theatre. In 2010, Li Ziyi proposed from the actor-audience relationship perspective that, compared to large theatre, little theatre features shared viewing spaces and diverse

spatial treatments, while at the psychological level, the creative psychology of actors and the receptive psychology of audiences are reconstructed, altered, and strengthened to varying degrees. In *A Chinese Contemporary Little Theatre*, Wu Baohe observed in 2016 that Chinese contemporary little theatre demonstrates characteristics of establishing an audience-based theatre concept, altering the relationship between stage performance and script, and breaking through the realist theatre model in terms of artistic exploration.

Overall, existing research on differences between little theatre and large theatre remains primarily at the theoretical and artistic creation levels, focusing mainly on the qualities and artistic characteristics of little theatre itself rather than on the differences between the two forms and the disparities in audience perception.

## 2.2 A Literature Review on the Actor-Audience Relationship

Since the twentieth century, the notion that audiences are essential to theatre's existence has become widely accepted, and the exploration and study of the actor-audience relationship have grown increasingly important. Regarding this relationship, Chinese scholar Lu Ang provided a clear definition in his 2000 book *The Comparative Integration of Chinese and Western Theatre*, stating that “the actor-audience relationship of theatre mainly refers to the special aesthetic relationship between the performer and the spectator determined by the structural form of the performance venue (environment).” He emphasized that spectatorship encompasses both the structural form of the performance venue and the aesthetic relationship between performer and spectator.

In 2011, Guo Yongwei suggested that through the development of the actor-audience relationship from the pre-theatre era to environmental theatre and episodic theatre, this relationship has evolved from ambiguity to clarity and eventually reverted to ambiguity. In 2015, Ye Peiling pointed out that since the early twentieth century, exploration of the actor-audience relationship in little theatre has demonstrated an overall trajectory of narrowing physical distance, closing psychological distance, and breaking physical boundaries. However, these studies have not examined the reasons for differences in audience experience between large theatre and little theatre from the perspective of the audience—one of the central elements of theatrical performance.

## 2.3 Problem Formulation

This paper therefore examines the actor-audience relationship and attempts to answer the following questions from the audience's perspective: How do differences in audience experience between large theatre and little theatre emerge? What dimensions—from the audience's perspective regarding spatial changes, emotional perception, immersion, and interaction—bring about changes in the actor-audience relationship and the theatre-going experience?

### 3 Method

Given that theatre audiences remain a relatively small group in China, this paper employs in-depth interviews to answer the aforementioned questions and gain deeper understanding of differences in audience experience and perceptions.

#### 3.1.1 In-Depth Interviewing Method

The interview questions were divided into three main sections. The first section addressed basic information about the interviewees, including when they were introduced to theatre, when they began attending regularly, and their average frequency of attendance. The second section translated the research questions into interview questions to understand the interviewees' definitions of large theatre and little theatre, differences in their personal experiences attending both forms, memorable productions in each format and the reasons for their impact, their preferences for focusing on the whole versus details, their level of immersion, and related topics. The third section prepared deeper follow-up questions, further exploring the research questions through perspectives on objective differences between large and little theatres, interaction, the recent rise of environmental and immersive theatre in China, as well as issues of artistry, entertainment, and commerciality.

During the interviews and research conduct, the researcher endeavored to avoid the four ethical issues and transgressions highlighted by scholar Alan Bryman: (1) causing harm to research participants; (2) failing to use informed consent documents or materials; (3) invading the privacy of research participants; and (4) deceiving research participants. Interviewees could also remain silent or withdraw from the interview if they encountered questions they preferred not to answer or felt uncomfortable. Interview materials that interviewees declared they did not wish to disclose were not included or quoted in this study.

#### 3.1.2 Selection of Interviewees

This study conducted approximately 50 minutes of semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of eight interviewees who had been exposed to theatre for more than three years and had attended regularly for more than two years. The interviews commenced in April 2022 and concluded in May 2022.

The interviewees consisted firstly of theatre-related students and non-specialist theatre audiences recruited by the researcher through on-campus theatre public lectures, and secondly of a broader research sample collected through various theatre bloggers on Weibo. In accordance with the maximum variation sampling principle of qualitative research methods, even with a small number of interviewees, the sample was sufficient to answer the research questions when saturation was reached. Respondents differed in terms of age, region, length of time spent watching theatre, and whether they were theatre majors, resulting in low homogeneity.

The interviews were conducted as one-to-one face-to-face interviews, text interviews on WeChat, and voice interviews via Tencent Meetings. The interview results were collated into verbatim transcripts, totaling 44,319 words. The basic profile of the interviewees is shown in the table below.

**Table 1: Basic Information for Interviewees**

*Note: The table data appears to be corrupted in the original source. The intended structure includes columns for Respondent, Age, Gender, Drama Major Status, Time of Exposure to Theatre, Timing of Regular Theatre Attendance, and Average Number of Plays Watched.*

#### 4.1 The Debate over the Academic Definition of Little Theatre and Audience Perception

Since Lin Zhaohua's *Absolute Signal* in 1982 marked the birth of little theatre in China, debate has persisted in the domestic academic community regarding its definition. According to the essay collection from the first Chinese Little Theatre Festival, *Little Theatre Studies*, the mainstream view of little theatre in China at that time referenced the Western little theatre movement, holding that little theatre should be anti-commercial, anti-mainstream, anti-establishment, experimental, and strongly rebellious—a view that still persists. With changing times, the definition of little theatre has gradually formed a consensus based on China's current theatre development situation: the essential feature of little theatre is the reduction of performance space, though the view that little theatre should be distinguished from large theatre by being experimental and rebellious still exists.

For most audiences, little theatre is drama performed in relatively small venues, often featuring smaller stages, simpler choreography, and fewer actors. All eight respondents held similar views regarding little theatre. For productions that have toured and changed in venue size, one respondent mentioned focusing on the “size of the cast and choreography” of the production (S5), while another felt it should be “defined by the size of the theatre in which the production was first performed” (S6). Only one respondent felt that “little theatre is somewhat experimental and has a barrier to viewing” (S4). It is clear that for most audiences, the size of the theatre, as well as the scale of the stage set and cast, constitutes the fundamental basis for differentiating between large and little theatre productions.

#### 4.2 Differences in Audience Experience between Large Theatre and Little Theatre from the Perspective of Actor-Audience Relationships

In his book *The Empty Space*, renowned theatre theorist Peter Brook suggests that “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is

needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.” This points to space, actors, and audience as the most essential elements that constitute a play. These three elements also form the foundation of the relationship between spectator and actor. The actor and the audience are the core elements of a theatrical performance—without either, the drama cannot properly take place—while space serves as the link between actor and audience where the theatrical production unfolds. This section explores the differences between large and little theatre experiences from the audience’s perspective, drawing on in-depth interview results and considering the two other elements of the viewing relationship: space and actors.

#### 4.2.1 Differences in Audience Focus Given Spatial Differences

Guo Yongwei points out that space signifies not only the place where performance occurs in a broad sense but also the distance between actors and audience in a narrow sense, encompassing both physical and psychological distance. In response to the changing spatial dynamics between large and little theatre, audience focus during theatre attendance also shifts.

First, the distance between audience and stage in large theatre makes it difficult for spectators to apprehend details of the work, whereas audiences in little theatre are more likely to attend to actors’ business and detailed stage design, achieving a better balance between the whole and its details. “In a large theatre you can see the whole story more fully and the movement of the characters is clearer, but in a little theatre attention is often divided by the business of actors close by or details in costume” (S7). “In large theaters it’s more often the case that you’re still focusing on the plot and the overall staging, but in little theaters it’s easier to focus on a particular actor in great detail because you’re closer to the stage and there are fewer actors on stage. It feels like you can’t help but start paying attention to a lot of details when you’re in a little theatre” (S8). “Only after already being very familiar with a particular big theatre production do you bring binoculars to see the details in a performance; otherwise you just can’t see all of the drama” (S3). Simultaneously, in terms of subject matter, large theatre productions are generally more ambitious, featuring wide-ranging narratives and more diverse and complex character stories, while little theatre productions focus more on relatively simpler, closer-to-life stories. Also based on these subject matter differences, coupled with the structural distinctions between large and little theatre stages, large theatre productions demonstrate far superior performance in stage art, capable of generating more shocking dramatic conflict. When interviewees discussed their memorable theatre productions, they invariably mentioned the eye-catching and striking staging and scheduling of the theatre stage, in addition to the excellent scripts themselves, such as *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Jane Eyre* produced by the National Centre for the Performing Arts, and the musicals *The Book of Lost Souls* and *Anna Karenina*. When discussing little theatre, the actors’ performances themselves, in addition to the script, became the main point of recall for interviewees.

Second, the spatial difference between large and little theatres brings about a

change in physical distance that also affects the psychological distance between audience and play and between audience and actors. Large theatres with their proscenium stages and substantial distances between performance and audience areas maintain the audience's psychological distance from the play as "spectators." In little theatre, however, the distance between audience and stage and between audience and actors is significantly reduced, enabling the audience, wherever they are seated, to easily establish a psychological state of "interlocutor," and in some environmental theatre productions to even create a psychological state of being part of the work itself. "Large theaters are relatively serious and distant, little theaters are smaller and more intimate, and because they are so close to the stage, they bring a connection with the actors themselves" (S4). "With a big theatre it's like gears—every department, the actors on stage, the lighting, and the choreography all jammed together tightly. With a little theatre it's a bit more flexible and very close to the actors" (S1). One interviewee described the little environmental theatre experience: "We are so close to them that we feel like we are one of them" (S3)—an experience unavailable in larger theatre productions.

Despite some large theatre productions employing means to break down the "fourth wall," including interaction and dialogue with the audience outside of character, these efforts still do not fundamentally alter the psychological state of the audience when watching. "A lot of the interaction in the big theatre is that the actors have to sit at the edge of the stage to interact because the pool seats are also occupied by the audience, which is actually a 'looking down' gesture. As long as you are not in the front row, you cannot connect with the actors through this interaction. Even if the actor walks off stage, I'm still very aware of being on the sidelines because of the distance. But in little theatre I am level with the actors, and I can easily meet their eyes and receive their energy even when I am sitting in the back" (S8). "Like the French musical *Romeo and Juliet* that has the interaction of walking out into the audience, for those sitting on the second or third floor many times they don't see that interaction and it becomes very abstract" (S3). The proscenium stage of large theatre possesses a certain height differential from the auditorium, and actors often appear to be "looking down" when breaking the "fourth wall." Additionally, blind spots in the audience's field of vision caused by the performance and interaction with audience members at the top of the auditorium further increase the distance between audience and work, preventing full immersion and more likely approaching Brecht's notion of allowing the audience to detach from the play for rational thought and judgment.

Interviewees' responses support this observation: "I can evaluate a play relatively objectively in a large theatre from my evaluation system. I can notice relatively quickly what I like about the play and what I think is not good enough; it's a more rational state. But in little theatre I'm more emotional. I'll have the feeling that although the play has a lot of problems, because I'm very involved or enjoying it, I still like it and I'll want to see it again in the future. If it were a big theatre play with as many problems, I wouldn't have the same idea" (S8). In little theatre, even with proscenium stages, the height differential

with the audience is reduced to the point of nonexistence. In this case, the distance between audience and actors is greatly diminished, which helps the audience form a psychological state of “interlocutor,” making it easier for them to immerse themselves in the work and establish a psychological connection with the actors, creating stronger empathy.

#### 4.2.2 The New Type of Little Theatre-Going Experience and Problems under Environmental Theatre

In the 1960s, Richard Schechner developed the theory of “environmental theatre,” which broke away from traditional theatrical forms and involved the audience in the performance process. Simultaneously, Schechner delved deeper into theatrical space, stating that all spaces could be used for performance and that the area between stage and audience was not fixed but could be adapted to the plot. Schechner’s ideas break down the boundaries between audience and actors in theatrical performance, causing a fundamental change in traditional theatrical form and a dramatic shift in the actor-audience relationship, with the audience becoming involved in the action of the performance and becoming the “creator of the scene.”

In recent years, many environmental theatre productions based on this theory have emerged in China, such as the musicals *Kings Table* and *Light Keepers*, and the play *The Great Detective Zhao Gane*, all of which have been embraced by numerous audiences. Seven out of eight interviewees have seen two or more environmental theatre productions, demonstrating that these works have become a popular form of theatrical performance in China in recent years. Interviewees also reported that these productions have brought new theatre-going experiences. “The interaction, the distance, and the setting of the theatre are unique to this type of play and will immerse you in the play as soon as you enter the theatre. It’s very immersive” (S1). “The environments like *Light Keepers* are so well done that it feels immersive” (S2). “It becomes relaxed because of the design of the environment, and it won’t be as serious as it would be in a big theatre” (S6). “The ambient design of *Kings Table* is fantastic, with the Viking warriors stomping on the audience as they sing their war songs so that everyone can feel the ‘earth tremble,’ which is a very strange and powerful sensation that no framed stage can achieve” (S8). Only a few productions, such as *The Great Detective Zhao Gane*, involve the audience as a band or police officers within the performance.

For interviewees, the new theatre-going experience brought by environmental theatre focuses primarily on the atmospheric sense created by the theatre environment’s design, which helps the audience better integrate into the plot and even, in some cases, makes the audience part of the performance setting. These productions take advantage of environmental theatre’s smaller venues to deliver sensory stimulation beyond sight and sound in ways that large theatre cannot achieve. These methods enhance and enrich the audience’s sense of experience and participation in manners impossible for large theatres.

Despite environmental theatre providing a good live experience for audiences, interviewees consistently pointed out common problems: many environmental theatre scripts and actors' performances still need strengthening. "Environmental theatre creates an atmosphere and enhances the audience's sense of experience, which often leads to the audience being immersed in the play and ignoring some of the textual and performance shortcomings in the production, sometimes even becoming a means for the production to 'hide'" (S5). Improving the quality of theatre productions and performances should be a key concern for theatre makers when creating environmental theatre.

On the other hand, environmental theatre, with its diverse experiences and content, is becoming the mainstream of little theatre today, attracting many ordinary people to the theatre. However, its strong entertainment properties have to a certain extent weakened the original experimental, rebellious, and bold artistic exploration that characterized little theatre. Some interviewees stated that if large theatre productions are compared to "main meals," these little theatre productions are more like "dessert" or a pastime after life, lacking profound connotation and reflection. This is also an issue that theatre creators need to consider and contemplate.

#### **4.2.3 Actor Differences between Large Theatre and Little Theatre from the Audience's Perspective**

In conversations with interviewees, differences between actors in large theatre and little theatre also affected the audience's experience. In little theatres, where audiences are closer to actors, actors' business and changes in expression help the audience better understand character actions and plot development and to pick up on the energy and emotions of the actors. In large theatre, however, the expansive performance space and distance from the audience place greater demands on actors' performances. Little theatre productions therefore offer many opportunities for less experienced actors, but this also negatively impacts the audience's experience compared to the mature and large-scale nature of large theatre productions.

Simultaneously, some interviewees pointed out a clear difference regarding actors: the contrast between actors who have never performed in big theatre productions and those who have performed in both big and little theatre productions. "There are some actors who are not capable of acting in big theatre, but if he has been honed in big theatre and his energy can be put at 10, then he may only need 5 to come back and act in little theatre. But for actors who have only acted in little theatre, their energy only has 5, but during the show it might be that they acted only at 3" (S6).

### 4.3 Misplaced Theatre Productions in Commercial Performances

As the popularity of theatre and theatre audiences increase, more theatre productions are being performed commercially on a larger scale, touring to different parts of the country and making a richer range of productions available to audiences in more regions. When discussing this type of theatre production, interviewees mentioned that many little theatre productions are “misplaced” in large theaters during commercial performances due to revenue considerations and the lack of suitable venues in local theatre settings, thereby diminishing the audience experience.

“The sense of oppression and tension that was present in the little theatre is gone in the large theatre. Despite being an excellent script, it can feel strange or less immersive and loses a lot of its original charm. The stage became empty and the original tightness and cohesiveness was gone, making it feel cutthroat” (S4). For most audiences, the greatest impression of this kind of misplaced theatre work is that the integrity of the play has been destroyed. Actors need to use more exaggerated body movements and performance on stage to achieve the effect possible in little theatre. The original psychological distance is broken by the space, and the audience becomes a relatively separated component. This results in a disparity between the ideal relationship of the performance and the reality of the work, which in turn deprives it of certain value and emotional transmission.

For some environmental theatre works, due to venue constraints during touring, the works are often changed to proscenium stage versions. They are still performed in little theatres, but because of the lack of environmental shaping and multi-sensory stimulation, the valuable qualities of the works as environmental theatre are lost. The ‘fourth wall’ is rebuilt by the proscenium stage, while flaws in the script and the actors’ performances are exposed, further reducing the audience’s experience. This demonstrates that it is important for theatre creators to consider the impact of changes in space and stage style on the actor-audience relationship during commercial performances and to maintain and avoid negative effects through various means.

## 5 Conclusion and Reflection

This paper employs the in-depth interview method to study the phenomenon of differences in audience viewing and experience between large theatres and little theatres from the perspective of actor-audience relationships and attempts to answer the question of what factors affect these experiential differences. The study found that spatial change is the central factor influencing the difference in audience experience between large and little theatre productions, with the physical distance created by space greatly affecting the psychological state of the audience when watching. Even if the ‘fourth wall’ is broken in large theatre productions, it remains difficult to change the audience’s psychological state of

being relatively rational and distant as “spectators.” Little theatre productions, by contrast, because of the closer physical distance and reduced height difference between stage and audience, are more likely to produce a psychological state of closeness and intimacy. In environmental theatre works, through full use of the environment and mobilization of sensory stimuli, audiences are more likely to feel a sense of identification as “part of” the performance, which in turn impacts their attention, immersion, and psychological resonance during the performance, resulting in a different theatre-going experience.

Simultaneously, this study also identified problems in the domestic theatre performance market, such as the misplacement of theatre productions resulting in diminished audience experience and the obscuring of important spiritual and connotational aspects of productions—issues that deserve the attention of theatre creators. However, this study lacks a comprehensive approach to the issue from the perspective of theatre creators due to its exclusive focus on the audience perspective. In future research, scholars in this field may need to focus on this perspective and, by extension, on the improvement of misplaced theatre productions in commercial performances.

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*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

*Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.*