

# The Current Development and Prospects of Musical Theatre in China

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**Abstract:** Musical theatre is a comprehensive stage performance art form derived from the integration of drama, music and dance. Musical theatre originated in England in the 19th century, and its prototype can be traced back to the operetta, comic opera, black opera, etc. The main performance venues are on Broadway in the United States, and it is here that musical theatre has been rapidly developed and innovated, and has gradually come to the world stage. When musical theatre was developed in China, it also began to innovate in form, gradually localized, combined with the Chinese market demand, and more inclined to meet the Chinese art appreciation habits. The innovation in the local development of musical theatre in China will surely usher in a broader development prospect.

**Keywords:** Musical theatre; Development; Prospect

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The development of musical theatre in China has not been long. After the reform and opening up, musical playwrights in China have been trying to explore a road for the development of musical theatre in China. Over the years, China has also accumulated a wealth of experience in the development of musical theatre, and has sought to find a path for the development of musical theatre in its own country in future explorations. This paper takes the development of musical theatre in China as the research object, introduces the development history of musical theatre in China, analyzes the problems that exist in the development process of musical theatre industry in China, and expresses its own insights.

## 1. The origin of the development of musical theatre

The late 19th century and early 20th century were the first stages of the birth and development of musical theatre. There are various types of musical theatre, the more common ones are narrative, comedy, satire, dance, etc. Because of their rich, wonderful performances and easy to understand, musical theatre soon gained recognition and became an important form of entertainment at that time. In the 19th century in the West, a large number of classic works were born, such as the operetta “Die Fledermaus” and “A Gaiety Girl”. In the 20th century, a large number of excellent and classic musical theatre were born, such as “The Lady Dances” and “Porgy and Bess” in the 1930s; “OKLAHOMA!” in the 40s; “West Side Story” and the classic “The Sound of Music” in the 50s; “The Phantom of the Opera”, “Cats”, “Les Misérables” and “Miss Saigon” in the 80s, all of which are excellent works with great artistic charm. Against the background of rapid development in western countries, musical theatre are also exploring and developing, and the pace of advancement has been accelerating. Nowadays, musical theatre has also become a unique and remarkable art form, and are widely popular all over the world<sup>[1]</sup>.

## 2. The initial exploration of Chinese musical theatre

After the reform and opening up of China, the country was rejuvenated and became more tolerant of the world’s cultures. Many outstanding musicians stepped out of the country and started their journey of learning western art, and then musical theatre was introduced into China as a new art form. Thus, from the 1980s, the first Chinese original musical theatre were born.

The 1980s was a period of exploration for musical theatre in China, and many original musical theatre emerged, including the most famous “The Passion And The Love” and “Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?”, as well as excellent original musical theatre such as “Our Young People Now” and “The Windy Years”. Throughout the 1980s, numerous excellent productions were born. Although these works varied in quality, they laid the foundation for the future development of musical theatre in China and were worthy of recognition and praise.

By the 90s, Chinese musical theatre entered a period of initial development. The Ministry of Culture and the Opera Research Association jointly held a national opera observation performance in Hunan Province. This performance ignited the composers’ enthusiasm for creation, and many excellent musical works emerged from all over the world. Among them, the most famous and widely disseminated works are “Game in the Mountain”, “Please Walk with Me”, “The Personals” and “There is Truth on Earth”. “Game in the Mountains” was toured in many places and became very popular for its strong life style and humorous performance form. During this period, the number of musical theatre grew rapidly, and not only a number of excellent musical theatre emerged, but also many talented writers and composers appeared, such as Wang Yansong, Peng Chuan and Zuo Huanshen<sup>[2]</sup>.

In the twentieth century, musical theatre in China reached a new stage of development, as China began to study the Western music system and creation mode. At the same time, people’s musical aesthetics also changed with the development of the times, and popular music took up half of the Chinese music market. People were no longer satisfied with the past forms and subjects of musical theatre, and as a result, the styles of musical theatre became diversified, and the mode was no longer only in national mode, but began to use western major and minor keys. In just a few years, as many as thirty works were performed around the world, among which the most

influential ones are “The Ballad of Peach Blossom”, “The Magic Aster”, “The Piano in a Factory” and so on.

### **3. Prospects for the development of musical theatre in China**

At present, the attendance rate of musical theatre in China is almost full, but the overall “box office” is not high. For a country with a large population, there are not many people who are really exposed to musical theatre and appreciate them. In China, the musical theatre market is usually in the first-tier cities, and the audience is generally the middle class and above, or those who study musical theatre, so musical theatre is seen as a refined art, and many people are not used to appreciate it. At present, the development of Chinese musical theatre industry is not mature compared to that of European and American countries, Chinese musical theatre development is relatively late, the musical theatre market audience is narrow, and excellent musical playwrights are also relatively scarce. All these problems have limited the development of musical theatre in China<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### **3.1 Strengthen the cultivation of talents**

Talents are the key force in the development of the industry, and strengthening the cultivation of musical theatre talents will have a certain promotion effect on the development of musical theatre in China. Nowadays, young students are the main force in the development of the industry, so institutions of higher education can choose to open a musical theatre major or offer musical theatre courses, so that interested students can fully understand musical theatre, provide a good platform for the development of musical theatre, and cultivate more excellent talents for musical theatre creation.

#### **3.2 Expanding the publicity of musical theatre**

At present, the people who are exposed to musical theatre in China are not wide, and the publicity of musical theatre by relevant departments is not strong enough. To make the public understand musical theatre, we should first improve the publicity of musical theatre and broaden the publicity channels. It can be appropriate to broadcast wonderful clips and promos about musical theatre through TV channels and online media, and it can also produce and shoot variety shows related to musical theatre, such as the original new form of vocal singing program “Super Vocal” produced by Hunan TV. This variety show has achieved considerable success, and on the basis of its super high ratings, it has not only achieved innovation in musical variety shows, but also made many people understand musical theatre, and viewers have lamented that they hope musical theatre can be more widely popular. This shows that many people are interested in musical theatre, but one of the reasons why they have become a “niche” music is that they are not popular.

#### **3.3 Supporting the creation of musical theatre**

The development of musical theatre cannot be achieved without the support of relevant departments, and the cultural arts departments should play their leading role and actively do a good job in cultural infrastructure construction to ensure that some excellent plays are no longer performed in favor of big cities, and to ensure that small and medium-sized cities can also have appropriately sized theatres and performances of excellent plays. Strengthen the innovation of musical theatre, only by creating more excellent musical scripts can we promote the stable development of musical theatre in China. The script creation combines Chinese national conditions, fully considers the audience’s music appreciation habits, adds modern cultural content, appropriately combines local elements, creates musical scripts that are more in line with Chinese aesthetics, and caters to the public’s musical needs through innovations in subject matter, story, and melody, so that musical theatre can be better developed in China.

### **4. Conclusion:**

Musical theatre is a comprehensive art form, which has high requirements for both creators and singers. While our national economy is developing rapidly, people’s art appreciation ability is also greatly improved. The development of Chinese original musical theatre has had many difficulties along the way. In the future development, we should not only inherit the classical works, but also push forward the new ones, make further innovations to the content and form of Chinese musical theatre, accumulate experience, and create more fine works. As an emerging musical genre, musical theatre will become one of the stage arts that enrich the spiritual world of the public. Creating musical theatre with distinctive national cultural characteristics and actively promoting them will enable Chinese musical theatre to walk out of an unprecedented path.

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