CHAPTER FIVE

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH, REALITY AND DREAM:
TOWARDS AN ONEIRIC IMAGINATION

The Other Shore of Cognition

The Other Shore (Bi’an, 1986) continued the discourse on the art of acting, and also documented another stage in the formation of Gao’s idea of theatre and of his concept of the modern art of acting. The playwright admitted that he wrote this work with the actors in mind and the chance to test new possibilities in acting by combining certain techniques of the Beijing opera and the Western style of acting. In an interview in 1987, Gao confirmed that while writing the play he focused on creating a versatile actor (quanneng de yanyuan), shaped in opposition to the existing model of acting which cultivates the art of word.¹ The stage directions which Gao habitually attached to the texts of his plays, fully disclosed the intention of the playwright who aimed at liberating the theatre from the dictates of language and to restore performative qualities of the drama. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to educate a new type of actor, who should be able to act in the classic Western repertoire and to sing, who should know martial arts and the stylized gesture of the traditional Chinese theatre and to be acquainted also with the art of mime and the musical. Gao wrote:

Our play aims at training actors who can be as versatile as the actors in Chinese traditional operas, but it is not our intention to create a new set of conventions for modern drama, because the latter aspires to the kind of acting which is non-formulaic, unregulated, and flexible. Before the actual performance, the actor should enter into a state of competitiveness similar to that of an athlete before a game, or a cock preparing to slug it out in a cock-fight, ready to provoke as well as to receive his partner’s reactions.

Thus the performance must be fresh, regenerating, and improvisational which is essentially different from gymnastic or musical performances.  

In his stage directions, Gao emphasized also that the self-exploration of the actor who discovers himself occurs in the course of the process of entering reciprocal relations with the partners on stage. Gao continued:

If the actor without being obsessed with his own self, is consistently able to find a partner to communicate with him, his performance will always be positive and lively, and he will be able to gain a real sense of his own self, which has been awakened by action, and which is alert and capable of self-observation.

The liveliness of the show is determined by the intensity of the intuitive and improvised element. Gao prioritized the intuition and physicality of an actor over a logical, analytical approach to the part. He also said:

On the stage as in real life, the actor sees with his eyes, hears with his ears, and captures his partner’s reactions with his free-moving body. In other words, a performance can only be lively without the use of intellect.

In The Other Shore stage props perform a particularly important role in establishing interpersonal relations. The play requires no setting. In tune with Gao’s suggestions, it can be acted anywhere: in a theatre, rehearsal room, circus tent, gym hall or in any empty space if it can accommodate the appropriate lighting and sound system. This empty space—in a sense following the example of the Beijing opera—burdens the actor and the stage props. It is brought to life by the physical activities of the actor, who is tasked to create imagined worlds. The stage prop is not just a lifeless item or decoration, but a partner to the actor and acts as a catalyst for activity on stage.

Gilbert C. F. Fong is right when he focuses our attention on the concept of a neutral actor present in the play, although naturally one may argue against his statement that “the play is also the first piece of work by the playwright embodying his idea of the neutral actor.” Monologue (Dubai, 1985) and even The Bus Stop (Chezhan, 1983) seem to prove

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2 Ibid. p. 43.
3 Ibid. p. 43.