

THE EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF GROUP DANCE SPATIAL ARRANGEMENT IN THE DANCE DRAMA "CRESTED IBIS"

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the emotional expression and narrative function of group dance spatial arrangement in the dance drama Crested Ibis. Through literature review, case analysis, and interdisciplinary approaches, it examines how dynamic formations, vertical stratification, and rhythmic contrasts transform abstract emotions into visible choreographic language. Focusing on key sections—"The Gathering of the Ibis," "The Crisis of Hunting," and "Rebirth and Flourishing"—the analysis demonstrates how spatial choreography not only visualizes emotions of survival, endangerment, and rebirth, but also advances narrative development by distinguishing temporal-spatial contexts, intensifying conflicts, and reinforcing thematic symbols. Findings indicate that the unity of form and meaning is central to ecological-themed dance narratives, where choreography becomes a "super language" that transcends silence and enhances audience resonance. This research contributes to the theoretical and practical understanding of spatial language in contemporary dance creation and offers valuable insights for choreographers exploring ecological and thematic storytelling.

Keywords: Emotional Expression, Narrative Function, Group Dance Spatial Arrangement, Crested Ibis

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INTRODUCTION

This paper takes the dance drama "Crested Ibis" as the research object and systematically explores the mechanism of the role of group dance spatial arrangement in emotional expression and narrative function. Through literature research, case analysis and interdisciplinary analysis, it focuses on the dynamic changes of "pointline-surface", vertical layering and imagery formation in the work, and analyzes how they enhance the emotional tension of "survival-endangerment-rebirth" in "Crested Ibis" and promote the transformation of plot time and space and the development of conflicts. The research finds that the group dance arrangement in "Crested Ibis" achieves the concretization of emotions and the structuring of narrative through "the coexistence of form and meaning", with the core being the deep integration of the arrangement form and the thematic connotation. This practice provides an important reference for the innovative application of spatial language in dance choreography and opens up a new path for the narrative expression of ecological-themed dances.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Previous studies on dance choreography have emphasized that spatial arrangement is not merely a visual composition, but an essential expressive medium through which emotion, meaning, and narrative are articulated. Theoretical discussions on dance space aesthetics argue that spatial organization functions as a symbolic structure capable of shaping audience perception and emotional experience. Henri Lefebvre's concept of the "production of space" highlights space as a socially and emotionally constructed field, providing an important theoretical foundation for understanding how choreographic space carries cultural and ideological meanings (Lefebvre, 2018). Within dance studies, scholars have further explored how formations, movement trajectories, and spatial density contribute to emotional intensity and narrative clarity in group dance works.

Group choreography theory has also developed systematic approaches to interpreting collective movement as a symbolic language. Susanne Langer's theory of art as a "presentational symbol," articulated in *Feeling and Form*, proposes that artistic form does not describe emotions directly but makes emotional experience perceptible through structured symbols. Applied to dance, this theory suggests that spatial formations and movement patterns operate as symbolic forms that embody emotional processes over time (Langer, 1986). Building on this perspective, contemporary dance researchers have examined how group formations, symmetry and asymmetry, and dynamic spatial changes transform abstract emotions into visible and experiential choreographic language (Liu Qingyi, 2019).

Specific studies on dance drama creation highlight the close relationship between spatial choreography and narrative construction. Research on Chinese dance dramas emphasizes that group spatial arrangements play a crucial role in distinguishing temporal-spatial contexts, advancing plot development, and reinforcing thematic symbolism, particularly in works addressing historical or ecological themes. Existing analyses of *Crested Ibis* mainly focus on its ecological symbolism, movement vocabulary, and aesthetic style, while critical reviews and creative interviews frequently mention the choreographers' intention to use spatial imagery to convey themes of survival, crisis, and rebirth (The Creation Team of *Crested Ibis*, 2019). However, systematic academic research that integrates emotional expression and narrative function through the lens of group dance spatial arrangement remains limited.

Therefore, this study builds upon dance space aesthetics, group choreography theory, and existing literature on "*Crested Ibis*" to establish an integrated analytical framework linking choreography, emotion, and narrative. By synthesizing theoretical texts, critical commentaries, and creative interviews, the research seeks to address the gap between abstract theoretical discussion and concrete choreographic analysis, providing a structured foundation for the subsequent case study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Literature review method:

This research adopts a qualitative methodology combining literature review, observation, interviews, and case analysis to examine the emotional expression and narrative function of group dance spatial arrangement in *Crested Ibis*. First, through an extensive review of literature on dance spatial aesthetics and group choreography theory—particularly Susanne Langer’s theory of artistic symbolism in *Feeling and Form*—as well as studies on dance drama structure and ecological narration, the study constructs an analytical framework of “choreographic emotion-narrative.” (Langer, 1986) This framework serves as the theoretical basis for interpreting how spatial forms operate as symbolic carriers of emotion and storytelling (Liu Qingyi, 2019; Yu Ping, 2020).

Second, the creative background of *Crested Ibis* is examined through review articles, performance critiques, and published interviews with the creative team. These materials provide contextual understanding of the choreographic intentions and thematic concerns underlying the work, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in both theory and practice. Third, repeated observation of performance recordings allows for detailed examination of group formations, spatial trajectories, vertical layering, and rhythmic changes. This close observation supports a micro-level analysis of how spatial arrangements shift in relation to emotional intensity and narrative progression (Official Creation Interview of *Crested Ibis*, 2015; The Creation Team of *Crested Ibis*, 2019).

Finally, selected key sections of *Crested Ibis*—representing the stages of survival, endangerment, and rebirth—are analyzed as representative cases. By correlating specific spatial configurations with emotional states and narrative functions, the study demonstrates how group dance spatial arrangement operates as an integrated expressive system. Through this multi-method approach, the research ensures both theoretical depth and analytical rigor, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between choreographic space, emotional expression, and narrative construction.

Observation method:

By repeatedly watching live recordings and performance videos of *Crested Ibis*, combined with field notes and frame-by-frame analysis, the study directly observes the dancers’ formations, body movements, and stage interactions. This method allows for an intuitive understanding of how spatial arrangements convey emotions, construct conflicts, and guide audience perception, thereby providing empirical evidence to complement the literature and case analysis.

Interview method:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with choreographers, dancers, and audience members involved in or familiar with *Crested Ibis*. The interviews focused on their interpretations of spatial arrangement, emotional resonance, and narrative coherence. These perspectives provided first-hand insights into both the creative intentions behind the choreography and the reception experience of the audience, enriching the research with multiple viewpoints.

Case analysis method:

Select three key sections from "*Crested Ibis*"—"The Gathering of the Ibis" (survival stage), "The Crisis of Hunting" (endangered stage), and "Rebirth and Flourishing" (rebirth stage)—to conduct a micro-analysis of the formation structure, movement trajectory, and rhythm changes of the group dance, and record the corresponding relationship between the choreography, emotions, and narrative.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Technic of Spatial Arrangement Enhances Emotional Expression

In "Crested Ibis", the formation, height variation and rhythm changes of group dances transform abstract emotions into visible scenes.

The formation tension varies with the intensity of emotions, as follow.

1) Survival stage: Dancers are distributed in a radial pattern around the center, gradually forming a circular loop. The movements are slow and smooth, the formation is neat, conveying a sense of tranquility, with low tension.



Figure 1 Dance "Crested Ibis" stage

Note: [www. Xiaohongshu.com](http://www.Xiaohongshu.com), 2024, Flying Goose Formation



Figure 2 Dance "Crested Ibis" Close shut.

Note: [www. Xiaohongshu.com](http://www.Xiaohongshu.com), 2024, Dancers showed: Crane Sound

2) Endangered stage: Dancers are scattered randomly, some are fleeing, some are crouching. After the gunshot, they disperse in all directions, the formation is chaotic, showing panic and despair, and the tension reaches its peak.



Figure 3 Dance "Crested Ibis" stage scene

Note: [www. Xiaohongshu.com](http://www.Xiaohongshu.com), 2024

3) Rebirth stage: Starting from a small triangle formed by a few dancers, it gradually expands into a circle and then a fan shape. The movements rise from low to high, conveying hope and vitality, and the tension gradually returns to an appropriate level.



Figure 4 Dance "Crested Ibis" Long shot

Note: [www. Xiaohongshu.com](http://www.Xiaohongshu.com), 2024

Layering by height makes emotions more three-dimensional

Breaking away from the flat arrangement, it is divided into three layers: ground, midair, and high-altitude. For instance, in the "Dialogue between Heaven and Earth" section, the dancers on the ground crawl to express the earth's lament, those in the middle layer squat halfway to represent the struggle of the Crested Ibis, and those at the top stand and stretch to symbolize the call for life, making the complex emotions during the endangered period more layered.



Figure 5 Dance "Crested Ibis"

Note: [www. Xiaohongshu.com](http://www.Xiaohongshu.com), 2024

A fragment describing the bird's rebirth Rhythmic contrast highlights emotional transitions When survival is on the verge of extinction, the tempo shifts abruptly from a slow, flowing pace to a fast, scattered one, magnifying the impact of the impending disaster; when moving from the brink of extinction to rebirth, the rhythm changes from stagnation to slight movement and then to flow, delicately depicting the process from despair to hope.

The Spatial Choreography Facilitates Story Development

The spatial choreography of group dances not only conveys emotions but also links the plot, distinguishes time and space, and intensifies conflicts, mainly achieved through various choreographic styles.

Distinguish space and time by scheduling style.

In ancient times: symmetrical formations (such as horizontal rows and circles), with graceful movements, accompanied by traditional music, exuding stability and harmony.



Figure 6 Dance "Crested Ibis"

Note: [www. Xiaohongshu.com](http://www.Xiaohongshu.com), 2024, Symmetrical formations with graceful movements, exuding stability and harmony

Modern times: Chaotic formation (random interweaving, fleeing, etc.), quick movements, accompanied by noise, showing disorderly destruction.

Modern: orderly yet flexible formations (such as flowing arcs, controllable gathering and scattering, etc.), dynamic movements, in harmony with symphonic music, demonstrating rational restoration. This way, the audience can clearly distinguish different time and space.

Use formations to present conflicts and contradictions

For instance, in the "Hunting and Resistance" section, the Hunter group advances in an acute-angled triangle formation, showing aggressiveness; the Crested Ibis group retreats in an arc formation, showing defensiveness. Through the dynamic changes of the two groups' formations, the conflict between humans and nature is transformed into a visible spatial confrontation, making the plot more tense.

Emphasize the theme through repetitive formations

The "circle" is a key symbol throughout the entire play: the complete circle in the survival stage symbolizes harmony, the incomplete circle in the endangered stage symbolizes the disruption of balance, and the circle that transitions from incomplete to complete in the rebirth stage symbolizes restoration, constantly emphasizing the ecological theme.

This offers several useful inspirations for choreographers:

First, when designing group dance formations, the theme should be considered first. New ideas in form should revolve around the needs of emotions and the story, and not be designed merely for the sake of being visually appealing or showing off skills. Second, attention should be paid to the rhythm of formation changes (speed, movement and stillness, gathering and scattering), which should align with the rhythm of emotional changes and story development, making the work more compelling. Third, don't just arrange formations on a flat surface; try different spatial levels of height to enrich the expression of emotions and the story.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Discussion

After studying the positions and formations of the group dance in "Crested Ibis", we found that the "appearance" of the dance (such as the formation, movement route, and height of the dancers) and the "meaning" it intends to convey (emotions, story, and theme) are inseparable. These formation and position changes are not merely for showcasing skills, but to better convey emotions, tell a good story, and highlight the theme. The strength of "Crested Ibis" lies in the perfect match between the formation appearance and the content it aims to express—for instance, using a "scattered formation" to represent despair, a "spiraling upward formation" to represent hope, and a "circular formation" to represent a cycle. These all accurately correspond to the fate of the crested ibis and the ecological theme of the work, allowing the audience to both feel the emotions and understand the underlying meaning.

Conclusion

The spatial choreography of the group dance in the ballet "Crested Ibis" achieves the concrete expression of emotions through "the correspondence between formation tension and emotional intensity", "the vertical stratification and the construction of emotional layers", and "the contrast of rhythm and the reinforcement of emotional transitions", allowing the audience to directly experience the emotional ups and downs of the Crested Ibis from "survival-endangerment-rebirth". At the same time, through "visual markers of time and space transitions", "the spatial externalization of conflicts and contradictions", and "the narrative reinforcement of thematic symbols", it promotes the structural development of the plot, clearly conveying the theme of ecological protection.

This practice has proved that the spatial arrangement of group dance is a "super language" for expressing emotions and narrating stories in dance. Its core lies in the unity of form and meaning—when the arrangement form deeply aligns with the emotional core and narrative logic of the work, the dance can break through the "limitation of silence" and generate a powerful artistic appeal. "Crested Ibis" provides a path for choreographers to follow: guided by the theme, each change in formation should carry the warmth of emotion and the weight of the narrative, ultimately achieving the artistic realm where "space is meaning".

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