

# THE SPATIAL ARRANGEMENT OF THE ENSEMBLE DANCE IN THE BALLET "CRESTED IBIS"

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## ABSTRACT

This article takes the group dance segments in the ballet "Crested Ibis" as the research object, and comprehensively and systematically explores the specific forms of group dance spatial arrangement and its intrinsic connection with "shaping the image of Crested Ibis" and "expressing ecological themes" by integrating literature research, video analysis and case analysis. Through the research, it is found that there are three key spatial arrangement techniques in the group dance of this ballet: first, the formation of the plane is arranged with rich imagery; second, vertical layers that can convey emotions are created; third, the stage area is divided with narrative significance. Through these three methods, not only does the image of the Crested Ibis group vividly present itself to the audience, but also the abstract themes such as "harmonious coexistence of human and nature" and "protecting the ecological environment" are transformed into dance language that the audience can directly perceive. This research result can provide practical reference and inspiration for those ballets with ecological themes when designing the group dance parts.

**Keywords:** The Dance Drama "Crested Ibis"; Group Dance, Spatial Arrangement, Ecological Theme; Dance Narrative

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## INTRODUCTION

Among contemporary Chinese dance dramas with ecological themes, "Crested Ibis" is undoubtedly a representative work. It was meticulously created by the Shanghai Dance Troupe. The entire story unfolds around the survival process of the Crested Ibis, from facing the danger of extinction, encountering survival crises, to ultimately regaining vitality. The creative team uses graceful dance movements to depict the complex yet close relationship between humans and nature.

In this dance drama, the role of the ensemble dance is not merely to set the stage atmosphere or serve as a "visual foil". It plays a crucial role in several key moments: on the one hand, through its orderly yet varied dance movements, it vividly portrays the Crested Ibis group, allowing the audience to immediately grasp the characteristics of the Crested Ibis flock; on the other hand, the choreography of the ensemble dance also drives the plot forward step by step, for instance, from the scene of the Crested Ibis happily living in the wetland to the tense situation where they face survival threats, the ensemble dance serves as an important link and driving force; in addition, it also undertakes the task of conveying the core theme of the dance drama, enabling the audience to understand the importance of ecological protection while enjoying the dance.

Spatial arrangement is a very core element in dance choreography. Simply put, it involves arranging how the performers move around the stage space, how they form different formations, and how different areas of the stage are allocated to the performers. Whether the spatial arrangement is well designed directly affects whether the visual logic presented by the dance drama to the audience is clear and also determines whether the emotions the dance drama intends to convey can be accurately delivered to the audience.

However, most of the current research on "Crested Ibis" focuses on the design of stage settings, the characteristics of dance movements, or the thematic ideas expressed by the dance drama. Specialized studies on the spatial arrangement of group dances are rather scattered, and there has been no systematic organization of the spatial arrangement methods of group dances, nor an in-depth analysis of the deep connection between these spatial arrangements and the thematic expression. Therefore, this article specifically focuses on the spatial arrangement of group dances in "Crested Ibis". On the one hand, it aims to fill the gap in this research area; on the other hand, it also hopes to provide theoretical guidance and practical references for the design of group dances in other similar-themed dance dramas.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

Existing studies on dance choreography have widely acknowledged that spatial arrangement constitutes a fundamental expressive dimension of dance, shaping both visual perception and thematic communication. Research on dance space choreography has gradually formed a systematic theoretical framework, emphasizing the visual composition, spatial order, and symbolic meaning embedded in choreographic design (Wang Xiaolan, 2021). Scholars such as Wang Mei, in *Visual Composition of Dance Space Choreography*, have proposed that spatial choreography is not a neutral stage arrangement, but a visual language constructed through points, lines, planes, density, and direction, which directly affects audience cognition and emotional engagement (Yu Ping, 2020). These studies provide essential analytical perspectives for understanding how space functions as an aesthetic and narrative structure in dance.

In addition to general theories of dance space, group dance choreography has been increasingly discussed as a key medium for shaping collective imagery and conveying abstract themes. Related research points out that ensemble formations can transform individual movements into a unified visual symbol, enabling choreographers to express complex ideas such as ecology, community, and collective destiny (Liu Qingyi, 2019). Through the organization of spatial relationships among performers, group dance creates a dynamic visual order that integrates

movement, rhythm, and meaning, thereby becoming an important carrier of narrative and symbolism in dance drama (Zhi Huayun, 2018).

Regarding the dance drama *Crested Ibis*, existing literature mainly includes creative records, official interviews, and academic commentaries. Materials such as *Creation Record of the Dance Drama "Crested Ibis"* published by the Shanghai Song and Dance Ensemble document the background, creative process, and core artistic concepts of the work, revealing the choreographers' intention to use spatial imagery to represent the living state and survival challenges of the Crested Ibis. Meanwhile, academic review articles and critical analyses focus primarily on the ecological theme, movement vocabulary, and aesthetic style of the dance drama, offering valuable evaluations from professional perspectives (The Creation Team of *Crested Ibis*, 2019).

However, although these studies provide important insights into the artistic value of *Crested Ibis*, systematic research specifically addressing the spatial arrangement of ensemble dance remains relatively limited. Most discussions treat spatial design as a secondary element, rather than analyzing it as an independent and structured expressive system (Yu Ping, 2020). Therefore, by organizing and synthesizing theoretical literature on dance space choreography and existing materials related to *Crested Ibis*, this study clarifies the analytical dimensions of "spatial choreography" and establishes a theoretical framework that supports an in-depth examination of how ensemble spatial arrangement shapes imagery and conveys ecological themes.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Literature review method:

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology centered on literature analysis, video text analysis, and case study, aiming to systematically examine the spatial arrangement of ensemble dance in the ballet *Crested Ibis*. First, theoretical literature related to dance space choreography was collected and reviewed, including representative works such as Wang Mei's *Visual Composition of Dance Space Choreography*. Through the study of these texts, the research clarifies the basic concepts, compositional principles, and analytical perspectives of spatial choreography, establishing a theoretical foundation for understanding how space operates as a visual and symbolic language in dance (Wang Xiaolan, 2021; Liu Qingyi, 2019).

Second, materials related to the creation of *Crested Ibis* were gathered, including official creative records, background documentation, and interviews published by the Shanghai Song and Dance Ensemble. These sources provide detailed information on the creative context, choreographic intentions, and artistic ideas behind the dance drama. At the same time, academic review articles and critical commentaries were analyzed to understand professional evaluations and interpretative viewpoints regarding the work. Through the comparative reading and organization of these materials, the study gains a comprehensive understanding of both the creative background and scholarly reception of "*Crested Ibis*" (The Creation Team of *Crested Ibis*, 2019). Based on the literature review, the study further conducts video text analysis using high-definition performance recordings of the ballet. Representative ensemble dance segments are selected and analyzed frame by frame, focusing on spatial elements such as formation structure, density, movement trajectories, vertical hierarchy, and stage area usage. These observations are systematically recorded and categorized to identify recurring spatial arrangement patterns (Yu Ping, 2020).

Finally, typical ensemble dance scenes are selected as case studies to examine how specific spatial choreography methods correspond to narrative development and thematic expression. By combining theoretical insights with concrete visual analysis, the research demonstrates how spatial arrangement functions as an effective tool for shaping the image of the Crested Ibis and expressing ecological themes. This multi-layered methodological approach ensures that the

study is grounded in both theory and practice, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis and conclusions (Zhi Huayun, 2018).

#### **Video Text Analysis Method:**

The official high-definition videos of the 2014 premiere and 2023 tour editions of the dance drama "Crested Ibis" were selected as the main research samples. Since one is the original version and the other is the version refined after a period of touring, they can better demonstrate the characteristics and possible changes in the group dance choreography. Subsequently, the four most representative group dance scenes in the drama, namely "Crested Ibis Gathering", "Wetland Play", "Ecological Crisis", and "Population Rebirth", were analyzed frame by frame. To ensure analytical rigor, a structured observation protocol was employed. It focused on three key spatial dimensions derived from the literature: 1) Formation Type & Density (e.g., scattered, linear, clustered; assessment of proximity), 2) Vertical Hierarchy (predominant body levels: low/kneeling, middle/standing, high/jumping/elevated), and 3) Stage Zone Usage & Movement Trajectory (distribution and paths across defined front, middle, and rear zones). During this process, the changes in the positions of the dancers were meticulously recorded, according to these categories. Finally, based on the recorded data and information, a classification ledger of group dance choreography methods was established, transforming qualitative observations into structured data for pattern identification.

#### **Case Analysis Method:**

The four aforementioned scenes ("Gathering", "Play", "Crisis", "Rebirth") were treated as in-depth case studies. Their selection was based on their narrative significance as pivotal plot points and their distinct visual-spatial characteristics. For each case, the spatial data extracted through video analysis (e.g., a shift from scattered points to a tight cluster, combined with a drop to low body levels) was systematically interpreted against the specific narrative context (e.g., onset of ecological crisis) and emotional tone (e.g., anxiety). This process involved cross-referencing the visual evidence with theoretical concepts (e.g., Wang Mei's visual language, Liu Qingyi's collective symbolism) to explain how the spatial arrangements achieve their narrative and expressive effects. Through such analysis, it is proved that these choreography methods play a supporting role in shaping the image of the Crested Ibis and expressing the theme of the dance drama, making the research conclusion more convincing.

#### **Methodological Integration and Limitation:**

This integrated approach—theoretical foundation (literature review), empirical data collection (video analysis), and contextual interpretation (case studies)—ensures a comprehensive examination. However, a key limitation of this study is its reliance on textual and visual document analysis. While it allows for detailed formal analysis of the choreographic product, it does not encompass the choreographers' explicit intentions or the audience's reception. The absence of interviews with the creative team is acknowledged as a constraint defining the scope of this research.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

### **Planar formation: Mimicking the "state" with the "shape" to create the group image characteristics of the Crested Ibis.**

The design of the flat formation for the group dance mainly revolves around "simulating the behavioral movements of the Crested Ibis in its natural environment", and conveys different messages to the audience through the changes in the formation between "sparse and dense" and "neat and scattered". Specifically, there are the following three formations:

1) Scattered and loose formation: In this formation, the performers are not arranged in a neat line but are distributed in an irregular, scattered pattern on the stage, with considerable distances between them. At the same time, they move back and forth with small steps, and their arms, like the wings of the Crested Ibis, slowly flap up and down, making a gentle "wing-

flapping" movement. This formation and movement combination is designed to simulate the state of the Crested Ibis freely foraging and leisurely strolling in the wetland. For instance, in the "Morning Mist Wetland" scene, as the music rhythm changes, the density of the scattered points will also be adjusted. Sometimes the performers will disperse, each showcasing the agility of the Crested Ibis; at other times, they will gradually gather, creating the impression of a flock of Crested Ibis, fully demonstrating the lively and wild characteristics of the Crested Ibis flock.



**Figure 1** Dance "Crested Ibis" on Scattered and loose formation

Note: This image is an official still of the dance drama Crested Ibis by Shanghai Song and Dance Ensemble, 2024, Bird flock interaction

2) Linear Regular Formation: This formation mainly consists of two types: straight lines and curves. When depicting the scene of "Crested Ibis Migration", the straight line formation is used. The actors are mostly arranged along the diagonal of the stage, marching in unison with their bodies slightly leaning forward. This arrangement and movement combination resemble the "flight path" of Crested Ibis, allowing the audience to clearly perceive the direction of their migration. It also highlights the cohesion of the Crested Ibis flock, presenting a picture of their united migration. When portraying the scene of "Crested Ibis Playing and Interacting", the curve formation comes into play. The curves are diverse in shape, including S-shaped and wavy ones. The actors move slowly along these curves and perform actions like "grooming feathers". The inherent softness of the curves, combined with these lively interactive movements, further intensifies the intimate and harmonious atmosphere among the Crested Ibis flock, allowing the audience to feel their friendly coexistence.



**Figure 2** Dance "Crested Ibis" on the formation of wild geese

Note: This image is an official still of the dance drama Crested Ibis by Shanghai Song and Dance Ensemble, 2024, the flocks of birds migrate.

3) Clustered Dense Formation: When this formation is adopted, the performers gather closely together, forming shapes like circles or squares that resemble "clusters", creating a distinct visual focus on the stage and easily attracting the audience's attention. In the scene of "Ecological Crisis", the "high density" feature of the clustered formation, combined with the performers' tense body movements, such as curling up their bodies and keeping their arms stiff, fully conveys the unease and vulnerability of the Crested Ibis when facing a crisis, allowing the audience to deeply feel their predicament. In the scene of "Population Rebirth", the performers also form a circular cluster, but unlike in the "Ecological Crisis" scene, their postures are very relaxed, their bodies are loose, and they all face the center of the circle. This formation design symbolizes the reuniting of the Crested Ibis group and conveys a sense of hope, foreshadowing the rebirth of the Crested Ibis population.



**Figure 3** Dance "Crested Ibis" on Clustered Dense Formation

Note: This image is an official still of the dance drama Crested Ibis by Shanghai Song and Dance Ensemble, 2024, Circle-Struggle

### **Vertical hierarchy: Emphasizing "high" and "low" to reveal "emotion", intensifying emotion and conflict**

To better convey emotions and present conflicts, the choreographer adjusted the height of the actors' body postures and combined them with some low props, such as wooden stakes and small platforms, to create vertical layers on the stage. Specifically, there are the following three types of layering arrangements:

1) Low-level Scheduling: In this scheduling approach, the performers mainly perform in postures such as squatting, kneeling, and crawling on the ground, with their bodies as close to the ground as possible and their movements slow and heavy, lacking the previous lightness. In the "ecological crisis" scene, some performers kneel on the stage, supporting themselves with their hands on the ground, and their heads are deeply lowered. The originally gentle "wing flapping" movements have also been greatly reduced in amplitude. Combined with the dense planar formation mentioned earlier, the performers are tightly huddled together, directly conveying to the audience the immense pressure the Crested Ibis is under when facing a survival crisis, allowing the audience to truly feel their difficult situation.

2) Mid-level choreography: This type of choreography is based on the actors' standing and tiptoeing postures and is the most common "baseline level" in group dance performances. In the "Crested Ibis Gathering" scene, the actors stand in the middle of the stage, with their feet slightly tiptoeing and their bodies remaining stable. The "wing flapping" movements are slow and steady, without much fluctuation. Combined with the loose and scattered formation, the actors are spread out on the stage, creating a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere. It is as if the Crested Ibis are at ease in a safe environment, allowing the audience to feel a sense of tranquility and comfort.

3) High-level Choreography: To achieve a high-level effect, there are mainly two ways: one is to have the actors perform large jumps, and the other is to use props to increase their height. In the "Crested Ibis Soaring" scene, the actors will make large jumping movements, pushing off the ground with their legs and fully extending their bodies in the air, just like the Crested Ibis spreading its wings and flying. Some actors will stand on wooden stakes set up in advance, further increasing their height. At this time, the amplitude of the actors' "wing flapping" movements also significantly expands. Combined with the open planar formation, the distance between the actors is widened, making the entire stage picture appear very spacious. It fully showcases the lightness and vitality of the Crested Ibis when flying, allowing the audience to feel the joy of them freely soaring in the air. In the "Population Rebirth" scene, the frequency of the actors' jumps increases significantly. As the music gradually reaches its climax, the amplitude of the jumps also becomes larger. Through such choreography, the sense of hope for the Crested Ibis population's rebirth is further strengthened, and the audience's emotions also become more passionate.

#### Stage Area: Define "Events" by "Zones", and Divide Narrative Functions

The choreographer, based on the characteristics of the stage, clearly divided the entire stage into three parts: "front area-middle area-back area". Each area has its specific narrative function and plays different roles in various scenes:



**Figure 4** Dance "Crested Ibis" A flock of birds is visible ahead

Note: This figure is a self-made schematic diagram of stage zone analysis for the dance drama Crested Ibis, adapted from official stills of Shanghai Song and Dance Ensemble. It clearly labels the "Front", "Middle", and "Back" stage zones to visually illustrate the logic of stage spatial division.

1) Central Zone: Core Narrative Area: The central zone is located at the center of the stage and is the most prominent and easily noticed area by the audience. Therefore, it mainly showcases key formations and important movements in the group dance. Scenes that are crucial to the plot development, such as "Ecological Crisis" and "Species Rebirth", with their core block formations and linear formations, are all performed in the central zone. Through dense formation changes and rich movements, the performers in the central zone draw the audience's visual focus, allowing them to concentrate on the core content of the plot and clearly convey the core narrative of the dance drama, helping the audience understand the development of the plot.

2) Front Area: Close-up Detail Zone: The front area is close to the audience, allowing them to clearly see the actors' movements and expressions. Therefore, this area is mainly used to

present some close-up interaction scenes and delicate detail actions. In the "Wetland Play" scene, the actors arranged in the front area will perform the "pecking" action, using their hands to simulate the beak of the Crested Ibis, gently touching the ground, just like the Crested Ibis searching for food; they will also perform the "grooming feathers" action, gently stroking their arms with their hands, imitating the Crested Ibis grooming its feathers. Combined with the scattered and loose formation, the actors freely move in front of you. These detailed actions make the scene appear more realistic and vivid, as if the Crested Ibis were really playing and frolicking right before the audience's eyes.

3) Backstage Area: Background Atmosphere Zone: The backstage area is relatively far from the audience and does not easily draw their main attention as the front and middle areas do. Therefore, it mainly serves to set the atmosphere and extend the space. In the "Morning Mist Wetland" scene, the actors in the backstage area will be distributed in a loose scattered formation, performing slow "wing flapping" movements. Combined with the fog effect lighting on the stage, it creates a hazy morning mist atmosphere. These actors are like a "flock of Crested Ibis in the distance", making the audience feel that the stage space is more expansive and has a sense of depth, as if they were seeing a vast wetland. In the "Ecological Crisis" scene, the actors in the backstage area will move slowly in a low posture, close to the ground, with heavy movements. Coupled with the dim lighting, it further enhances the oppressive and tense atmosphere, allowing the audience to better feel the crisis situation at that time.

### **The functions and values of the spatial arrangement methods in shaping the image of Crested Ibis.**

The core value of the spatial arrangement of the ensemble dance in the ballet "Crested Ibis" lies in its realization of the "deep integration of dance form and ballet content". That is to say, the arrangement of the ensemble dance is not designed randomly but is closely combined with the content the ballet intends to convey. Specifically, it is mainly reflected in the following three aspects:

1) Spatial arrangement is like a "visual translator" of the Crested Ibis image. The changes between the "scattered and orderly" formations in the plane correspond to the behaviors of the Crested Ibis in nature, such as the scattered formation representing the free foraging state of the Crested Ibis and the orderly formation representing the collective migration behavior of the Crested Ibis. The "high and low" differences in the vertical layers also match the life states of the Crested Ibis. The high-level arrangement showcases the lightness of the Crested Ibis when flying, while the low-level arrangement reflects the vulnerability of the Crested Ibis when facing a crisis. Through such spatial arrangement, the originally abstract concept of "Crested Ibis group image" is transformed into a dance form that the audience can directly see and truly perceive. The audience does not need to rely on textual explanations; they can clearly identify what actions the Crested Ibis are performing and what emotional states they are in just by observing the changes in the group dance arrangement on the stage, greatly enhancing the intuitiveness and appeal of the dance drama.

2) Spatial arrangement also serves as a "narrative carrier" for conveying ecological themes. Different combinations of spatial arrangements can convey different thematic moods. For instance, the combination of "scattered formation + medium-level arrangement + background in the rear area" creates a "harmonious and peaceful" atmosphere, allowing the audience to feel the happy life of the Crested Ibis in a good ecological environment, reflecting the beauty of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. The combination of "cluster formation + low-level arrangement + core display in the middle area" presents a tense situation of "ecological crisis", showing the survival predicament faced by the Crested Ibis. While the combination of "linear formation + high-level arrangement + core display in the middle area" symbolizes "rebirth hope", conveying the positive signal that the Crested Ibis population has regained vitality under protection. This way of corresponding "arrangement combinations and

thematic moods" transforms the originally abstract and hard-to-understand concept of "ecological protection" into intuitive and understandable visual language, enabling the audience to naturally understand and accept the importance of ecological protection during the appreciation of the dance, greatly enhancing the appeal of the dance drama's theme.

3) Such a spatial arrangement design also conforms to the audience's aesthetic habits and comprehension patterns. The central area, as the core narrative zone, ensures that the main plot of the dance drama is not scattered, allowing the audience to focus their attention on the key content. The close-up details in the front area and the background atmosphere created in the rear area form a "complementary relationship of primary and secondary" with the central area, making the entire stage picture more rich and three-dimensional, avoiding monotony. The vertical layering and height variations also add a sense of depth to the stage visual effect, preventing the audience from experiencing aesthetic fatigue from watching a single layer of dance for a long time. This "clearly defined functions and distinct layers" arrangement logic reduces the difficulty for the audience to understand the dance drama. The audience does not need to spend too much energy pondering the plot and can easily keep up with the development rhythm of the dance drama. At the same time, the dynamic changes in formation, such as transitioning from scattered formations to clustered ones, keep the stage picture fresh, maintaining the audience's attention and enhancing their overall artistic experience, allowing them to better immerse themselves in the world created by the dance drama.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

### Discussion

This study demonstrates that the ensemble spatial arrangement in *Crested Ibis* constitutes a sophisticated, multi-layered expressive system. It effectively transforms the ensemble from a decorative element into an active narrative agent. The findings strongly support and operationalize the theoretical frameworks of Yu Ping, showing how spatial "language" is concretely applied for mimetic, emotional, and narrative ends.

Two choreographic principles emerge as particularly significant for ecological dance drama: Iconic Mimesis (spatial patterns directly deriving from the subject's natural behavior) and Narrative Synergy (spatial design being inseparable from plot and theme development).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this research decodes the spatial choreography of *Crested Ibis* as a deliberate strategy of "ecological storytelling through space." Its primary contribution lies in providing a structured analytical framework that bridges dance spatial theory and concrete choreographic practice. For creators, it underscores the narrative potency of ensemble space. For scholars, it offers a replicable method for rigorous choreographic analysis. Future research should build upon this formal analysis by incorporating the perspectives of creators and spectators, thereby achieving a more holistic understanding of how choreographic space is conceived, realized, and interpreted.

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