

# On the Artistic Characteristics and Practice of Musical Theater in Music Education in Colleges and Universities

Tong Bian

Shanghai Xinyidan Culture Media Co., Ltd., Shanghai, China

**Abstract:** Musical theater integrates music, dance, drama and other diversified art forms, and has such remarkable features as comprehensiveness, popularity, storytelling and popularity. These characteristics make it play an important role in music education in colleges and universities, such as stimulating students' interest in learning, enhancing comprehensive artistic literacy, and promoting teaching innovation. This study focuses on the art of musical theater in music education in colleges and universities, and discusses its artistic characteristics and practical applications. By analyzing the diverse forms of practice, such as curriculum construction, campus community activities, interdisciplinary integration practice, and the display and exchange of practice results, this paper describes the effective path of musical theater in colleges and universities. At the same time, the study summarizes the inspiration of musical practice on music education in colleges and universities, such as establishing the concept of comprehensive literacy training, creating a diversified curriculum system, etc., aiming at providing theoretical and practical references for the reform of music education in colleges and universities, and helping to cultivate high-quality musical talents to meet the needs of the times.

**Keywords:** Music Education in Colleges and Universities, Musical Theater, Artistic Characteristics, Practical Value.

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of modern society, the demand for talents has become more and more stringent, colleges and universities as an important cradle of talent training, to be able to actively cultivate applied talents to adapt to social development. Therefore, in the actual education of colleges and universities, the comprehensive quality of students and aesthetic quality often have more stringent requirements. Music education teaching in colleges and universities is an important way to cultivate students' comprehensive quality and aesthetic quality. Musical theater also belongs to a special music education teaching resources, in recent years, music teaching in colleges and universities gradually have more and more extensive teaching applications. In order to be able to play the advantages of musical teaching resources, teachers should grasp the basic characteristics of musicals, seek the fit between musicals and music teaching, and show the musicals in the students' classroom teaching in a suitable teaching presentation, so that the students will be interested in the musicals and at the same time, constantly improve the enthusiasm for music learning, and promote the comprehensive development of the students' music aesthetic qualities and comprehensive qualities.

## 2. Musical Theater and its Artistic Characteristics

Musical theater is a highly comprehensive art form, covering a variety of artistic fields such as music, drama, dance, etc. Born in Europe and the United States in the 20th century, it is a kind of music that embodies people's cultural choices and aesthetics, and familiar musicals include "Cats," "Les Misérables," "Miss Saigon," etc. (Magalhães, 2022). With the development and progress of the times, such popular musicals have been applied to university music teaching, greatly broadening the scope of music teaching in colleges and universities, improving college students' music

appreciation and creative ability, and achieving good music teaching results (Akbarova et al., 2020). Musical theater is at the forefront of the times, not only in the form of flexible and diverse performances, in the ordinary story often contains a profound philosophy of life, so that the viewer has a long aftertaste, with the advantages of easy to understand and strong visualization, but also has a diverse range of artistic characteristics:

### (1) Diversity

Musical theater combines music, dance and drama to create a unique artistic expression. Music is pivotal in portraying characters and progressing the plot through a variety of styles. The use of different musical styles, including classical, pop and rock, meticulously crafts the desired atmosphere and accurately portrays the characters' innermost sentiments. The musical "Cat" uses a range of musical styles to portray characters' emotions: rock music shows the rebellious and confused "Charming Cat", while the "Leader Cat" is portrayed by a more majestic and wiser melody. Dance is also important, with different styles enhancing emotional expression and generating stage tension. "Chicago" is a good example of this, using jazz dance to show the American city in the 1920s and move the story forward. Drama helps musicals tell stories by creating conflicts and plots to engage the audience. Les Misérables is a good example of this, using a grand narrative to explore human nature and social reality. The combination of music, dance and drama makes for a distinctive artistic experience.

### (2) Popularity

Musicals are popular for many reasons. Their themes, narratives and styles appeal to all audiences. Thematic content comes from a variety of sources. Les Misérables draws on human struggles against the backdrop of the French Revolution, while The Sound of Music conveys love and hope through the familiar setting of a family unit. Musical theater blends classical, pop, jazz, folk and other genres, incorporating memorable melodies. "The Music of the Night" from "The Phantom of the Opera" is a classic that has been widely

circulated. Stage performances of musicals are characterized by Musicals are rich and varied, incorporating music, dance, drama and choreography. Their combination of light-hearted plots, spectacular dances and stunning stage effects creates a strong audio-visual impact, making them both artistic and entertaining. Their enduring popularity is indicative of their significance within popular culture and their global appeal.

### (3) Adaptability

Musicals have always kept pace with the times, and are constantly innovating in terms of themes and forms of expression. Themes closely follow the pulse of the times, reflecting current social hotspots and cultural trends. For example, *Hamilton* tells the history of the founding of the United States with hip-hop music, which breaks the narrative mode of traditional historical dramas, triggers the interest of young audiences in history, and reflects the grasp of the cultural trend of the times. In terms of presentation, modern technology, such as multimedia projection and virtual reality, is actively integrated to enhance the visual effect of the stage (Alexander-Hills, 2022). *Notre Dame de Paris* utilizes multimedia projection to create realistic scenes and an immersive viewing experience. At the same time, musicals continue to absorb new artistic elements, incorporating pop music, street dance, etc., to maintain artistic vitality. This adaptability to the times has enabled musicals to continue to develop in the ever-changing art market and become a model of art that advances with the times.

## 3. The Practical Value of Musical Theater in Music Education in Colleges and Universities

Musicals have a far-reaching impact on university music teaching, and this special form of music teaching can enhance students' aesthetic interests and purify their minds, so that students can feel the charm of music in the process of watching musicals, which ensures the realization of the goals of music teaching in China's colleges and universities, specifically, the teaching value of musicals is mainly manifested as follows:

### 3.1. Stimulate Students' Interest in Music Learning

The unique charm of musical theater has been shown to revitalize music education in higher education, stimulating interest in music learning. Unlike the conventional approach to music education, musical theater integrates diverse artistic elements, providing a comprehensive immersive experience (Akbarova, 2022). A classic musical like *The Phantom of the Opera* combines grand melodies, narratives and performances. The Phantom and Christian's captivating voices, stunning stage and dance instantly transport students to a fantasy and romantic realm of music. This powerful audio-visual experience enhances students' curiosity and eagerness to explore music, making the learning process enjoyable. Furthermore, students rehearse and perform the musical, transitioning from passive acceptance to active creation and performance. The full commitment needed for singing, dancing and acting must be emphasized to allow students to connect with the music and learn expressive skills.

### 3.2. Enhance Students' Comprehensive Artistic Literacy

The study of musical theater is important for developing

students' artistic literacy. It covers styles like classical, pop, rock, and jazz. Learning different vocal techniques helps students understand musical characteristics, rhythm, harmony, and more, expanding their artistic horizons and improving their perceptual and vocal abilities (Liu, 2024). Hip-hop's use in *Hamilton* conveys history through its rhythms. Students are encouraged to engage with hip-hop through rap, a form of expression allowing for emotions and narratives. In terms of performance literacy, musical theater demands students to vividly portray their characters, necessitating the development of performance skills. During rehearsals, students are expected to delve deeply into the characters, refine their acting skills, and collaborate with their peers. Musicals have rich cultural connotations and historical background. *Les Misérables*, for example, enables students to understand the social history of France in the 19th century, enhancing their cultural literacy.

### 3.3. Promote the Innovation in Music Education

Integrating musical theater into music education in higher education can introduce new teaching methods. It can also encourage the development of new methods and curricula. Conventional music education focuses on the transmission of knowledge and skills. In contrast, musical instruction focuses on participation and experience, and uses innovative methods such as project-based learning and contextual teaching. In this model, educators group students to rehearse musical excerpts, facilitating experiential learning, autonomous learning and creative thinking, and enhancing problem-solving. Institutions of higher education are integrating music, dance, theater and other resources to construct a diversified and comprehensive curriculum system. For instance, professional courses are now offered, and musical elements are integrated into other music courses to meet students' learning needs and promote the innovative development of music education (Vyas, 2023).

## 4. Forms of Musical Theater Artistic Practice in Music Education in Colleges and Universities

### 4.1. Integration of Course Instruction and Practice

Musical theater education in higher education institutions integrates curriculum teaching with practical application. Specialized musical practice courses enable students to hone their abilities through rehearsals and performances, building on their learning. This approach fosters a deep understanding of musical theater, as well as teamwork and stage performance skills. The Music Education Centre at Xi'an Jiaotong University offers a course based on the musical "Westward Spirit". The course includes vocal training, dance and stage performance, allowing students to experience musical theater. The course is themed around "The Spirit of Moving West", a narrative about the patriotic struggle of three generations of individuals who "move west". Students seamlessly integrate vocal skills and performance theories with practical performance, thereby immersing themselves in musical theater. The curriculum aims to equip students with professional competencies and civic education, fostering familial and national sentiments, and enhancing art and ideological education (Qian, 2023).

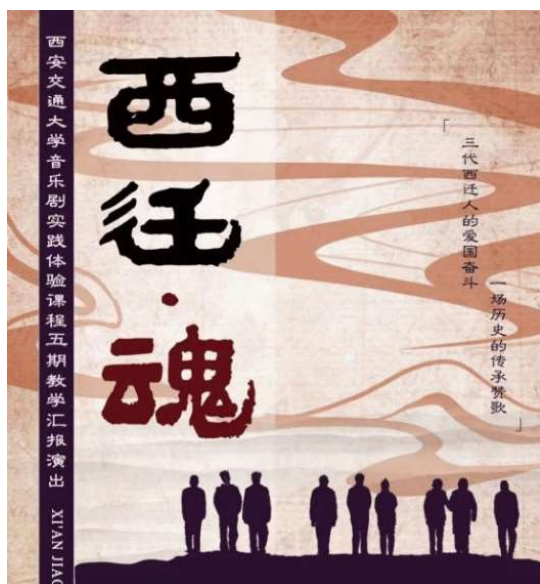


Figure 1. Poster of the Musical Theater "Moving West·Soul"

## 4.2. Creation and Performance of Original Musical Theater

Colleges and universities organize students to create and perform original musicals, provide a stage for students to show their creativity, and vigorously promote the construction of campus culture. This form of practice requires students to have a deep understanding of the creative elements of a musical, including script conception, music creation, choreography, etc., combining creativity with professional knowledge (Liu, 2024). Yunnan Arts College's original musical 'Guan Sushang' (created by the School of Music) blends Peking Opera with musical theater. It offers a timeless perspective on Guan Sushang's granddaughter, Chu Chu. The production integrates Yunnan's local cultural elements, showcasing the institution's achievements in musical theater creation and performance. During the process, students blend local culture with contemporary musical theater forms. This fosters students' understanding and appreciation of local culture and serves as a conduit for its transmission and evolution through stage performances. The original musical theater is important for the exchange of ideas between campus and local culture. This improves the cultural scene on campus and helps students to be more confident and creative.



Figure 2. A still of the Original Musical Theater Guan Su Shuang

## 4.3. Exhibition and Exchange of Practice Results

In college music education, the exhibition and exchange of musical theater practice is a key platform for students to showcase their achievements, enhancing the influence of musical theater education and the professional calibre of students. The Third International Musical Theater Festival, organized by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, focuses on performance, production and education. It attracts top experts and provides students with opportunities. The "Musical Master Class Series" at Communication University of China (CUC) invites industry experts to lecture on subjects such as "Musical Creation and Production in China". This fosters interactions between students and the professional field, and facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration. The "Musical Theater Teaching Practice Reporting Concert" at Xi'an Conservatory of Modern Music showcased the accomplishments of the singing major in transforming musical theater pedagogy. The concert enabled students to

enhance their professional competencies through the "promoting learning through performance" approach. These activities promote the high-quality development of musical theater education and improve students' comprehensive quality and professional level. Displaying and exchanging practice results is key to cultivating professionals, promoting artistic innovation and cultural inheritance, and establishing a solid foundation for musical theater development.

## 4.4. Interdisciplinary Integration Practice Program

Musical theater is a comprehensive art form that naturally integrates different disciplines. The Shanghai Conservatory of Music's Spring Shanghai 1949, due to premiere in 2019, is a notable example of this. The musical integrates the strengths of multiple disciplines, showcasing the Academy's artistic originality and teaching achievements. The Department of Composition's faculty and students have integrated music theory with historical contexts, using symphonic music as a foundation and incorporating ethnic and contemporary

musical elements. Through skilfully arranged melodies, rhythms and harmonies, they have vividly depicted the changes in Shanghai in 1949, presenting a grand historical narrative. The Department of Music and Drama uses theater theory and acting skills to analyse historical data, construct scripts and breathe life into characters. This enables actors to accurately interpret emotions and spirituality within a specific era. The Department of Stage Art uses art and design theories, multimedia technology and realistic visual effects to present

historical scenes on stage. Through lighting, props and set decoration, an atmosphere is created that matches the plot and enhances the audience's sense of immersion. This approach integrates diverse academic disciplines, facilitating students' professional expertise in musical creation and collaborative and creative abilities. It offers a valuable example of integrating theoretical concepts with practical applications in college music education.



Figure 3. A Still from the Musical Theater Spring Shanghai 1949

## 5. Implications for the Practice of Musical Theater Arts in Music Education in Colleges and Universities

### 5.1. Establish the Concept of Comprehensive Literacy Training

Musical theater integrates music, dance, drama and other art forms, which reveals that music education in colleges and universities should innovate the teaching concept from single skill cultivation to the improvement of comprehensive artistic literacy. Traditional music education is often limited to music skills training, while musical practice emphasizes the synergy of various art disciplines. For example, when analyzing musical works, students are guided to understand how music drives the plot and how dance strengthens the expression of emotions, so that they can realize that music is closely related to other art forms. This conceptual shift helps to cultivate students' ability to perceive multiple arts, so that they can synthesize multiple elements in their creations and performances to create works with greater depth and impact. At the same time, students are encouraged to understand music from different artistic perspectives and broaden their artistic horizons, laying the foundation for their comprehensive development in the field of art to meet the needs of diversified artistic development in the future (Hou, 2023).

### 5.2. Create a Diversified Musical Theater Curriculum System

The richness of musical theater art practice requires colleges and universities to optimize the curriculum and build a diversified curriculum system. Currently, some colleges and universities have a relatively single music course, which is difficult to meet the demand for comprehensive study of musical theater. Colleges and universities should set up additional courses such as musical appreciation courses, so that students can come into contact with classic plays of different styles and themes, and cultivate aesthetic and appreciation skills; open musical creation courses, covering script writing, music creation and dance choreography, etc., to exercise the students' creative ability; set up musical performance practice courses, so that students can improve their performance skills in the practice of the stage. Through the systematic curriculum, a complete teaching chain from theory to practice is formed (Zhao, 2021). In a step-by-step manner, students are guided to study musical theater in a comprehensive and in-depth manner, so that they can master professional knowledge and at the same time have solid practical skills, and be fully prepared for future work related to musical theater or further studies.

### 5.3. Implementation of Diversified Teaching Methods

The unique appeal of musical theater has led to new teaching methods in higher education, aimed at inspiring students' interest and creativity. Lecture-based teaching often doesn't allow for a deep understanding of musical theater. The

contextual teaching method has been used to create simulated musical rehearsal halls and performance stages, enabling students to immerse themselves in the emotions of the characters and the atmosphere of the performance, thus enhancing the sense of immersion in the learning process. The project-based learning method, where students are assigned to create a small musical project, has been found to be an effective means of enhancing teamwork and problem-solving skills. Students work in groups on script, music, choreography and performance. Multimedia resources can be used to enrich content, stimulate enthusiasm and enhance the teaching effect (Grandi, 2022).

#### 5.4. Build an All-Round Practice Platform

The development of musical theater practice depends on a comprehensive framework. Universities should proactively extend available practice channels and consolidate their connection with the industry. Organizing musical theater performances on campus offers students opportunities to showcase their abilities and accrue stage experience. Students should participate in intercollegiate musical theater exchange competitions, facilitating the exchange of skills with students from other institutions. Colleges and universities should establish relationships with off-campus musical groups, theaters and other relevant institutions to create internship opportunities, allowing students to gain experience and understand market demands. Industry experts should visit campus to lecture and run workshops on the latest trends and practical experience. Integrating internal and external resources is vital for establishing a diverse practice platform for students, enabling them to transform theoretical knowledge into practical abilities, enhancing adaptability to the evolving musical theater industry and employability prospects.

### 6. Conclusion

With its unique artistic characteristics of diversified integration, popularity and adaptability to the times, musical drama has injected vitality into music education in colleges and universities. It not only stimulates students' interest in music learning and improves their comprehensive artistic quality, but also promotes the innovative development of music education. In practice, colleges and universities have made musicals take root on campus through the combination of curriculum teaching and practice, creation and performance of original musicals, display and exchange of practice results, and interdisciplinary integration of practice programs. These forms of practice provide new ideas for the reform of music education in colleges and universities, revealing that colleges and universities should set up the

concept of comprehensive literacy training, create a diversified curriculum system, implement diversified teaching methods, and build an all-round practice platform. In the future, colleges and universities should give full play to the advantages of musical theater, overcome the existing difficulties, and continue to explore and innovate, so as to lay a solid foundation for the cultivation of all-round development of musical talents.

### References

- [1] Magalhães, F. (2022). Music, performance, and preservation: Insights into documentation strategies for music theater works. *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 18(3), 316-340.
- [2] Akbarova, M., Tursunova, G., & Abdunazarov, Z. (2020). Pedagogical approaches to the formation of musical literacy of students in the system of higher education. *European Journal of Arts*, (1), 125-128.
- [3] Alexander-Hills, M. (2022). Audio mediation technology and liveness in modern musical theater performance. *Studies in Musical Theater*, 16(1), 5-20.
- [4] Von Germeten, G. (2022). We are also music lovers: Testing vocal tastes in higher musical theater education. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 44(3), 554-569.
- [5] Liu, S. (2024). A preliminary study on the value of musical theater art practice in music education in colleges and universities. *Chinese Musical Theater*, (2), 77-80.
- [6] Vyas, A. (2023). A comprehensive review of theater in education programs in Indian higher education institutions: Practices, challenges, and innovations. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies (IJELLS)*, 2(1), 73-88.
- [7] Qian, S.S. (2023). Innovative research on collaborative education between curriculum civics and musical theater majors under the background of establishing virtue and shaping people. *Times Report (Pengyu)*, (3), 40-42.
- [8] Liu, H. Y. (2024). Research on innovative strategies of original music teaching in colleges and universities under the perspective of "aesthetic infiltration." *Chinese Musical Theater*, (2), 101-104.
- [9] Hou, Y.Y. (2023). Exploration on the comprehensive cultivation path of musical theater performing talents. *Symphony: Journal of Xi'an Conservatory of Music*, 42(2), 134-138.
- [10] Zhao, F. (2021). Artistic expression and development of diversified musical styles in the creation of modern musical theater. *Art Dazhan*, (10), 93-94.
- [11] Grandi, G. L. (2022). Theater as method: Performance creation through action research. *Action Research*, 20(3), 245-260.