

Water Sleeves (Shui Xiu) as Non-Verbal Performance: Interaction between Costume and Body in Chinese Dance Drama

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Abstract

Dance drama, as a non-verbal form of theatre, conveys its narrative through various theatrical elements, including body language, facial expressions, costumes, props, and lighting. Among these, the interaction between costume and body plays a central role in shaping the visual and emotional impact of performance, yet remains underexplored. This study focuses on the traditional Chinese dance costume element of water sleeves, and, by integrating media theory and semiotic theory, employs qualitative research methods of textual analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to conduct a detailed investigation of water-sleeve movement. It identifies key factors that affect body and costume coordination and highlights the performance techniques needed for their effective integration. The study further reveals how water sleeves serve as both narrative tools and visual extensions of the dancer's body. By situating the interaction between costume and body as a dynamic system, the research offers practical insights for designers, choreographers, and actors, framing costume not as decoration but as an active agent in rehearsal and performance.

Keywords: Chinese dance drama, Water sleeves, Non-verbal performance, Costume, Body, Interaction

Introduction

Non-verbal performance is an essential component of theatrical acting, comprising non-verbal elements such as mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hairstyle, costume, props, décor, lighting, proxemics, tone/paralanguage, music, and sound effects (Pan et al., 2024). It works with verbal performance (monologue, dialogue, voiceover) to build character, promote narrative, and convey emotion. However, as a non-verbal performing art that uses dance as its primary means of expression, dance drama relies entirely on non-verbal elements for character portrayal, storytelling, and emotional expression. Thus, the unique role and value of these non-verbal performance elements in dance drama are undoubtedly a key aspect that deserves to be explored in depth. Among the many non-verbal performance elements, the relationship between costume and body is the most intimate, and the interaction between the two directly affects character

building and storytelling in the dance drama. In the present field of dance drama studies, the study of costume and physical movement is commonly conducted independently of each other. The study of physical movement in dance drama primarily focuses on the choreography of dance movements and the expression of body language, examining the symbolic meaning, emotional expression, and cultural connotations of gestures (Chen, 2023; Mao, 2017). The study of dance drama costumes, on the other hand, mainly starts from the aspects of style, colour, and material, and explores the method of costume design, the expression of culture, and the interpretation of theme (Ryu & Chang, 2023; John, 2021). However, the interaction between the two has not been fully studied. To this end, this study focuses primarily on the interaction of two elements, the body of the actor and the costume.

In an in-depth discussion of the interaction between body and costume in dance drama, the water sleeve, a costume element with unique Chinese traditional characteristics, plays a crucial role in shaping the vivid image and cultural connotations of the characters through its symbolic representational function. It has transcended the practical and decorative functions of costume, becoming a vital medium for actors to express emotion and shape character. Through movements such as ‘sleeve quivering, sleeve out and in, sleeve winnowing, sleeve reeling, sleeve pushing, sleeve rushing, sleeve seizing, sleeve Leaning, sleeve floweret’ (Cai, 2015), actors silently convey the full range of a character’s emotions, joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness, with grace and subtlety. This non-verbal mode of expression not only breathes life and soul into the water sleeves but also profoundly reveals the inseparable relationship between the sleeves and the body.

However, Previous research on water sleeves has focused on historical development (Deng, 2021; Wang & Zhu, 2023), performance techniques (Cai, 2015; Zhao & Liu, 2020), and pedagogy (Tang, 2016; Zhao, 2020; Zhong, 2022). A systematic analysis of water sleeves within the theoretical framework of costume-body interaction, particularly concerning their modes of engagement and semiotic logic, remains critically underexplored. More notably, research that holistically examines, from the perspective of non-verbal performance, how water sleeves and the body collaboratively generate meaning and emotional resonance is strikingly scarce.

This study combines media theory and semiotic theory to conduct a comprehensive investigation of the

relationship between water sleeves and the body, from the perspective of dynamic two-way interaction. Its purpose is to analyze the interaction between the body and costume; to examine how costume (water sleeves) influences and shapes body expression; and to explain the ways in which costume (water sleeves) affects the transmission of meaning through the body.

Literature review

From water-sleeves to dance costume

Scholars generally trace the origin of water sleeves back to the long-sleeve dances of ancient China. Archaeological findings and textual sources indicate that images of long-sleeve dancing were already widespread in Han dynasty tomb reliefs, whose artistic forms and pictorial language reflected Confucian and Daoist thought as well as aesthetic ideals (Tian & Wang, 2025). With the progressive translation of this aesthetic tradition into tangible forms of costume and performance, the configuration of water sleeves likewise started to change.

From the Han dynasty onwards, the water sleeves appeared in a double-layered style, combining long and wide sleeves. Before the Ming dynasty, they were generally made either as single-layer long sleeves or in the double-layer form. It was not until the Ming dynasty that the long-sleeved section began to be sewn together with the sleeve of the garment itself, gradually developing into the form of water sleeves commonly seen in traditional Chinese opera (Figure 1). (Song, 2011, p. 214-218)



Figure 1 The development and evolution of Water Sleeves

Source: Song (2011)

This style of water sleeves has been retained to the present day, forming the foundation upon which water sleeves in contemporary Chinese classical dance and dance dramas have developed. Moreover, the performance techniques of water sleeves in modern classical dance are likewise rooted in the expressive forms found in traditional Chinese opera (Deng, 2021). In recent years, the performance style of water sleeves in classical dance and dance drama has continued to preserve elements of traditional Chinese opera, while also demonstrating its unique artistic charm through innovations in colour, fabric, length, and performance techniques.

Notably, the transmission and innovation of water-sleeve art have now transcended the confines of the stage, entering the domains of academic inquiry and pedagogical practice. Contemporary scholarship not only examines the historical roots and technical artistry of water sleeves, but also investigates, through frameworks such as semiotics and cultural heritage, their theoretical value and practical relevance in arts education. Zhao (2020) has proposed the use of 'living teaching' to translate the sleeve dance depicted in Han pictorial art into classroom practice, enabling students to experience traditional culture through embodied perception. Tian and Wang (2025), adopting a semiotic perspective, analyze the pictorial language of sleeve dance in Han dynasty images, revealing its narrative function and cultural connotations.

Similarly, research on theatrical costume encompasses the fields of history, technology, design, and semiotics, and related studies have increased significantly in recent years. From the perspective of the designer, John (2021) systematically reviews and discusses the methods of theatrical costume design, its working processes, and the current state of the industry. Nesen (2021) points out that costume functions as a complex semiotic system on stage, serving not only as a political tool and an artistic signifier within the framework of socialist realism, but also as a vehicle for aesthetic construction and the communication of ideology.

Studies on costume and body expression

Academic research focusing on the costume and the body remains relatively scarce, though in recent

years scholars have begun to turn their attention to this field of study. Dean (2016) introduces bodily perception into the costume design process, providing designers with new avenues for reflection and creativity. Similarly, Grew (2019) argues that the interaction between body and costume makes it possible to trace the developmental trajectory of corporeality in dress and to establish a more complex and comprehensive evaluative framework. In addition, Imparato (2021), drawing on theories of the body as medium, analyses the close interaction between costume and the body in performance, thereby further expanding theoretical understandings of their relationship.

From the perspective of research into the relationship between water sleeves and the body, Jiang (2021) contends that water sleeves serve both as an extension of the body and an externalization of emotion, constituting a vital means for shaping character portrayal and creating stage atmosphere. Li and Peng (2022), adopting a media perspective, demonstrate that water sleeves function as a mediating element between costume, body, and stage. Their inherent exaggeration elevates quotidian movements into artistic expression, thus establishing them as a significant emblem within the aesthetics of Chinese opera.

However, the above studies have not examined the performance and relationship between costume and the body in any specific type of performance, nor have they analyzed the bidirectional dynamic interaction between them. This study, therefore, takes water sleeves as its object, with a particular emphasis on the bidirectional interaction between costume and body in situated performance, in order to address this gap.

Research methods

To understand the interaction between costume and the body in character construction, it is necessary to draw on the concepts of authenticity, effectiveness, and intentionality. This integration is a complex phenomenon that requires an investigation and analysis of both the literature on water-sleeve performance techniques and the perspectives of practitioners (actors). Accordingly, a qualitative research approach has been employed, comprising textual analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Textual analysis serves as a methodological approach through which researchers systematically examine and interpret symbolic materials to discern how individuals or groups construct meaning about the world (McKee, 2003). In this study, textual analysis is primarily conducted through the examination of literature about the techniques of water sleeve performance to uncover the core elements and profound implications of the interaction between water sleeves and body movements. This analytical process lays the groundwork for elucidating the methods and pathways of interaction between costume and physical movement.

IPA is a methodological approach that focuses on exploring and examining individual experiences in depth to understand them on their own terms (Smith & Nizza, 2021). When exploring the interaction between the water sleeves and the body in dance drama, the use of IPA methodology enables a deeper insight into the subjective experience of the actors, revealing how they perceive, recognize, and give specific meaning to the interaction between the body movements and the costumes in the dance. This approach facilitates a comprehensive and deep insight into the object of study, providing solid support for understanding its inherent complexity.

Sampling and sample size

In qualitative research, the selection of samples is crucial to the integrity of the study, with emphasis placed on the relevance and depth of the data rather than the sample size (Rajasinghe, 2019). In accordance with the research questions and objectives, purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method,¹ was employed. The sample of texts analyzed was completed through an extensive review of literature related to water-sleeve performance. Ultimately, two books that are highly authoritative in the field of water-sleeve performance were selected and analyzed in depth for relevant chapters dealing with body language and water-sleeve interaction. In IPA, purposive sampling was similarly adopted, with distinguished actors from

Chinese dance-drama being invited to participate in the research.

The sample size for the text analysis consisted of two authoritative books in the field of water-sleeve performance. These two books were selected because there is currently a scarcity of monographs that systematically examine the performance techniques of water sleeves. Existing academic articles tend to focus on the in-depth analysis of a specific technique, but often fall short in terms of overall scope and coherence. Through a review of relevant literature, the study determined that the selected sample possesses sufficient representativeness to adequately address the research questions. The sample size for IPA is two. As IPA is considered an idiographic approach, it typically involves a small sample size, with recommendations usually ranging from one to three participants (Smith et al., 2012, p. 49). Both participants are highly experienced, top-tier Chinese dance drama actors who are not only reasonably representative but also able to provide in-depth and substantial first-hand data, thereby ensuring the quality and depth of the research findings.

Data collection instrument

Data collection in this study was primarily carried out through two methods. First, two authoritative texts in the field of water sleeve performance were reviewed. Relevant material aligned with the research aims was selected, and the credibility of the sources was critically assessed in order to gather data. Then, semi-structured interviews were used to gather first-hand information and insights into the experience of water-sleeve performance. Semi-structured interviews are regarded as the most widely used method of data collection in IPA research (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). They offer the flexibility to guide participants in exploring the research topic in depth, while also allowing them the freedom to express their personal experiences and perspectives.

After completing the data collection, the data were categorized by source, type, etc., and coded. At the same time, to ensure participant anonymity, each individual was assigned a unique identifier; for example,

representative of the research focus (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 99).

¹ Purposive sampling refers to a method in which the researcher selects participants based on prior knowledge of the population and the aims of the study, using personal judgement to identify individuals deemed

participant one was labelled as SI-01 (see Table 1 and Table 2). In addition, the data collected will be properly stored by the researcher to ensure its security and

confidentiality, and only the researcher will be authorized to access and use the data.

Table 1 Data for textual analysis

Code	Title	Author	Publication Date
TA-01	Course of sleeve dance in Chinese classical dance	Weiqiu Shao	2004
TA-02	Classical Chinese dance sleeve dance	Xi Xiong	2018

Table 2 Data for interpretative phenomenological analysis

Code	Number of works	Years in Profession
SI-01	15	12
SI-02	27	16

Ethical consideration

As this study involved human participants during the semi-structured interview process, ethical approval was sought from and granted by the university's ethics committee. An informed consent form has been formulated by the research team, and each participant will be invited to review and sign the informed consent form prior to the start of the interview, making it clear that they are participating in this study on a completely voluntary basis. As a researcher, there is no authoritative or supervisory relationship with individual participants; therefore, their responses or participation in the study will not be influenced. In the process of analysis, anonymization will be implemented for content that may involve personal privacy to ensure that the personally identifiable information of the research participants will not be disclosed. In addition, the researchers will endeavor to avoid personal bias and preconceived notions from influencing the results of the study, so as to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

Results and discussion

This study identifies three key insights into the interaction between water sleeves and the body in dance drama performance. These are: (1) the physical factors of the actor, such as strength, flexibility, and coordination, significantly influence the dynamic interaction between the body and the water sleeves; (2) water sleeves enhance body expression, character building, emotional conveyance, and narrative depth in performance; and (3) water sleeves shape the pathways

through which the body communicates meaning, functioning as both an extension and a mediator of movement. These findings are discussed in detail below.

Physical factors in body–sleeves interaction

Water sleeves are an important component of Chinese classical dance and also serve as a vital expressive device in Chinese ethnic dance dramas for shaping characters and conveying stories. The fundamental aim of sleeve dancing is to realize an autonomous form of body expression through movement (Shao, 2004, p. 3). As a cultural symbol, the water sleeves serve as an extension and deepening of the actor's body gestures. Their forms, combined with body movement, create a new system of dance signifiers, enriching the connotation of the dance and effectively shaping and conveying the emotions and psychological state of the theatre characters.

However, body movement is the primary factor influencing the form of the water sleeves. Through the precise control of even the subtlest physical actions, the actor guides the water sleeves to display a rich variety of shapes and dynamics. In sleeve dancing, movement is rooted in the power generated from the waist, which drives the coordinated engagement of the shoulders, elbows, wrists, and fingers (Xiong, 2018, p. 8). This follows the core principles of 'the body leads the sleeves, the sleeves follow the body, and the body propels the sleeves'. Equally essential is the mutual activation and integration of the hands and feet, shoulders and arms, and torso and steps. Together, these elements contribute to the ultimate artistic ideal of unity

between the body and the sleeves. This kind of artistic performance of body-sleeve unity cannot be separated from the support of the actors' body qualities in all aspects. Specifically, flexibility, coordination, and power control of movement are the three key body factors in achieving a high-quality water-sleeve performance.

The role of body flexibility in shaping water-sleeve movement

The use of water sleeves involves the entire body; the aim of sleeve dancing goes far beyond merely showcasing localized sleeve techniques. In essence, the water sleeves are an integral part of the whole body, and their performance adheres to the principles of 'using the body to guide the sleeves, using the sleeves to refine the body, and realizing the integration of body and sleeves'. (TA-01)

Physical flexibility serves as the foundation for realizing this principle, playing both a fundamental and

constructive role in water sleeve performances. The effective execution of water-sleeve movements relies on the high degree of coordinated freedom in the joints of the shoulders, arms, waist, and wrists. Good flexibility enables the dancer to transform inner emotions and imagery into continuous and expansive external dynamics, thereby constructing a water-sleeve language that combines both strength and rhythm.

Take the water sleeve-throwing movement as an example; an actor with excellent flexibility can extend their arms to the fullest range. This not only allows the water sleeves to be thrown further and higher, but also enables the actor to use their flexibility more freely when retrieving the sleeves, executing a series of movements in perfect coordination with the trajectory of the flowing fabric. Such movements not only enhance the dynamic beauty of the dance, but also form an expressive and symbolic visual symbol (see Figure 2). (SI-01).



Figure 2 Water Sleeves Performance in Shuiyue Luoshen
Source: Maoyan Entertainment Official Account (2025)

Thus, physical flexibility, in this context, goes beyond its biological function to serve as a crucial medium for cultural expression and the transmission of aesthetic values.

In dance drama performance, physical flexibility can be regarded as a form of mediated capability, enhancing both the efficiency and effectiveness of the body as a medium of communication. By virtue of heightened bodily flexibility, the dancer incorporates the water sleeves into the corporeal schema, transforming them from an external object into an extension of perception and a vehicle for expressive communication. Specifically, with sufficient flexibility, the actor extends the upper limbs and torso to expand the physical scope of movement and, at the same time, to project emotional expression across space and time, transforming the flight of the water sleeves into a visible form of inner feeling.

In addition, enhanced physical flexibility amplifies the communicative efficacy of the water sleeves as a visual medium. A flexible and precisely controlled body endows the water sleeves with sharper contrasts of dynamics and variations of rhythm, thereby enhancing the recognizability and emotive force of their visual symbolism and more effectively guiding the audience's emotional engagement and interpretative response. In this process, the water sleeves and the body together constitute a complete expressive system that not only conveys concrete content but also embodies the distinctiveness of Eastern corporeal culture and aesthetic perception. Therefore, actors need to expand the expressive dimensions of the water-sleeve symbol through systematic flexibility training and ultimately construct a more infectious non-verbal narrative system.

The interplay between body coordination and water sleeve dynamics

The expression of water sleeve techniques, forms, strength, and rhythm is the artistic result of highly coordinated body movements transmitted to the sleeves. This body coordination enables the actor to control the movement and trajectory of the water sleeves with greater precision. When performing complex combinations of water-sleeve movements, actors can accurately grasp the rhythm and strength of each movement, ensuring that the water-sleeves are danced in

an orderly and expressive manner. Moreover, effective coordination also helps the actor maintain body balance while manipulating the water sleeves, allowing for steadier and more fluid movements. This, in turn, enhances the visual impact of the performance, making the sleeve dance more captivating on stage.

In dance drama performance, body coordination can be understood as a kind of 'medium synchronization', which ensures the accurate and effective transmission of information. This coordination involves various aspects such as footwork, body direction, and range of movement, all of which require a high degree of body control to achieve seamless integration. Through such coordination, the movement of the water sleeves transcends their role as mere body extensions and instead becomes an integral part of the actor's physical language, thereby enhancing the dance's capacity for character portrayal and narrative expression. This medium synchronization is key to the effective delivery of emotion and storytelling in water-sleeve performances, allowing each swing of the sleeve to match the actor's physical movements and emotional state, resulting in vivid characters and stories.

The influence of strength and dynamic control on sleeve expression

Physical strength and its control are crucial body factors in water sleeve performance. The intensity of movement directly affects the shape and speed of the sleeves' motion. In performing with water sleeves, actors must regulate both force and dynamics in order to shape the sleeves precisely within the spatial flow of movement. According to media theory, power and dynamic control can be considered as 'media modulation', which involves how the media, i.e., the body and the sleeves, are adjusted and optimized to produce the best possible performance. To illustrate,

When performing with nine-foot-long sleeves, the actor can express different emotions by controlling the intensity and range of movement. Through the alternating extension and withdrawal of the water sleeves, the actor shapes their spatial form and expressive quality. These forms become visual symbols that not only enrich the visual effect of the dance, but also profoundly affect

the emotional expression of the body. At the same time, the audience is made to feel the subtle changes in the characters' emotions.
(SI-01)

This ability to modulate the medium allows each movement of the water sleeve to accurately convey the actor's emotions and intentions, enhancing the effectiveness of the water sleeve as a communication medium. It is transformed into a powerful form of non-verbal communication, greatly enhancing the expressive and artistic power of the dance.

The impact of water sleeves on body expression

Clothing is an extension of the human being (McLuhan, 2016), and the water sleeves, as a costume element, serve not only as an extension of the person, but also of the limbs and, more profoundly, of emotion. This multi-layered quality of extension in the water

sleeves is influenced by factors such as their length, weight, and material. Together, these elements determine the richness and subtlety with which the sleeves can express body language, as well as the vividness with which they help shape character on stage.

Length of water sleeves

As a medium of interaction between the body and space, water sleeves transcend the actor's physical limitations, expand their expressive range, and construct a rich visual language on stage (see Figure 3). However, the length of the water sleeves also has an impact on the actor's physical expression to some extent. This influence is both multidimensional and bidirectional: in some respects, it can add new dimensions to the actor's physical expression, enriching the expressive potential of their body language; in others, it may also, in certain contexts, restrict or hinder the actor's physical articulation.



Figure 2 Long Water Sleeves Performance by Shiyi Tang (2017)

Source: Provided by Tang (2017)

The increased length of the water sleeves can significantly enhance the spatial extension of the actor's movements. Compared to short water sleeves, long water sleeves produce more expansive and elongated

movement trajectories, creating a highly dramatic visual impact, an effect that short sleeves can scarcely achieve. For instance, throwing the water sleeves not only accentuates the actor's body lines, making them appear

more slender, but also expands their spatial presence on stage while conveying both emotional focus and conveys emotion and story more vividly and expressively, significantly enhancing the depth and emotional impact of dance drama storytelling.

However, the length of the water sleeves also presents significant practical challenges. As the sleeves become longer, it becomes considerably more difficult for actors to control their inertia, which not only tests their ability to anticipate movements but also places greater demands on their precision. At the same time, a much higher level of spatial accuracy is required. Moreover, the longer the water sleeves are, the higher the requirements for the comprehensive qualities of the actors, such as strength, flexibility, and body coordination. Actors need to go through a lot of training and repeated experiments in order to accurately complete a variety of difficult performance movements.

Weight of water sleeves

The weight of the water sleeves becomes a distinctive medium in dance drama performance, influencing both the actor's mode of movement and

Material of water sleeves

The material properties of the water sleeves act as a medium of visual communication between the actors and the audience. Through their movements, actors impart varied trajectories to the water sleeves, while the material properties of the sleeves determine the distinctive visual effects produced in motion. These visual effects become a vital medium through which actors convey emotion and meaning to the audience.

The properties of the water-sleeve material have a significant impact on the actor's expression. For example, fabrics that lack sufficient drape can create considerable difficulty for actors when executing movements such as sleeve out and in, sleeve winnowing, sleeve reeling, sleeve pushing, and sleeve rushing (SI-01). This, in turn, can hinder the fluidity and expressiveness of the actor's physical performance. However, by engaging with sleeves made of different materials, actors can also explore new modes of expression, thereby enriching the expressive possibilities of the dance.

explosive power (SI-01). This non-verbal mode of narration

artistic expression. The weight of the water sleeve not only determines the inertia and rhythm of its movement, but also requires the actors to demonstrate a higher level of strength control and body coordination in their performance. Actors must adapt to and harness the weight of the water sleeves, transforming bodily strength and coordination into a form of visual communication.

Depending on the weight of the water sleeves, actors need to adjust the range, speed, and rhythm of their movements to accommodate the varying loads (SI-02). When performing with heavier sleeves, they must rely more heavily on the strength of the core, particularly the waist and legs, to drive the movements of the arms. This redeployment of power is not only a physical adjustment, but also a message conveyed through the non-verbal medium of the weight of the water sleeves. The actor translates the strength and coordination of the body into a visual message that is conveyed to the audience through the dance of the water sleeves.

Pathways of meaning transmission through the body mediated by the water sleeves

In dance drama, water sleeves are not merely decorative costume elements but serve as an important non-verbal medium of performance. It conveys a wealth of emotions, stories, and cultural connotations through its interaction with the actor's body. The movement trajectory of the water sleeves, their material qualities, and their coordination with the body together create a unique visual and emotional channel of communication between the actor and the audience. These paths not only enrich the expression of the dance drama, but also deepen the audience's understanding and feeling of the dance content.

Externalization of body language

The essence of water sleeve performance lies in the actor's ability to transform inner emotions and narrative intent into visual motion through body movement, effectively generating a form of non-verbal symbolism. All parts of the actor's body, including the torso, shoulders, wrists, fingers, etc., work together to present the water sleeve. The body's way of force, the

rhythm of movement, and power control determine the shape of the sleeve.

This system of body movement, in fact, constitutes a comprehensive symbolic code. Actors are required to translate the character's emotions, such as joy, anger, sorrow, and delight, as well as psychological states like hesitation or determination, and narrative intentions such as guidance or rejection, into the movement language of the water sleeves. This is achieved through technical manipulation of the body, namely, control over force, speed, rhythm, and direction, which is then expressed through specific sleeve movements such as flicking, lifting, retracting, twining, coiling, shaking, or tossing. In this process, the actor's body is like the 'encoder' of meaning, and the water sleeves become the output medium of these encoded meanings. Through the dynamic combination of water sleeves and limbs, the dance drama provides narrative visual symbols and realizes the intuitive transmission of emotions and meanings.

The visual symbols created by water sleeves are an integral part of the narrative in dance drama. Dance drama, as a form of theatre, requires a variety of means to tell a story, and the visual symbols of the water sleeves provide a non-verbal means of expression for the narrative of dance drama. Unlike verbal narration, the visual symbols of water sleeves act directly on the audience's visual perception, enabling them to quickly grasp aspects of the storyline or emotional atmosphere.

Water sleeve movement and the dynamic construction of spatial narratives

The movement trajectories of water sleeves in space transcend the constraints of physical dimension, becoming a vital element in shaping the narrative space of the dance drama. The morphological changes in the trajectory of the water sleeve movement in three-dimensional space are rich in meaning. By controlling the speed, arc, and landing point of the water sleeves, actors sketch out layers of spatial depth on stage where the real and the imagined intertwine. Rapid, fluttering sleeve movements can create a tense and intense atmosphere, while slow, expansive trajectories evoke a sense of distance and emotional depth. The density of rhythm likewise influences emotional expression; dense rhythms may suggest heightened tension or narrative climax, whereas sparser rhythms can reflect a more

relaxed emotional state or a calmer phase in the storyline.

Moreover, the symbolic function of water sleeve trajectories is also reflected in their interaction with the stage space. Through carefully choreographed movements, water sleeves can restructure the visual order of the stage: wide, sweeping horizontal motions can delineate distinct performance zones, while successive upward throws can construct vertical layers within the spatial composition.

Conclusion

A key finding of this study is that physical flexibility, coordination, and strength control are crucial in water sleeve performance, as they directly affect the dynamic shaping, movement trajectory, and emotional expression of the sleeves. In addition, the physical characteristics of the sleeve, such as length, weight, and material, also play an important role in performance. The length, weight, and material of the sleeve affect physical expression and performance techniques, but they can provide rich possibilities for the creation of new visual images. The interplay between physical attributes and the material properties of the water sleeves enables a seamless integration of sleeve and body, achieving a state of unity that allows for the precise transmission of emotion and intent. Through the externalization of body language and the dynamic construction of spatial narrative, water sleeve performance offers a powerful non-verbal means of storytelling within dance drama. The dynamic interactions between the actors' limbs and the water sleeves are transformed into visualized dynamic symbols, adding a vivid and profound dimension to the emotional expression and narrative of the dance drama.

This study contributes to the existing body of research on the interaction between the body and costume in dance performance. This offers a new interpretative framework for the relationship between body and costume in dance-drama and performance, while contributing actionable references for dance-drama education, choreographic practice, and costume design. Actors should learn to optimize the dynamic performance of the water sleeves with the help of body movements, and at the same time, pay attention to the limitations and assistance of the physical characteristics of the costume on the body. Similarly, costume

designers should closely study the creative demands of body movement, striving to design costumes that not only align with the character but also complement and enhance physical expression. However, if these findings are regarded merely as a technical guide, emphasizing only ‘optimization, alignment, and enhancement’, they still fail to move beyond the traditional binary of ‘the body obeying the costume’ or ‘the costume serving the movement’. The genuine breakthrough lies in conceiving the body and costume as a co-creative whole, in which movement vocabulary and costume form evolve in parallel from the outset of creation, following the same creative logic rather than being passively adapted at a later stage. In this way, the grammar of dance and the semantics of costume achieve a profound harmony.

This study has limitations in terms of the study subjects. This study focuses solely on the physical demands of water sleeve performance and the impact of costume material properties on performance outcomes, without addressing other potential influencing factors such as costume structure and style. Furthermore, from a semiotic perspective, the study does not examine audience reception, which presents a certain limitation. Therefore, in order to achieve more comprehensive research results, it is necessary to incorporate audience reception studies, employing quantitative methods to evaluate performance effects; to broaden the scope of research subjects, delving more deeply into the expressive tension of costume–body interaction in dance drama; and to undertake interdisciplinary collaboration, integrating perspectives from theatre studies, textile engineering, movement science and other fields, so as to construct a more holistic research paradigm.

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