

## From loafing to dignity

The mise en scène of Guo Shixing's play *Go Home* directed by Lin Zhaohua

Barbara Leonesi

Guo Shixing is considered one of the most interesting playwrights in contemporary China. In his production, an important role is played by his two trilogies, the *Loafers* (1990s) trilogy and the *Dignity* (2000s) trilogy. After briefly analysing commonalities and differences between the two, this essay focuses on an analysis of the text and the mise en scène of the third play in the *Dignity* trilogy, *Go Home*. The essay will show that this play can be seen as a sort of point of arrival for Guo Shixing's creative writing, concentrating the distinctive features that have marked his production from the beginning. In particular, the study will reflect on the close link between theatre and society, and on the function of dramaturgical writing as a mirror and at the same time a criticism of contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Guo Shixing, contemporary Chinese drama, *Go Home*, theatre and society

### 1. Introduction

Since his debut on the Beijing stage with the play *Bird Men* (*Niaoren* 鸟人) in 1993, Guo Shixing has gained a reputation as one of the most interesting playwrights in contemporary China. His partnership with Lin Zhaohua 林兆华 (1936), who has directed most of his works, has certainly played a role in the swift increase in his popularity. Lin is considered one of the promoters of “exploratory theatre” (*tansuo xiju* 探索戏剧) or experimental theatre (*shiyan xiju* 实验戏剧) in China, and his creative partnership with playwright and Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian 高行健 (1940) has left a permanent mark on the development of contemporary Chinese theatre. From the 1980s onwards, Lin directed many Chinese and western plays at the Beijing People's Art Theatre (BPAT, Beijing renmin yishu juyuan 北京人民艺术剧院), exploring new ways of directing and performing. In 1989 he opened his own drama studio (Lin Zhaohua xiju gongzuoshi 林兆华戏剧工作室), while maintaining his position at the BPAT. When, after 1989, Gao Xingjian chose to live in exile in France, Lin began a new, fruitful creative partnership with Guo Shixing. Acclaimed by the public and critics alike, both in China and abroad, Lin Zhaohua is

therefore one of contemporary China's most influential theatre directors but also one of the most controversial: his works combine the aesthetic of traditional Chinese theatre – its spare and highly symbolic stage design – with the most recent developments in avant-garde Western theatre. Likewise, Lin balances and mutually integrates the two contrasting approaches of *xieyi* (写意 symbolism) and *xieshi* (写实 realism) (Xie, 2011: 37).<sup>1</sup> His cooperation with Guo marked the Chinese theatre scene of the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium; Lin Zhaohua himself has praised the important contribution made by this playwright on many occasions:

Guo Shixing has created nine plays in ten years, we can say this is a wonder in Chinese creative theatre writing, but what is even more remarkable is the sensitive attitude towards reality displayed by his plays. Many Chinese plays today just fool around, hardly touching on actual reality. Therefore, Guo Shixing's work is all the more praiseworthy. (Wang 2011)

The lack of new writing talents in Chinese theatre emphasised by Lin Zhaohua has become an increasingly debated issue among theatre actors, but also scholars: on the one hand, many have denounced the migrating of new writers into the far more profitable fields of TV and cinema, particularly since the 1990s; on the other hand, the new avant-garde theatre experiences which have emerged in China since the beginning of the 1980s and the leading role they have assigned to performance, to the detriment of the text, have somehow left playwrights in the shadows, while putting the spotlight on theatre directors, who are the real “stars” nowadays. Guo Shixing has not been very prolific in recent years, but apart for some rare forays into the screen world, he has remained true to his first love, theatre, and to his idea of it as a mirror of contemporary society: through his plays, he keeps on commenting on the tremendous changes that have occurred in Chinese society in the last few decades.

Actually, it is possible to detect in Guo Shixing's productions the key elements that Colin Mackerras has listed as the main themes to have shaped the evolution of spoken drama (*huaaju* 话剧) in China since its introduction from the West at the beginning of the 20th century – first of all, its highly politicised role and its aim to affect society as a whole. In the over 100-year history of spoken drama, the focus on political commitment has of course varied over time, reaching its peak during the Cultural Revolution with model operas (*yangbanxi* 样板戏) as perfect examples of political propaganda. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Director Huang Zuolin 黄佐临 (1906-1994) was the first to define these concepts borrowed from the world of painting and to apply them to theatre in a famous study published in 1962.

period of economic reforms that followed the Revolution, the new theatre vigorously distanced itself from that propaganda model by focusing on the individual, on human beings and their inner world: in theatre – and in the arts more generally – the intense and broad debate of the 1980s stressed the independence of art and culture from political guidelines, without abandoning the function of art as a means of social criticism and dissent. Guo Shixing's texts are emblematic in this respect, as they stick to contemporaneity, dismantling society's contradictions through the instrument of humour. The sketches of life in Beijing he proposed in the 1990s are in fact veiled ways to denounce the contradictions and difficulties of contemporary society. While in his first plays dissent is expressed through oblique discourses and allegories, in the texts he has written in the 2000s the denunciation of the main problems in contemporary Chinese society (the loss of moral values, corruption, etc.) becomes an explicit topic of discussion between characters, down to the violent indictment delivered in the play we are about to analyse, *Go Home*. In an interview which Guo Shixing gave after the debut of this play, the interviewer asks whether the text is not too dark, the denunciation too violent, and the humour too black. Guo Shixing responds that he intended to be harsh: good works and good books are like "bitter medicines," which, however, are good for the spirit (Tang Ling 2011: 27).

The tension between traditional Chinese elements and external influences is the second key aspect characterising the evolution of spoken theatre highlighted by Mackerras. This tension is also a second fundamental key to interpret Guo Shixing's theatre: on the one hand, particularly in his first *Loafers trilogy* (*Xianren sanbuqu* 闲人三部曲), he takes up the Chinese tradition of "tranche de vie" theatre of the 1930s (Pisciotta 2000: 74-91), while portraying traditional local activities. On a superficial level, these "tranches de vie" from the alleys of Beijing can simply be enjoyed as funny sketches with a "local" flavour. But behind the paradoxical dialogues and cutting humour there is a profound reflection on the meaning of life, on man, and on contemporary society. On the other hand, the plays show a keen awareness of modernist Western dramaturgy in general and of the theatre of the absurd in particular:

Birdsmen's modernistic tone [...] is far from accidental. The play deals with the profound cultural shock produced by social, economic, ideological and international conflicts, and by the threat of rupture from a familiar path (Chen 2002: 330).

Humour is a third, fundamental key to analyse and understand Guo's plays. It is expressed in every possible form: from slapstick to harsh and violent satire, from subtle irony to funny comedic moments. Laughter runs through all of Guo Shixing's texts: it is at the same time a means to convey uncomfortable contents and a sort of break, a relaxing moment offered to spectators as means for them to take a breather while being harshly confronted with the contradictions of real life.

Two trilogies mark Guo Shixing’s production: the *Loafers trilogy*,<sup>2</sup> which collects his first plays, written and staged in the 1990s, and the *Dignity trilogy*<sup>3</sup> (*Zunyan sanbuqu* 尊严三部曲), written and staged in the first decade of the second millennium. With his typical sense of humour, Guo has declared he has been inspired by the supermarket policy “buy 1, get 3” (Lin Haibo 2002: 136). This paper analyses the text and the mise en scène of the last play of the second trilogy, *Go Home*, written in 2009 and first staged in 2010. I believe it can be regarded as the end point of a playwriting trajectory begun with the first trilogy, which in many respects encapsulates the hallmarks of Guo’s creative work, in terms of both language and content.

In this article, a brief introduction to the structural, thematic, and stylistic similarities and differences between Guo Shixing’s two trilogies will be followed by two sections analysing the text and the 2010 mise en scène of *Go Home*.

## 2. Guo Shixing and his two trilogies

Guo was born in Beijing in 1952 and started going to the theatre with his mother in his childhood. However, he made his debut on stage rather late, in his 40s (1993). Because of the Cultural Revolution, he interrupted his studies and, like many young people of his generation, took part in the campaign “up to the mountains and down to the villages” (*shangshan xiaxiang* 上山下乡) which brought millions of urban middle school graduates to rural villages and to frontier areas as members of the so-called “educated youth” (*zhishi qingnian* 知识青年). Guo spent many years in Heilongjiang, returning to Beijing as a worker in 1973. In the early 1980s he began working as a journalist at *Beijing Evening News* (*Beijing wanbao* 北京晚报), where he ran a column on theatrical and literary criticism under the pseudonym Shanhaike (山海客). He thus came to enjoy privileged access to the theatre world, from official shows to niche performances by young artists who, in that period of great cultural and intellectual dynamism, were experimenting with new modes of expression and performance. Predictably, Guo made the acquaintance of Lin Zhaohua, who together with playwright Gao Xingjian was signing the most innovative and revolutionary productions of the 1980s, launching the “small theatres” movement (*xiao juchang* 小剧场), and inventing a new way of performing and doing theatre.

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<sup>2</sup> It includes: *Fish Men* (*Yuren* 鱼人), written in 1989 and staged in 1997; *Bird Men* written in 1991 and staged in 1993, and *Chess Men* (*Qiren* 棋人), written in 1994 and staged in 1996.

<sup>3</sup> It includes: *Toilet* (*Cesuo* 厕所) 2004, *To Live or to Die* (*Huozhe haishi shiqu* 活着还是失去) 2007 and *Go Home* (*Hui jia* 回家) 2010.

As has been clearly recorded in nearly all of Guo's biographies and interviews, it was precisely Lin Zhaohua who encouraged Guo to write, after Gao had left China for good. The Lin-Gao partnership that profoundly marked the Chinese scene in the 1980s was then replaced by the Lin-Guo one in the 1990s.

The beginning of the 1990s, when Guo made his debut on stage, was a difficult period for the theatre world, and for the cultural and intellectual world more generally, after the standstill caused by the Tiananmen Square events of 1989. Guo Shixing's theatre clearly fits with that wave of anti-heroic and anti-sublime theatre which, after the 1989 crisis and the failure of the democratic movement, led artists to express themselves in an oblique way, by concealing their dissent behind the mask of paradox, absurdity, and farce. This complex political situation was accompanied by an economic crisis in Chinese theatre, which on the one hand was crushed by the rise of cinema and television and, on the other, suffered the consequences of reforms that considerably reduced state subsidies for theatre companies. Nevertheless, *Bird Men* (Guo 1997 for the English translation and Guo 2015 for the original text) proved a success with the public, gained critics' attention, and earned international acclaim. Produced by the BPAT, this play features a stratification of symbolical and allegorical meanings, both cultural and political, that revolve around the theme of alienation together with the definition of Chinese national and individual identity (Conceison 1998). A group of bird raisers struggles to engage with the Other – which takes the form of what is external to Beijing and the group, of the markedly changed China of the contemporary period, and finally of the West. Indeed, the early 1990s were a moment of engagement for China, as it struggled to define its identity with respect to the Other/West. However, thanks to the wit and humour permeating the dialogues and the virtuosity of the great actors of the BPAT, *Bird Men* – a play originally written for small theatres – has been repeatedly billed by the BPAT as a play for the broader public. The amused spectators invariably laugh and cheer the actors playing the roles of nutty yet likeable bird raisers, in an atmosphere of nostalgia for the old Beijing.

Following the success of the first trilogy in the 1990s, in the 2000s Guo worked on his second one, again with Lin Zhaohua as stage director. There are many differences between the two trilogies. The first – and the most evident, even from their titles – has to do with “compactness:” the plays in the *Loafers trilogy* all share themes, settings, and structure. Strongly rooted in the city of Beijing, this trilogy portrays traditional local activities (chess-paying, bird-raising, fishing, and opera-going) through a language that has a strong local flavour (the Beijing dialect). The protagonists of the three plays – *Fish Men*, *Bird Men* and *Chess Men* – share, in addition to the fact of being passionate about their hobbies, a condition of marginalization and the difficulty in finding a place in society. Hence their flight into the self-enclosed and fictitious world of their hobbies, which eventually turns into an obsession, an ultimate ideal to be pursued. Despite their differences, these stories express the same sense of unease.

The *Dignity trilogy* tones down the kind of strong local colouring which marked the first trilogy: while this is still present in the first play, *Toilet*,<sup>4</sup> in the last one, *Go Home*, the setting loses its specific geographical features, evoking a borderland between reality and dream, memory and the present. As the play acquires a more universal breadth, only the use of language typical of Beijing and the occasional hint at places in the city, like the Panjiayuan market (Panjiayuan guwan shichang 潘家园古玩市场), allow us to grasp its setting. Furthermore, this second trilogy loses the marked compactness we find in the first one, so much so that the plays it comprises have changed over time: initially, it included *Bad Talk Street*,<sup>5</sup> but this was later replaced by *Go Home*. It is evident, however, that in this second trilogy all three plays share the same underlying structure: they take the form of a series of scenes with the same setting (a public toilet, a crematory, the exterior of a home) and the same protagonist – the guardian or host of the place. There is no classic dramaturgical structure: the various scenes depict a series of encounters with different characters, through a kind of parade of heterogeneous types that, in different ways and at different levels, represent contemporary Chinese society, with its problems and contradictions. Several critics (Zhang Shouzhi 2017: 78) have compared the succession of these scenes to the rounds in a match, as the protagonist increasingly clashes with reality and struggles to the last breath to preserve what little dignity is left in his life.

Criticism and dissent, which in the first trilogy had been expressed through the veil of parables, turn into an explicit debate on the most heated contemporary issues in the second trilogy: in the public toilets of the first play, the characters discuss corruption, the loss of moral values, greed in a society ruled by money, housing problems and unemployment. In the last play, *Go Home*, the main character angrily enumerates most of the issues that are listed as urban inhabitants' main concerns in the annual report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the *Blue Book of China's Society 2011* (and which are

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<sup>4</sup> Sergio Basso has directed an Italian version of this play that toured in Italy in 2017-18 and published an Italian translation (Guo 2017).

<sup>5</sup> *Huaihua yitiao jie*, 坏话一条街 was first staged in 1998; it featured the Central Experimental Drama Troupe (Zhongyang shiyan huajuyuan 中央试验话剧院) and was directed by Meng Jinghui (孟京辉). Clearly set in the alleys of Beijing, this play is marked by an extremely experimental use of language: it centres on sophisticated language games filled with paradoxes, nonsense, jokes, and humour. The two protagonists, who live in one of Beijing's typical alleys, are master gossipers and challenge one another through quips, puns, and violent verbal exchanges. Here too the author pays close attention to contemporary Chinese problems: in 1998, the controversial issue of housing in Beijing had taken the media by storm. The municipal government had pushed forward a policy of demolition of old houses, arguing that they lacked modern conveniences. The destruction of the old city centre, the seizing of buildings, and the forced eviction of their occupants were hotly disputed.

therefore connected to the year of the play's debut, 2010).<sup>6</sup> The link between theatre and social criticism, between theatre and society, becomes increasingly strong, with specific references to the food scandals of recent years (for example, the case of melamine-tainted infant formula)<sup>7</sup> and to hot topics like the rising cost of housing in big cities or the growing unemployment rate. What remains constant in this transition from allegory to open social criticism is the use of humour as the main means to illustrate the contradictions and paradoxes of contemporary society.

### 3. *Go Home*: the text

As Chinese critics have repeatedly stressed, the guiding thread running through the Dignity trilogy is the highlighting of human dignity in the most degrading moments/places: in the face of physical urges (*Toilet*), death (*To Live or Die*), and illness (*Go Home*). What we have is a kind of “descent into hell;” but hell, here, does not lie merely in the inevitability of death or illness, but increasingly takes the form of contemporary Chinese society. This is especially the case in the last play of the trilogy, whose ending screams out its social criticism.

After two years of gestation, *Go Home* premiered in Nanjing in the summer of 2010. It then toured Shenzhen and Tianjin in September, before reaching Beijing at the end of that year. It was only staged a dozen times and was largely a box office fiasco, despite some positive reviews (Xie Xizhang 2011: 36–38). Like most other plays by Guo Shixing, it was inspired by a personal experience (Guo's having to deal with his mother's condition as an Alzheimer patient) and was directed by Lin Zhaohua. However, unlike the first two plays in this trilogy – produced by the National Theatre Company of China (NTCC Zhongguo guojia huajuyuan 中国国家话剧院) – it was produced by the Lin Zhaohua Theatre Studio. Ever since 1989, when Lin Zhaohua opened the country's first private theatre studio, theatre productions in China have been following a “double track:” directors will typically work for national, state-funded companies to produce plays for the wider public, while at the same time managing private studios in order to produce niche plays, for a select public. Significantly, the play in question was not put on stage by a state-run company.

The protagonist of *Go Home* is an elderly man suffering from Alzheimer's who, as the title suggests, wishes to return home. The play opens with the old man standing before a door; he shouts out for

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<sup>6</sup> *Shehui lanpi shu* (社会蓝皮书). This consists of a series of annual reports by sociologists from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences that comment on the social developments of the previous year, while making predictions about the coming one.

<sup>7</sup> The scandal of melamine-tainted infant formula broke out in 2008, when it was found that this had damaged the health of hundreds of thousands of children and led to a number of deaths.

someone to open it – he wants to enter his home. But he cannot remember the door code, or even the street number: perhaps, this is not his home at all. From inside the building, the Voice (the co-protagonist) shouts that this is no longer his home. The whole play unfolds through a series of ravings, disjointed memories, fears, and visions on the part of the elderly man, as he hurls himself against this door which never opens, discusses the matter with the Voice, and clashes with several characters that pass by the door or exit through it. These are ghosts from the past, like the girlfriend whom the man abandoned in the big North,<sup>8</sup> or the teacher who killed herself during Cultural Revolution; some are street characters (whether real or imaginary, it is unclear), such as the newly-wed couple who exit through the door with some friends, or the policeman who wants to remove the old man; other characters still are delirious nightmare creatures, such as the monkey spirits who want to devour his brain. The line between reality and dream or hallucination, between memory and the present, is constantly shifting. At the end we see traffic lights, cars, and passers-by: the elderly man was in the middle of a road, blocking the traffic; the policeman gives him an alcohol test and fines him. Was this only a hallucination? Maybe not. The old man continues in his ravings through one last angry, shouted monologue.

Within this play and the elderly man's ravings we can identify three levels of reflection. The first is a universal level, which concerns issues common to mankind across all ages and places, such as the afflictions of illness and loneliness, the meaning of life and death, and the prospect of a just reward/redress for good/evil actions. The main character, like most of Guo's characters, is a sort of archetype – the disease-ridden elderly man – and therefore devoid of psychological depth, but through him Guo explores and investigates in detail emotions and thoughts stemming from that situation.

The second level of reflection concerns the problems and contradictions of contemporary society in general: what used to last a lifetime (one's home, wife, job, or family) now only lasts a few years; man is destroying the environment and even destroying himself by creating new diseases in his labs (possibly a reference to AIDS – but in today's post-pandemic scenario, these allusions acquire new meanings).

Finally, there is a level that directly touches upon the problems of contemporary Chinese society – and at least half of the reflections in the play belong to this level: remarks and gags about food safety, housing, healthcare, and the pension system are strictly connected to today's China. The old man is

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<sup>8</sup> With the end of the Cultural Revolution, most of the so-called educated youths fought to return to urban centres from the countryside: many of them, in those years, had built a family or entered a love relationship, but as their wives or lovers generally did not have an urban residence permit, they had no choice but leave them there.



therefore a universal character, although the reality he lucidly criticises and rages against in his ravings is undoubtedly the PRC of 2010.

The fact that this furious social criticism is delivered through the ravings of an old man suffering from Alzheimer's is in itself significant: both in China and in many other countries, there is a long literary tradition of madmen expressing unwelcome truths. Alzheimer's also gives Guo Shixing the opportunity to repeatedly touch upon the theme of memory, and to return to an issue he had already extensively addressed both in *Bad Talk Street* and in *Toilet*, namely: the demolition of entire historic neighbourhoods of the city to make place for dull skyscrapers in the name of unchecked urban and economic development, leading to the loss of places of memory.<sup>9</sup>

The protagonist's lengthy final monologue consists in a list of sentences that all begin with the same verb, although the object changes: "Fuck XXX" (*wo ri XXX*, 我日 XXX). In such a way, with no logical connection or rhetorical flourish, the old man newly evokes facts, characters, and social issues that have emerged over the course of the play, assaulting the public with a sort of foul and raving summary of the many themes that have been touched upon (housing and healthcare costs, youth unemployment, food scandals, the health system, pensions, various leading figures in the contemporary world, the WTO, bloggers, etc.). When asked about the reasons for his choice of using such aggressive language, Guo Shixing stated that he had been inspired by Peter Handke's theatre:<sup>10</sup> his main aim was to provoke the public (Tang Ling 2011: 27). This monologue does not convey any dramatic content; rather, it lends voice to the resentment against society that runs through the whole play. Despite his efforts, the protagonist is unable to find a place in society, he fails: as emphasised by the final line ("fuck myself"), personal dignity has collapsed (Xu Jian 2011: 84). This can be seen as the end point of a trajectory leading from the allegory that permeated Guo's first plays to the explicit social criticism of his second trilogy.

The focus on language and its violence are distinctive features of this play, and possibly played a role in its lukewarm reception by the public. Experimentation with language certainly lies at the centre of Guo Shixing's writing and production: his creative work is based on the refined use of language

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<sup>9</sup> Consider the following line spoken by the old man: "比如你住的地方。今天住的好好的，明天拆了。我到我念过书的学校去看过，拆了[...]。我怀疑我究竟是不是真的活过，是不是做梦啊" (For example, the place where you live. One day you're living there just fine, the next day they demolish it. I went to take a look at the school I attended – it has been demolished. [...] I wonder: did I really live or was this just a dream?) (Guo 2015: 260). Criticism of the demolition of historic areas in cities, which are being turned into megalopolises that all look the same, is a recurrent theme in 21st-century Chinese art and literature.

<sup>10</sup> See his provocative "anti-play" *Offending the Audience* (1966).

across all registers, from the most vulgar to the loftiest, and on a wealth of inventive puns, nonsense phrases, and dialogues devoid of logical connections and based instead on the repetition of words, assonances, and homophones. The humour that springs from all this is the cornerstone of all Guo’s texts. As already noted, it serves the purpose of making the text run smoothly, of recounting tragic facts in a comical way (Gu Haihui 2011: 56). In *Go Home* the only “plot” element is represented by the old man wanting to enter his home and by the Voice that refuses to let him in. The text thus unfolds through a series of episodes and characters that have no logical or temporal connection with one another, but serve as digressions that aid the free flow of the old man’s delirious thought, as he keeps skipping back and forth between reality and fiction, present and past. Some of these scenes are constructed as funny sketches, bringing to mind the *lazzi* of Commedia dell’arte in terms both of their structure and of their function in the text: take, for example, the comic scene in which the Voice tries to explain the concept of virtual reality to the old man by making him mimic the action of rowing. Language indeed serves as the guiding thread holding these scenes together: Guo Shixing here draws upon his experience with refined language games in *Bad Talk Street*, to develop a stream of consciousness which does not obey any logic, but rather uses language and word plays to create new meanings and new trajectories, deviating the course of the play now in one direction, now in another. In many cases, the connection between the lines in a dialogue is limited to the random echoing of a few words:

环 甲：知识青年上山下乡 很有必要！	Environmental Activist A: The movement of <b>educated youths</b> up to the mountains and down to the villages <b>was absolutely necessary!</b>
老 人：很没必要！	Old man: <b>It was not necessary at all!</b>
环 甲：知识青年四体不勤 ，五谷不分。	Environmental Activist A: The <b>educated youths</b> are parasites who do not toil and are ignorant of common things.
老 人：农民进城很有必要 ，农民分不清哪是二环，哪 是三环。	Old man: <b>It is absolutely necessary</b> for migrant workers to come to the city; they are incapable of telling the <b>second belt</b> from the <b>third</b> .
环 甲：他们很了解六环以 外。	Environmental Activist A: They know the part beyond the <b>sixth belt</b> very well.
老 人：听说要修七环。	Old Man: I’ve heard that they are about to build a <b>seventh one</b> .

In this example (Guo 2015: 268; the English translation is mine), the first, second, and fourth lines are connected through the expression “it is/was necessary;” the third line takes up the subject of the first, namely the educated youths, while the fifth and sixth lines shift the focus to the belt roads in the city of Beijing, the object of the fourth line. Elsewhere, the connection is even weaker and is established not through the echoing or repetition of a word, but through a play based on homophony/semi-homophony or assonance. While these language experiments run throughout Guo’s writing, and while the very use of foul speech is hardly foreign to his oeuvre as a whole, in *Go Home* they become predominant, serving as the main key to the text.

#### 4. *Go Home*: the mise en scène

The blurring of reality and hallucination, the time of memory and the present time, that runs through the text of this play is increased by the stage design, which provides no spatio-temporal references: all we see are four closed doors and an old man. Disease-ridden old age, the loss of memory, and loneliness are universal human tragedies: the old man has no name – he is one of the countless old men who are ill and left to themselves. In his stage direction, Lin Zhaohua seeks to reinforce this “universal” perspective through a number of strategies: first of all, he employs a minimalist, drab scenic design, which does away with any references to specific places – he arranges four doors in a row on the right-hand side of the stage, which remains bare. In accordance with Guo Shixing’s stage notes, the left-hand side of the stage features a treadmill: at the beginning and in various moments during the play, an old lady in red walks on it.



Figure 1. *Go Home* opening scene. The set of Lin Zhaohua’s production in Tianjin 2010 (courtesy of Guo Shixing)

The same lady later appears to be practising tai-ji with a fan, while in the final scene she enters on stage playing with a diabolo. Then she leaves the diabolo spinning on stage when the chorus falls silent and all the actors make an exit. In reviews and interviews discussing the stage design, both the director and the playwright have refused to provide any specific interpretation of these symbolic elements: their meaning must remain ambiguous, open; they are vessels ready to be filled with any meaning spectators will choose to assign them.

A second important strategy that Lin Zhaohua adopts to strengthen the universal perspective of the play is so-called role-sharing, i.e. getting more than one actor to play the same character. There are two actors playing the old man – they simply take turns at wearing his coat; there are four doors at which the old man screams, and four voices answer him. On the one hand, this multiplication of characters is designed to plunge the spectators into the old man's mental confusion; on the other, it conveys the multiple, rather than univocal, significance of this story and tragedy. Lin Zhaohua had already experimented with a bare stage and role-sharing with his famous stage design for *Hamlet* in 1990, when he had used these tools to turn the individual protagonist's tragedy into the universal tragedy of man, who must inevitably face the menacing forces of his time. While Lin has always sought to avoid political discussions, the universality of his *Hamlet* and the “dark” moment that intellectuals were experiencing after Tienanmen left few doubts as to the fact that his “dark and menacing forces” were open to a “local” interpretation (Ferrari 2012).

A third element that contributes to strengthening the universality of *Go Home*'s story from the point of view not only of space (as the story of every place), but also of time (as the story of any time) is the selection of young actors, with no make-up, to play the old characters' role. The tragedy of old age is represented through the face of youth, as though to suggest that youth and old age are but different stages in each person's life. The empty space of the stage is “filled” by the actors' physical presence and by their acting style, marked by an extensive use of the body and voice.

Lin was actually essentially forced to choose young actors: in an interview I conducted with Wang Dingyi (王丁一), one of the four actors interpreting the character of the Voice, in the summer of 2011, he stated that Guo Shixing had envisaged one of the star performers of the NTCC in the role of the old man. But all these established actors refused to play that role, which was indeed a very “problematic” one: many lines are full of foul words and insults, culminating in the lengthy final monologue.

Actually, the explicit discussion of the major issues in contemporary society, together with the verbal violence, made the whole play “problematic;” hence the choice (or forced choice?) to produce it through the “private” channel of Lin Zhaohua's studio. All the actors working there were very young, so again the choice of young actors for old characters falls on the borderline between artistic choice

and practical necessity. In Wang Dingyi's opinion, the role-sharing and Lin Zhaohua's decision to have a chorus – formed by all the actors – deliver the final monologue which Guo had written for the old man, depended on the fact that the young actors needed to share the responsibility for such a key monologue and the violent words it included. Nevertheless, the final result on stage is very intense, interesting, and meaningful. The chorus follows a rap rhythm (which is unsurprising, given that rap was developed as a means to voice social criticism) and is supported by stomping. Everyone takes part in this final chorus, as one person's rage becomes everyone's rage – a shared, screamed rage – down to the final “fuck myself,” followed by silence. In this way, Lin Zhaohua underlines the explicit nature of Guo's social criticism, before returning to a traditional *xiayi* aesthetic in the close up with the diabolo spinning on stage, a symbol left to the spectators' interpretation.

## 5. Conclusion

After the première, Guo Shixing declared in many interviews that *Go Home* had been a very difficult play to write: it had required almost two years of incubation. Is it a realistic play? A symbolist play? An absurdist play? An avant-garde play? Both Guo Shixing and Lin Zhaohua have always rejected any kind of label, defending the uniqueness of their voices as artists. Certainly, in this play there is a loss of space-time coordinates, a fragmentation of speech, a loss of logical connections, together with a *mise en scène* strewn with symbolic elements (symbols which were already described in the stage directions given in the script)<sup>11</sup>. The main topic of the play itself, namely homecoming, is a metaphor laden with different meanings: the imagine of the home may represent the womb or the lost Eden (Xie Xizhang 2011, 37), a peaceful haven or the end point in the search for oneself (Xu Jian 2011, 83). It is definitely a safe harbour one can escape to, in order to find protection; but although very near, it remains inaccessible for the main character, who is adrift in the raging sea of the real world.

*Go Home* brings forward the cross-cutting themes of Guo's theatre production: as Chinese critics have remarked, his plays, based on satire and paradox, aim to show that reality is never univocal or unambiguous, that absolute truth does not exist, that absolute right and absolute wrong do not exist either, and therefore that there is no fixed system of values one can refer to (Zhang Lange 2006, 102). Given this lack of certainties, man must come to terms with alienation (Gu Haihui 2011, 55).

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<sup>11</sup> Guo Shixing generally includes detailed stage directions in his scripts; in 2008, he also started directing his own plays and/or plays adapted by him. In an interview (Beijing, 4 December 2015), when discussing the relationship between playwright and director, Guo acknowledged that, as a playwright, he had often been disappointed by directors' choices which did not fit with his own way of envisaging a given play.

In my opinion, given its structure, language, and topics, this play can be seen as the end point/culmination of Guo Shixing’s creative journey: it sums up the main features of his writing. As far as its structure is concerned, as we have seen, the play does not depict a dramatic conflict and the action is stripped down to the essential: from beginning to end, the main character simply strives to enter his home. As far as language is concerned, the witty usage of words, aimed at building a (darkly) humorous level that is Guo’s trademark, takes over the play, to the point that in many passages the dialogues tend to lose their logical connections and simply revolve around puns and clever wordplays: the play on language becomes the centre of the script. This witty and shrewd play on the one hand fully draws upon the tradition of comic dialogues (*xiangsheng* 相声); on the other, it takes inspiration from absurdist theatre. Finally, as far as topics are concerned, this play sums up numerous contemporary social issues already addressed in Guo’s previous production – environmental problems, the rising cost of living, the alienation of the educated youths, etc. To these, it adds a long series of new issues and scandals, through a process of accumulation that ends up crushing the main character.

Ultimately, the play can be read as a sort of parade of contemporary Chinese social issues and scandals, a sort of theatrical adaptation of the *Blue Book*: compared to Guo’s past production, what is new in this play is the explicit social criticism, the scream of rage that directly addresses these issues. It is a cry of alarm delivered through very violent language, in order to elicit a reaction from the public.

During his 2015 interview, Guo Shixing remarked that it had become more and more difficult for theatre to play its role as a source of social criticism: censorship was much more stringent than in the 1980s or 1990s. But as many commentators (journalists, intellectuals, and academics) have underlined, censorship increased even further during Xi Jinping’s second term as President (2017-2022). Therefore, it is unsurprising that Guo’s production has slowed down a lot in recent years, which is not to say that it is stagnating – although Guo himself is hiding behind the screen of his old age. Many issues denounced by Guo – food scandals, for examples – have been harshly condemned and punished by the Chinese government. However, the loss of dignity and moral values he has described, together with the paradoxes of a number of government policies he has pointed out (on the one hand health and pension reforms, on the other lack of support for the elderly, the housing problem, etc.), is quite remote from the glossy facade of a prosperous and harmonious society which the Chinese government wishes to support and broadcast both within China and abroad. Would this play reach the stage in today’s PRC? Considering the recent tightening of control over cultural content (from academic research and university courses to artworks), I doubt it. But it is noteworthy that when the play was staged in 2010-2011, its cry of alarm actually fell on deaf ears – a rather short tour, no scandals. Was the public not interested in this cry of alarm? Or wasn’t it ready to accept the violent indictment formulated by Guo?

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Barbara Leonesi is Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Turin, where she teaches modern and contemporary Chinese literature and Chinese language. She has published articles on the translation and reception of Italian literature in China, particularly poetry and drama, and on the theory of translation from Chinese to Western languages. Her current research mainly focuses on the translation and reception of literary texts in the target language society, on translation theories applied to drama, and on contemporary Chinese literature, with a focus on theatre.

Barbara can be contacted at: [barbara.leonesi@unito.it](mailto:barbara.leonesi@unito.it)