

The Leaning Tower of Pisa: There is no Standard Answer to Relationships

Gao Yange
China Arts News

The Leaning Tower of Pisa produced by National Theatre of China met audiences from October 21st to 30th, 2016 in small theatre of National Theatre of China. *The Leaning Tower of Pisa* is written by Russian modern playwright and director Надежда Михайловна Птушкина, directed by Wang Jiannan, young director of National Theatre of China, starred by Zhao Rui and Zhai Xiaoxing. On October 9th, “Why The Leaning Tower of Pisa does not fall down?—Workshop of *The Leaning Tower of Pisa*” was organized by the Department of Research and Education, National Theatre of China in Beijing. In the workshop, Director Wang Jiannan as the host guest shared lots of topics, including the process of directing this play, metaphorical meanings of “The Leaning Tower of Pisa” and what is a good play, etc.

The Leaning Tower of Pisa focuses on a couple who have been married for 20 years. After work, the wife suddenly proposed that she wanted to leave home. From paying no attention to realizing the seriousness of the matter, the husband tried to persuade his wife to stay, and quarreled with her. Finally, they two faced to each other heart to heart, revealing holes of marriage, and the love lying underneath. Director Wang Jiannan said that this is a story that spoiler information would not ruin its beauty. “This couple has not been frank to each other before, and this is the first time and the only time for them to face ‘the bloody truth’”. In the end, the husband said that family life is like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and it may lean, keep leaning, but never falls down. It is also true of love, marriage and family.” He said, “Relationships between men and women exist around the world, so lots of problems are general and in common. Therefore, we want to find more resonance in audiences.”

According to Director Wang Jiannan, when he first read the script of *The Leaning Tower of Pisa*, he was not touched at the beginning. However, when he read it out later, he found that it was very interesting, of which there were many places need further contemplating. The author Надежда Михайловна Птушкина is also an interesting playwright, who has been writing a series of plays, most of which are only two characters, a man and a woman. The characters even have no names, only noted as ‘husband’ and ‘wife’, or ‘he’ and ‘she’, without any political setting.” In order to make the performance resonate with the audiences, the director did not outline the nationalities of the characters, “it is neither a Chinese play, nor a foreign one. From the setting of living room, it is a well-off family and the characters use forks to take western meals. As a matter of fact, nowadays some Chinese families also eat western meals, and watch football games after work.”

In the first part, it looks like a comedy, and then in the second part, as they become frank to each other and start to reflect upon the marriage, the story bears heavy weight. Director Wang Jiannan really appreciates the author’s exquisite portrayal of the characters and the characterization. “In this play, there is a process

from 0 to 100 for both characters. In the beginning, the husband seems to be an alcoholic careless man, but in the end, he would give the metaphor of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, which is very philosophical. As to the wife, she initially intends to end the marriage in an elegance way. Then she quarreled with her husband, and finally she picks up the identity as a loving partner again, which shows female's beauty and tolerance."

Zhao Rui and Zhai Xiaoying who star in the play, are schoolmates of Central Academy of Drama in China, and they have been quite close for 20 years. "It is a challenge for the two characters to finish the script with around 30,000 words within 2 hours." Director Wang Jiannan said that as the two have been known each other for more than 20 years, so they understand each other well. Moreover, their real ages also accord with the characters in the play. "They two are very good actor and actress, and they have very sensitive creative ability and their control of rhythm, their understanding of the play, their expression as well as explosive power are excellent", commented by Director Wang Jiannan who felt quite easy in cooperating with them.

Director Wang Jiannan once took the script to his friends and found an interesting phenomenon: After reading the script, the male audiences feel more sympathy with the husband, while the female ones would stand in one line with the wife. "As to marriage and relationship, no one could give a standard answer, and I don't have one, either. Hope the play *The Leaning Tower of Pisa* would make the audiences reflect upon these questions", said Wang Jiannan.

<http://ptushkina.com>