

Music Therapy through Musical Theater: A Study of the Creative Practice and Therapeutic Pathways in Feier

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Abstract

Art therapy has emerged as a vital domain within mental health services in China, attracting increasing public and scholarly attention. This paper examines the creative practice of the therapeutic musical Feier as a case study to explore the application and potential standardization of musical theater in youth mental health interventions. The study finds that Feier constructs a three-dimensional therapeutic framework integrating "narrative, music, and interaction." This framework combines cognitive restructuring from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) with the emotional externalization characteristic of artistic expression, resulting in a replicable group therapy model. The project employs a systematic fieldwork mechanism to ground its creation in authentic experiences. Through narrative role reversal, it enables participants to gain a sense of agency on a symbolic level, while also exploring the transformation of traditional cultural elements into therapeutic tools. This paper further analyzes the project's therapeutic mechanisms and social value, identifying key challenges-such as developing evaluation systems, training personnel, and adapting to different settings-that must be addressed to move from a single "project" to a scalable "model." This analysis aims to provide a reference for the localization of art therapy practice.

Keywords

Art Therapy; Musical Theater; Adolescent Mental Health; Standardization; Feier.

1. Introduction

Adolescent mental health has become a significant public health concern. The Report on National Mental Health Development in China (2019-2020) indicates a depression detection rate of 24.6% among Chinese adolescents, with 17.2% experiencing mild depression and 7.4% severe depression. Traditional psychological counseling resources are often insufficient to meet this growing demand, with limited reach per intervention. Concurrently, art therapy, as a form of non-clinical intervention, is gaining public recognition. Examples include the "One-on-One Healing Theater" productions *Someone's Game* and *Someone's Smile* introduced by Shanghai Culture Square, which achieved 2,135 performances in six months[1]. The Beijing Gulou West Theater consistently hosts drama therapy workshops. In October 2025, *This is Not Child's Play*, billed as China's first therapeutic stage drama for adolescent mental health, premiered in Chengdu. Its creative team conducted in-depth research in hospitals, collecting case files, and arranged expert discussions and public consultations post-performance[2]. These phenomena suggest a significant cultural trend merging art and mental health.

It is within this context that the therapeutic musical Feier was developed. Led by the team of Zhang Chao at the School of Music and Recording Arts, Communication University of China, in collaboration with the musical theater team of Li Dun at Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts, Feier represents a domestic effort to integrate neurofeedback mechanisms with drama therapy in a children's musical. Grounded in the theory of brain plasticity, the project attempts to construct

an innovative paradigm combining "scientific intervention, artistic transformation, and social empathy." This paper, based on the creative practice of Feier, investigates how the musical theater format can serve mental health interventions and assesses the potential for replicating and scaling this model.

2. Project Orientation and the Pursuit of a Standardized Model

2.1. From Single Performance to Replicable Solution

Current art therapy practices in China often remain at the level of single events or performances confined to specific venues. For instance, while *Someone's Game* achieved a long run, its "one-on-one" format inherently limits its reach to one audience member per session, constraining scalability. Productions like *This is Not Child's Play*, despite garnering social attention, have yet to establish a generalizable operational framework[3]. From its inception, the Feier project prioritized "standardization" as a core objective. The project proposal explicitly states the aim to create a replicable group therapy solution adaptable to various settings—schools, communities, and medical institutions—through modular plot design (e.g., thematic units addressing social anxiety, trauma recovery), with a target reach of 50-100 individuals per session. This design aligns with international models like "Tailored Therapeutic Musical Theater." Windle (2024) at Lesley University detailed a four-phase operational process for such a model and validated its effectiveness in reducing social anxiety among adolescents through the production of the musical *Newsies*[4].

2.2. Fieldwork Mechanism: Grounding Creation in Reality

The efficacy of any therapeutic project relies on a profound understanding of its target population. The Feier project incorporated a systematic fieldwork plan: observing child and group counseling sessions at psychological centers, collecting children's drawings and sandplay creations, participating in campus "Heart Tree Hole" peer support activities, recording family conflict mediation processes, and gathering excerpts from parental diaries. This approach of "entering the therapeutic scene" ensured that scriptwriting and musical composition could access genuine emotions and needs. The team also conducted workshops like "Psychological Imagery Visualization," inviting children to shape their "inner forms" using materials like clay and fabric, which were subsequently transformed into stage installations by set designers. This pathway from reality to art mirrors the approach of the *This is Not a Child's Play* creative team, who "went into hospitals to collect first-hand case files"[2], suggesting a growing consensus on the importance of grounding therapeutic art in authentic experience.

2.3. Theoretical Basis of the Three-Dimensional Therapeutic Framework

The "narrative-music-interaction" framework constructed by Feier rests on a clear theoretical foundation. At the narrative level, it draws upon "cognitive restructuring" from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). By enabling the protagonist, Feier, to enter and alter the outcomes of fairy tales, the project helps young audiences understand that "trauma can be re-narrated." At the musical level, it seeks to integrate the ancient Chinese theory of "Five Notes Healing" from the *Huangdi Neijing* (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor) with modern neurobiological mechanisms, exploring the correspondence between the frequency characteristics of the notes gong, shang, jue, zhi, yu and emotional regulation. At the interactive level, the production features both professional adult actors and non-professional child actors on stage together, breaking down the performer-audience divide and fostering a "therapeutic community" atmosphere in the live space. The theoretical underpinnings of this framework are supported by recent systematic reviews. Barnish and Nelson-Horne (2023) found that group-based active artistic interventions have a clear positive effect on symptoms of anxiety and depression[5]. Another systematic review focusing on children and adolescents confirmed that active,

participatory music therapy yields more positive outcomes than passive reception[6]. Feier's design explicitly incorporates the key elements of "group-based" and "active participation."

3. Analysis of Therapeutic Mechanisms

3.1. Narrative Reconstruction: From Victim to Rescuer

A key element of Feier's script is its role reversal: the protagonist, Feier, is not a passive recipient of help but an active agent who enters the fairy-tale world to assist the Little Mermaid, the Little Match Girl, and the Steadfast Tin Soldier. This reversal carries significant therapeutic meaning. In traditional narratives, individuals who have experienced trauma are often defined as "victims" or "patients," labels that can reinforce feelings of helplessness. Feier, through the repeated question, "Is your heart true in wanting to help them?" positions the protagonist (and, by extension, the young audience members who identify with her) as an active subject. As the voiceover in the script states, "Because you believe in love, magic resides in your heart." This narrative strategy resonates with the concept of "role reversal" in drama therapy-by playing the role of a helper, individuals can re-examine their own predicaments and gain a sense of mastery on a symbolic level.

The script's final revelation amplifies this effect: the entire fairy-tale world is revealed to be a "brainwave theater" constructed by Feier's father for his comatose daughter. The father's monologue includes the line, "I will try to be the God of that world, help her build a paradise." This framing embeds the repair of the parent-child relationship within the therapeutic process, echoing principles of family systems therapy. The father's dual role-as a bedside companion in reality and a creator in the dream world-suggests that healing involves not only individual inner reconstruction but also the restoration of relational bonds.

3.2. The Emotion-Regulating Function of Music

The Feier project plans to create eight original songs. The richness of its musical conception is evident in the reference track list (totaling 21 pieces), which spans diverse styles from the epic soundscapes of Jo Blankenburg to the pop-electronic influences of JVKE and the folk-tinged melodies of First Aid Kit. Song titles like Electrocardiogram Flower, Lucid Dream, Promised Land, and Oh Daughter directly evoke emotional states and psychological imagery.

The mechanisms through which music facilitates healing are multi-layered. Neuroscientific research indicates that music can activate the brain's limbic system, promote dopamine release, and modulate emotional responses. Rhythmic stimulation can also synchronize auditory-motor neural pathways, helping individuals establish a sense of order and control. The project places particular emphasis on utilizing traditional Chinese musical elements. For instance, it explores connecting the frequency characteristics of the san yin (dispersed sound) of the guqin (approximately 98 Hz) to emotional regulation. It also deconstructs the Sichuan opera technique of "face-changing" into a standardized process of "mask painting, role-playing, and pressure release." These designs serve both to revitalize traditional culture and to provide indigenous operational pathways for art therapy practice.

3.3. Constructing Safety between Reality and Fiction

A core advantage of drama therapy lies in its "fictionality." Participants understand that events on stage are "not real," allowing them to lower their real-world defenses and safely explore genuine inner emotions. The script of Feier repeatedly engages with the philosophical questions "What is real? What is false?"-a deliberation that itself creates space for healing. The protagonist Feier's adventures in the fairy-tale world constitute a form of "safe exposure." She confronts familiar characters, navigates clearly defined problems, and accumulates self-efficacy with each successful intervention. When she finally grasps her father's trembling hand in the real world, the courage cultivated in the virtual realm can be transferred. This connection

between the "virtual" and the "real" is a unique value of art therapy, distinguishing it from direct psychological intervention.

4. Social Value and Pathways for Scaling

4.1. Democratizing Mental Health Services

Mental health service resources in China are unevenly distributed, with professional counselors concentrated in first-tier cities and major hospitals. Consequently, many adolescents in need struggle to access timely help. The group-based nature of art therapy offers a potential avenue for wider accessibility. The Feier project aims to reach 50-100 individuals per session. Scaled within a school setting, a single performance could impact hundreds of students and parents. Crucially, the musical format helps destigmatize mental health support. Audiences attend for artistic appreciation, yet may unconsciously receive emotional catharsis and psychological support. As the creators of *This is Not Child's Play* noted, this "laughter and tears" approach makes mental health knowledge more approachable[2].

4.2. Integrating Cultural Confidence with Therapeutic Practice

The Feier project intentionally incorporates elements of traditional Chinese culture. Intangible cultural heritage elements like mythical creatures from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, guqin music, Sichuan opera face-changing, and Dunhuang dance are given new functions-not merely as cultural displays, but as therapeutic tools. This model of "intangible heritage revitalization + digital healing" carries dual significance. On one hand, it provides a pathway for traditional culture to enter contemporary life, enabling young people to encounter and identify with Chinese civilization naturally through participation. On the other hand, it offers a localized alternative to Western discourse in art therapy. While Western drama therapy often centers on individual subconscious exploration, Feier attempts to construct an intervention pathway based on a "collective cultural subconscious." By incorporating elements like ancestral hall rituals, seasonal work songs, and dialect chanting, it seeks to awaken fragmented cultural memories and alleviate crises of identity.

4.3. From Project to Model: Feasibility for Scaling

Currently, Feier is in the scriptwriting and therapeutic research phase. Song composition is scheduled from September to December 2025, rehearsals from January to March 2026, with project conclusion in April 2026. Deliverables include the script, eight songs, a video recording of the musical, and this academic paper.

Transitioning from a single project to a scalable model requires addressing several key issues. First is the evaluation system: how can therapeutic effects be quantified? The project team plans to use devices like brainwave headbands to collect neurofeedback from audiences during performances, potentially generating data from a "thousand-person neural resonance field" that could provide more scientific evidence for art therapy's effectiveness. Second is personnel training: scaling requires equipping more teams with this methodology, necessitating supporting training programs. Third is contextual adaptation: schools, communities, and hospitals operate under different logics, requiring script and activity design modifications. Relevant domestic and international experiences offer reference points: Lesley University's TTMT model details a four-phase operational process[4]; the team behind *This is Not Child's Play* has planned follow-up actions including public lectures, counseling workshops, and online courses[3]. These explorations provide valuable references for the further promotion of Feier.

5. Conclusion

The creative practice of the therapeutic musical *Feier* demonstrates multiple possibilities for integrating the musical theater format into the field of adolescent mental health. Its "narrative-music-interaction" three-dimensional framework synthesizes the strengths of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and artistic expression. Its systematic fieldwork mechanism ensures alignment between the artistic product and authentic human needs. Its creative transformation of traditional cultural elements constructs a localized therapeutic pathway.

Of course, this exploration remains in its early stages. Questions remain: How can the long-term effects of art therapy be sustained? What is the suitability of different art forms for different psychological issues? These questions require further empirical research. However, it is clear that when a theater becomes a sanctuary for the soul, and audiences find healing through artistic experience, the function of art extends beyond aesthetics into the realm of caring for life itself. As the script of *Feier* concludes, quoting Hans Christian Andersen: "The daughters of the air have no immortal souls, but they can win one through good deeds." What art therapy strives to do, perhaps, is to create, through repeated acts of compassionate artistic practice, the possibility for wounded hearts to take flight once more.

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