

Korean Performing Arts 1992

An Impression

BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR DR. CHUA SOO PONG

It was in 1978 that I first visited the "Land of Morning Calm" on my way to attend an academic conference in Hawaii. I was then a graduate student working on my Ph.D. thesis at Queen's University in the United Kingdom and a young theatre critic writing for Singapore newspapers and radio. During my four-day visit, extremely brief for a country of immense beauty and richness in culture, I managed to see performances at the newly opened and elegant Sejong Cultural Centre, the National Theatre complex on Namsan, the Konggan Sarang, an exciting new venue which pioneered 'pocket theatre', the Drama Centre, which is now renamed the Seoul Institute of Arts, and an assortment of tourist attractions such as the National Museum, the Korea House and the Palaces. I told myself then, I must come back again, to learn more about the sorrows and successes of the Koreans. How did they manage to build up an impressive metropolis on the ruins of an unfortunate war resulting from the competition for hegemony by superpowers of the 1950s? Can a showpiece like Sejong Cultural Centre contribute significantly to the promotion of performing arts, or, will it become a

Funded by the Korea Foundation, Singapore's leading dance critic and theatre scholar Dr. Chua Soo Pong was in Seoul to conduct research on "Dance and Theatre in Contemporary Korea". He was affiliated to Seoul National University.

costly white elephant? Will Korea emerge as a model for the developing countries in their ways of mobilizing creativity of their peoples?

Subsequently, as a guest of the International Cultural Society of Korea and participant of various symposiums and conferences, I visited Korea five more times. Unfortunately, each visit was limited to a short span of four or five days. Therefore, there was only time to catch a glimpse of the exciting, rapidly growing theatre scene of the 80s. This is why I was particularly happy to be able to come this year at the time when the 16th Seoul Theatre Festival was on, thanks to the funding of my visit by the Korea Foundation.

The 16th Seoul Theatre Festival

I saw ten plays, including all the eight plays presented for competition organized by the Korean Theatre Association. Unlike the Philippines National Theatre Festival launched last February and the bi-annual

Singapore Drama Festival, which is organized by the Government, the festival here is managed by a non-government organization, similar to the Bangladesh Theatre Festival. Like my previous experience watching foreign drama performances, I find no difficulty in understanding the situation of pain or joy as portrayed by the characters. This is because the better performers have the ability to project their emotions which transcend language barriers. However, I must acknowledge the helpful translation provided by my two friends, Park and Choi during some performances.

The most striking feature of this theatre festival for an outsider is the high quality of stage and lighting designs of Korean productions. Designers here seem to have no problem in presenting on stage the most unlikely venues chosen by the playwrights to challenge them. From a small aircraft on the snow in "For Aurora" written and directed by Kim Sang-Yol to the symbolic setting of "Yongja and Jintack" by Lee Kang-Back and directed by Chung Jin-Soo, the designers were able to produce the atmosphere needed in the scenes described in the plays. Much credit must be given to Lee Sang Bong of Theatre Sinsi who cast such beautiful light on the snow scene, and it was helped by the well choreographed and imaginatively dressed deer dance. Those who have to design realistic sets too did a good job. Designers of the Semi Theatre featured a village house in remarkable detail while the Theater Boohwal must have done much research to produce a typical middle class Indian living room.

The only exception was "Lover in the Mirror" by the Sacho Theater Group. While the metal pipes scattered around the stage on the various performing spaces made up of platforms of various heights and shapes which looked interesting at first glance, did work for some scenes, in other scenes these pipes became rather distracting.

From the themes chosen by the playwrights who participated in this festival, it appears that they are no longer devoted to only didactic drama which preaches morality, or patriotism, a common approach to drama in many Asian countries. As some of these playwrights see drama as a vehicle for moral edification, the standard ending of their story is that good triumphs over evil. Some of the plays in the festival dealt with more complicated emotional encounters of individuals and their search for new destinations in life. But they are packaged more like television soap dramas rather than great theatre pieces that can arouse a strong reaction from the audience.

It is also interesting for me to note that Korean playwrights seem to have an interest in writing about Korean experiences in other countries, past and present. Such concern is perhaps a reflection of the Korean passion for their countrymen and the strong national and cultural identity the Koreans share. Perhaps in the near future we will also see the disastrous experiences of the Koreans in Los Angeles on stage.

Similar to the situation here, in Singapore, some playwrights think that by moving away from realistic

setting and the school of naturalism means seeking new grounds. The tendency frequently led to scripts which have too many short scenes which renders to play a fragmented effect. Some attributed this to the influence of television and superficial knowledge of avant-garde theatre of the west while others believe that many of these writers simply are unable to command language like the old generation masters to write first class naturalistic plays.

External elements whether smoke, fanciful lighting, ritualistic motifs, folk music or token dances inserted to decorate the plays are no ingredients which can guarantee the success of plays. The strength of a good script rests on its ability to provoke thinking through a focused theme and its ability to show the development of the characters as the play progresses. The actions and their results contributing to the development of the character must be visually portrayed on stage to make an impact on the audience. Many of the festival's plays here were inadequate in character development and incidents were often verbally described rather than unfolded on stage to intensify dramatic conflicts.

Another observation contributing to the weakness of some of these productions was that many fringe characters appearing in the play were played by actors who obviously lack training and experience. I would have thought that Korea, with so many theatre groups and universities offering courses in theatre, would have plenty of fine actors. But the festival's offer showed otherwise,

although actors who played leading roles in most groups were reasonably good.

However, it was the script of Lee Kang Beak's "Yongja and Jintaek" well-directed by Chung Jin-Soo, which interested this writer the most as it presented an imaginative approach to the serious issues of oppression, love and friendship. This is unlike other plays that too explicitly narrate a story with clear cut messages and leave no room for the audience to think about the implications and possibilities of the issues. The beauty of this play is that audiences can relate with the hypothetical workplace and identify themselves with the heroine. The tragedy was unfolded through a series of action-packed scenes and the dramatic tension was there all the time. The director, Chung, must be given the credit for interpreting a metaphoric play with vivid clarity. In the small space of Munye Basement Theatre, the designer devised a three-level space effectively. Most impressive was the use of a transparent screen showing the tragic scene where Jintack was whipped by Yongja. Chung also made clear the hierarchical structure of the social environment and cruelty and indifference of those possessing power in this production by his effective blocking of movements, choice of costume and visual images. It was enhanced by captivating ensemble acting. If the lead actor were stonger in his portrayal of Yongja, the play would have been more moving.

Most of the plays presented were technically polished, if not good in total quality. My impression is therefore that Korea has a large number of technical theatre personnel

and it is an area in which Singapore theatre is weak. What I am surprised at is the lack of excellent scripts though I have come across many more from my previous visits and my reading.

What surprised me most was that the audience turnout was poor even for the better productions. This is a serious problem which should be urgently addressed. Is it because of poor publicity, lack of interest, inconvenient ticketing systems? In a city of 11 million people, the audience size is appallingly small.

The press could certainly do much more of course. In Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, much more coverage is devoted to the drama activities, especially during the festivals. Here in Seoul, why so little coverage in the local press? The previews and reviews which did appear however, should not be written by the newspaper staff but by a qualified drama critic. Leaving review writing to journalists is a suicidal move for drama!

One important component missing in a festival of such scale is the absence of any workshops, master classes, panel discussions and other activities of a similar nature. These activities form an important component of any respectable drama festival as they serve many important functions; they will help to create a festive atmosphere and nurture audienceship and active participants. However, I am fully aware that many highly respected theatre groups, playwrights, directors and actors were not featured in the festival this year and therefore I

know that this festival did not fully represent Korean theatre. Nevertheless, it showed drama lovers the areas of concern and theatre groups might like to examine all aspects of their creative products in order to produce a better play the next time round. These observations here, like those by any casual observer, are superficial and I await more opportunities to learn about Korean theatre in which there were many dramatists I greatly admire.

P'ansori

In his effort to contemporarize a traditional art form, Hoe Kyu, the foremost P'ansori opera director and innovator, has shown us once again his genius in combining the musical quality of P'ansori and dramatic impact of modern theatre in "The Song of Shim Chong" presented by the National Ch'angjuk Company. P'ansori emerged in the later half of the Choson period, and was transformed into a popular entertainment in the Enlightenment period, but declined in the context of modern society because of the deterioration of aesthetic sensibilities. Similar to the Filipinos' experiment to indeginize and contemporarize Aeriala and the Chinese to do the same with many simple regional traditional theatre forms, the Koreans have successfully transformed P'ansori opera as an accepted art form with vivid national character.

"The Song of Shim Chong" is a much loved P'ansori, one of the popular versions staged by the National Ch'angjuk Company, is a new

version arranged by Kang Han-yong, with Ahn Suk-son playing the title role.

This much loved story was condensed into slightly over two hours to cater for the habits of modern audiences. The P'ansori opera was divided into 15 scenes, unfolding the story of a filial daughter who attempts to help her father regain his sight. The traditional P'ansori features more the kwangdae orai technique and the skills of the drummer. And at times, long passages are devoted to express the emotions of characters thus slowing down the tempo of the drama.

Hoe Kyu is aware of the modern audience's habit of appreciating action-packed drama and thus ensured that no excessive outpouring of emotion by any single character was ever present. The narrator's powerful singing is closely interwoven with the dance and drama of the strong cast of over 40 members of company.

Credit must be given to the stage designer, who constructed two two-storey structures at both sides of the stage, which provides space for the narrator, the musicians and actors to sing or play music or dance in these areas, upstairs and downstairs, sometimes even simultaneously. The backdrops are stylized, and are supported by the more realistic props such as huts, trees, a throne.

The early death of Shin Chong's mother and the sacrifice of her own life as well as her father's misfortune give the story a tragic tone. But "The Song of Shim Cheng" includes the reunion of Shim Chong and her mother, Madam Kwak in the Crystal

Palace, who was reincarnated as Lady Okchin, Ppaengdok's mother's sudden proposal to Chim Chong's father and the royal banquet for the blindmen. Because of the constant shift between miserable happenings and at times comical events, the story emulates life and is more believable. Of course, like most stories of traditional theatre of the East, the good triumphs at the end and Shim Chong's father finally recovers his sight with great joy.

This story also allows the staging of several rituals in theatrical manners, such as the funeral, Buddhist dance, and the religious service of the sailors. The village life was also cleverly depicted in the scene where Shim Chong's father encountered the village women at work.

For audiences who are unable to appreciate the beauty of the lyrics, they are certainly delighted by the sensitive singing of the narrator, O Jong-Suk and the dramatic song of the sailors, blindmen and village women. The ensemble acting of the chorus members of the 30-year old company also reveals their wealth of experience. The dancers display equal quality in their diverse forms of dance. In the court dance presented at the scenes of the Crystal Palace, Sujonggung, and the King's Palace, the dancers master their smooth steps with great control. With their voluminous skirts and long flowing sleeves, they made lavish movement patterns with quiet grace. In the Buddhist dance, their strength and agility contrast sharply with their courtly appearance and evoke the religious atmosphere by their exuberant rhythms.

All actors and actresses who played the lead roles were very truthful in their portrayals of various characters. Special mention however must be made regarding the actress who played Ppaengdok's mother, Kim Kyung-suk. Comic role is arguably the hardest of all role types. She knows the boundary well and does not exaggerate to the extent of losing credibility of her character or degrade to merely please the audience. Only mature artists are able to master the art of comedian with sensitivity.

It is reported that "The Song of Shim Chong" has won acclaim in its recent tour of Japan and I am pleased that I had the privilege of watching a polished piece of new interpretation of traditional work. Hoe Kyu has indeed revealed to us the splendour as well as the vitality of Korean traditional performing arts in a memorable example.

Dance

In today's urban social environment, work pressure piling high, daily experience of human waves at rush hour and bombardment of new ideas from a rapidly changing world in the highly developed mass media, and opportunities for gaining economic independence by women, seem to have made marriage a more vulnerable partnership. We see much more trouble in marriages, from common men working in the factory to royal couples.

It was a delight to see how love and misunderstanding, confrontation and passion were depicted in such humorous ways in dance vocabularies by Park He Chun and Yook Mi Yong,

a married couple in real life, who co-choreographed and danced in a work they created entitled "Les Jeux Interdites."

Using the lighthearted music by Carlos Dalessio, the couple sitting on a sofa, were soon in different poses as the stage light came on and off, from happinesses, passion, boredom, annoyance, shock or surprise to anger and frustration. Subsequently the dancers manifested their confrontation and reconciliation in dances in several expressive pas de deux, although at times the transition between dances were not smooth.

This charming dance which won the top prize of the recent Young Choreographer's Fall Dance Festival was later featured together with two other winning items "Bird's Eye View" and "Reminiscence" at St. Mark's Place in New York and Yale University in the United States. Their premiere in America helped the dance community there appreciate the latest developments of the dance scene in Korea.

The Young Choreographers' Fall Dance Festival was one of the highlights of the Year of Dance, which was held from 11th to 24th October.

Korea's dance boom of the 1980s, has paved the way for 1992 Year of Dance's huge success. The last decade was characterized by expansion of dance departments at universities, mushrooming of new performing venues, formation of new dance groups, increasing number of artistes going overseas for dance training, strengthening of dance organizations

and greater financial support for dance from the public and private sectors. Furthermore, the Asian Games and Olympics in 1986 and 1988 have to great extent expanded the dance horizon of Korea as the events provided opportunities for enchanting encounters of East and West.

This year's Young Choreographers' Festival was supported by the Korean Small and Medium Industrial Bank. It selected 12 choreographers to compete, based on themes, resumes, records of dance companies, video taped choreographers' works submitted by the applicants. Each group gave three performances at the Munye Small Theatre managed by the Korean Arts and Culture Foundation at Dong Soong-Dong.

It was a great honour and privilege indeed for me to join the four distinguished choreographers and dance critics to serve on the adjudicating committee. They were Prof. Suh Jung Ja, Chung Ang University, Prof. Jung Je Man, Sookmeung Women's University, Prof. Kim Mal Borg, Ewha Women's University and Mr. Chang Kwang Ryul of the monthly Music and Performing Arts Magazine Gaek Suk. The committee was chaired by Prof. Park Il Kyu, Director of the Project Department of The Year of Dance.

The 12 choreographers, all under the age of 35, displayed great diversity in their preference of themes, styles and music used in their creative works. From "The Lonely Woman" (by Choe Sang Cheul), "Unusual Traveller" (by Kim Yong Chen), "Bird's Eye View" (by Kim Hee Jin),

"Release Me" (by Park Hwa Kyung), "Rice" (by Paek Hyun Soon) to "Exorcism" (by Park Kyung Lee), these young choreographers have a good sense of musicality and were able to select music, songs or sound effects, including human voices, traffic noises as well as narrators to achieve their intended atmosphere. A few items that have live music were fortunate to have musicians who really understand dance and they played the melodies with their hearts!

"Reminiscence" was also a memorable item which depicted emotional conflicts of relationship in the past and present with dramatic tension. The choreographer used the props, old photos, chairs and dummy well but she would have done better if there were more dancing than static acting and miming.

Unusual lighting, film projection and set used in Kim Hee Jin's "Bird's Eye View" helped the choreographer to create some memorable poses.

Most dancers had strong technique and were well disciplined. The Korean traditional dancers such as those who appeared in "Rice" and "Exorcism" also have broad training in non-traditional dance technique. This is why they were able to meet the choreographers' demand to perform innovative steps.

One area deserving the young choreographers' attention is the directorial skills to select and connect choreographic ideas. Unless they flow smoothly and are clearly presented in dance language, movements, no matter how interesting they look,

might become disjointed sequences and fragmented images. Creating a few nice steps is not enough. To sustain the audience's interest, steps must be created with grace and logic focused on the chosen themes.

The other weakness that was

apparent in some dances was the lack of understanding of music. Some choreographers did not study details of musical phrases and the movements they created did not correspond to music.

Nevertheless, what an excellent

opportunity it was for the young choreographers to receive the financial and logistical support from the organizer and such warm applause from the packed house night after night. Their debut in this festival is a promise for more imaginative work in the years to come.