

“Staging Korea: Korean Theatre in Search of New Aesthetics”

The 19th Hahn Moo-Sook Colloquium in the Korean Humanities receives many accolades
November 4-5, 2011

George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

The 19th Hahn Moo-Sook Colloquium in the Korean Humanities with film screening was a huge success this weekend, with over 150 people from GW, DC, and across the nation in the audience. Theatre scholars and students traveled from Harvard, Yale, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Amherst, the University of Michigan to hear the dynamic presentations by invited director and scholars from Seoul, and various parts of the United States..

The renowned Korean director and playwright of over 60 original plays, **Oh Tae Suk** of Mokwha Repertory Company in Seoul visited GW and spoke at the colloquium on Saturday, November 5, to shed light on his methods of artistic creation and his vision for *The Tempest*. The filmed versions of the performances in Seoul and Edinburgh were screened in the Elliott School of International Affairs on Friday, November 4 and Saturday, November 5. Oh's *Tempest* won the prestigious Herald Angel Award at the Edinburgh International Festival this year (August 2011).

Oh's *the Tempest* opened with a bang with a storm scene that transported Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to 5th century Korea. Prospero's book of magic transformed into a multi-colored magical fan which he handed over to the audience at the end of the play. Caliban became a two-headed monster (skillfully played by two talented actors in one robe) who is sawed apart at the end. Oh adopts a remarkably light, fun approach to a play that has routinely been politicized in postcolonial discourses.

Video highlights are now available online with English subtitles:

The amazing storm scene with drum beats

<http://youtu.be/dWAqR03mnTw>

Ferdinand "reborn" as a pillow

http://youtu.be/LF_1yKQXW3M

Two-headed Caliban separated by Prospero into two creatures

http://youtu.be/_52fnxNvtmQ

The editor of *Shakespeare Quarterly* and Folger Shakespeare Library research division director, **Dr. David Schalwkyk**, gave brilliant opening remarks, touching on his own experiences of cross-cultural exchange. **Dr. Chan E. Park**, Associate Professor of Korean Language, Literature, and Performance Studies, at the Ohio State University, gave a talk titled "Korean *Drama* in Search of Korean *Theater*: Past and Present," which detailed the challenges facing Korean directors who stand at the cross-road between tradition and modernity. Focusing on the construction of Korean theatrical identity in clash or in harmony with the indigenous Korean traditional plays, she pointed out that in tandem with the globalization trend, Korean theater sees a convergence of traditional and modern approaches.

Following Professor Park's paper, **Dr. Suk-Young Kim**, Associate Professor of Theatre at the University of California at Santa Barbara, took the audience behind the scenes to unveil the secrets of North Korean theatre. Entitled "Uncovering the Forgotten Decade: Shin Go-song's *Ten Years* and the North Korean

Drama in the 1950s," her talk considered the play *Ten Years*, a 1958 play written by Sin Go-song, one of the most prominent figures of the early North Korean theater world, in the context of North Korean dramas of the 1950s, a period when artistic expression was less restricted. She argued effectively that various levels of border crossing in this play challenge the historiographic limitations of what we conventionally perceive as the North Korean dramatic tradition.

Master Oh Tae Suk followed on the heel of the two- presentations to share with the audience his artistic visions in a talk entitled "Leaps, Omissions, Surprises, Spontaneity: My Forty Years of Theatrical Experimentation," and translated graciously on site by Professor Ah-jeong Kim.

Dr. Ah-jeong Kim, Professor of Theatre History at California State University, Northridge, gave a paper entitled "Translating Performance Between East and West: Aesthetic Dilemmas and Problems of Shakespeare Adaptations using as an example Oh Tae Suk's *Romeo and Juliet* at the Barbican Centre in 2006. The dramaturge and translator for the Barbican Centre production in 2006, she explored how Shakespeare's work was re-created in the hands of a masterful director, Oh Tae Suk. Her talk illustrated how his theatre methodology, which is firmly rooted in Korean sources, enabled Korea to be a full participant in the global exchange at the dawn of the 21st Century.

After the lavish Korean lunch on the 7th floor of the Elliott School, **Dr. Esther Kim Lee**, Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre and the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, spoke about the vitality and depth of Korean-American drama and theatre. She recently edited *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2012), and her presentation drew from the new anthology. Entitled "'Remember to Forget': A Study of the Family in Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the U.S," her illustrated talk analyzed how the reoccurring themes and issues about family derive from such dispersed sense of existence and how the existence is also dynamic and constantly changing, by focusing on *Cleveland Raining* by Sung Rno, *Satellites* by Diana Son, *American Hwangap* by Lloyd Suh, and *99 Histories* by Julia Cho.

Echoing Master Oh's lively presentation on how he directed Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Professor Ah-jeong Kim's paper on Shakespeare in Korean cultural contexts, **Dr. Alexander C. Y. Huang**, Associate Professor of English at GW, offered an overview of Shakespeare in the global context and his appreciation of Master Oh's version of *The Tempest* (which he had the good fortune to see live on stage during this year's Edinburgh International Festival). He noted that Shakespeare's global career is far from a simple story of Western colonial expansion and Latin American, African, or Asian postcolonial reorientation. As Oh's *Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* amply demonstrated, global is not a linear process of transmission from Shakespearean texts to foreign-language performative texts. The plays are often filtered by many languages and performance traditions. The Korean *Tempest* extrapolates something extraordinary from both the Elizabethan genre of romance and the Korean tradition of hybrid theatrical genres (such as ch'angjuk and the masked dance drama kamyong'guk).

Dr. Richard Nichols (Emeritus Professor of Theater at Penn State University) closed exhilarating film screenings and a day of illuminating presentations on Korean theatre with insightful concluding remarks. Professor Nichols recently edited the monumental *Modern Korean Drama: An Anthology*, published by Columbia University Press. He began with personal stories of how he was attracted to Korean theatre and began studying it, and moved on to analyze what is unique of this performance tradition and its continued vitality in the world. His moving account of his own journey through Korean theatre will no doubt inspire many to follow in his footsteps to discover the beauty of Korean culture.

GW students who attended the event were impressed by the deep baritone drums and turbulent music. They wrote: "The stage bursts forth with color and white robed dancers elegantly gesticulating with

beautiful white pieces of cloth." The audience, they said, was treated to "a jarring visual portrait of the stormy opening scene." They were fond of the Caliban as two-headed monster (or Siamese twin) "consisting of a normal-sized man and his 'little brother,' a figure of diminutive stature. By giving Caliban two heads, Oh Tae-suk gives added depth to the character that can now converse with itself and have two separate personalities. In Shakespeare's original play Caliban maintains several child-like features and has been molded by Prospero's teachings as a child. Oh maintains the child-like aspects of Caliban within the smaller Siamese twin, often referred to as "Little Brother." An Elliott School student, Kristin Marsh Song, said: "... It only heightened my eagerness to continue my studies and immerse myself again in the culture and language." Chemistry Professor Akbar Montaser, one of the many GW faculty who attended the colloquium, expressed his satisfaction with the experience: "Wow! What a grand depiction of Korean Humanities. It was flawless, inimitable." Another GW faculty teaching Asian Art, Susanne Francoeur, wrote: "Just to let you know how much we enjoyed last weekend's colloquium. Thank you so much for including us in this memorable event. The topic was particularly interesting for me as it also relates to aspects of visual arts that I deal with in my field. We'll have to get together soon and talk about this topic more.... and the delicious Korean lunch topped it all off."

Many participants from outside GW have written with the same excitement and appreciation. Catarina Kim, a GW alum engaged in international affairs, wrote: "I felt that this year's colloquium was truly one of the best of the bests, and I was so impressed by the quality of the talks and presentations. The topic itself pushed me to reflect on the importance of the arts... I realized that music and theater are an integral part of how I get inspired, and how I cope with life. The explanation of *kut poro kaja* 'ut poro watch the show/shaman ritual' as a means of using the parts of our brain that we do not use in the mundane rituals of our daily lives was intriguing. Also, Master Oh's notion that the theater experience is a communal one, and one that is only complete by the active participation of the audience was enlightening! Finally, the sincerity and passion that all of the presenters demonstrated toward their studies and craft was beautiful and humbling." A Ph.D. candidate in Theatre History at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Sandra Lee, who came to DC just to attend the colloquium said: "...this trip did mark a turning point in my life." Shira Milikowsky, Artistic Director Fellow at Harvard's American Repertory Theatre, who also made a special trip for the colloquium interjected: "My interest in Korean theater is a big part of my work, and it's a major project for me trying to figure out how to integrate it all together. It was an utter joy to spend all day today thinking about these different topics that the speakers touched upon. Thank you for coordinating it so wonderfully." Harvey Kipper of the Wharton Club of DC sent an encouraging comment: "My only regret is that I missed sixteen of the nineteen colloquia."

Speakers were also very happy with the colloquium, which they described with such kind words as "beautiful memories to cherish for a long, long time," "highly successful," "one of the highlights of my career," "making a significant impact in Korean studies," "the golden memory," etc.

Two Korean language newspapers, *the Korea Daily* and *the Korea Times*, featured the colloquium.

What has made the HMS Colloquium series so popular was partly explained by Master Oh's vision of creativity. It is the audience's active involvement, encouragement, and support that have made these events so much more meaningful and fun for all.

MORE VIDEOS

David Schalkwyk's opening remarks:
<http://youtu.be/0ZbA8F7Az8o>

Master Oh's talk translated by Ah-jeong part 1:

<http://youtu.be/3OhOkXsl4ws>

Master Oh's talk translated by Ah-jeong part 2:

<http://youtu.be/giSpbUBuQ2Y>

Master Oh's improvisational performance of pansori (traditional Korean opera) at dinner:

<http://youtu.be/ZtVweeOfEDl>

Ah-jeong Kim's talk on Oh Tae-suk's Romeo and Juliet and The Tempest, part 1:

<http://youtu.be/0K42DemjLAW>

Ah-jeong's talk on Oh Tae-suk's Romeo and Juliet and The Tempest, part 2:

<http://youtu.be/Os7u1wAySJY>

Ah-jeong's talk on Oh Tae-suk's Romeo and Juliet and The Tempest, part 3:

<http://youtu.be/vyNwf1fcSO8>

Alex Huang's talk on Oh's The Tempest:

<http://youtu.be/ejrFjHqZltM>