

NTQ Reports and Announcements

doi: 10.1017/s0266464x07210085

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New Theatricality and Old in Seoul

Ian Herbert reports on the fiftieth anniversary congress of the International Association of Theatre Critics, held in Seoul during the Seoul Performing Arts Festival, 7–29 September 2006.

IT PROBABLY doesn't matter much to you that the International Association of Theatre Critics was fifty years old last year. It matters more to me, since it gave me a very enjoyable week in Seoul celebrating it. The Korean Theatre Critics' Association organized a superb congress for a hundred critics from thirty countries (IATC now has members in twice as many countries as that), featuring hard work, serious debate, and a choice selection of theatre to chew over, the last thanks partly to the Seoul Performing Arts Festival.

At the centre of the week was a colloquium on 'New Theatricality and Criticism'. I don't much like the word 'theatricality' – it seems symptomatic of the tendency in academic circles to find a new word for something rather than attempt to describe it – but what most of us were talking about was the kind of performance which stubbornly refuses to follow Aristotle's absurd rules and dispense with plot, maybe, or text, or even character. I've heard some more interesting attempts to define it lately, such as 'metaphysical theatre', or (my favourite) 'scenic poetry', but the term on most people's lips was Hans-Thies Lehmann's 'postdramatic theatre'. How is the critic to respond to this often puzzling, sometimes brilliantly touching way of making theatre?

We had three sessions in which the question was tackled by critics from the Americas, Europe, and Asia. You can find most of the papers on the IATC website www.aict-iatc.org if you're interested. What was very noticeable was that the Asian critics weren't very concerned about post-dramatic theatre, since their own traditions already had plenty of room for non-textual, non-Aristotelian drama. We had some striking examples of this during our week in Seoul, to which I shall return. For the moment, let me remark that, because of this variation, 'new theatricality' can have very different meanings in Asia. For the critic from mainland China, it meant

interesting new theatre, if anything moving away from the 'post-dramatic' Beijing Opera to more western styles; for the slightly out-of-touch professor from India, it meant street theatre of protest as witnessed in the eighties. For the critic from Singapore, it meant the hybrid theatre of Ok Ken Seng, a prophet with little honour, it would appear, in his own country.

A common characteristic of much Asian theatre, noted by the Korean keynote speaker, Bang-Ock Kim, is its use of energy – *gyee* in Korean, *chi* in Chinese. That energy comes not only from the performer but from the audience in return. An immediate example came in the congress's opening ceremony, when the effect of one of the country's leading groups of ritual drummers was to galvanize the hall. More mutual energy was released in the congress's closing event, a full-scale shamanic ritual (or *gut*) carried out in the open-air setting of an island dangerously close to the border with North Korea by Ms Kim Kumhwa, a seventy-six-year-old 'national treasure'. After much chanting, dancing, and distribution of food and drink (we didn't have time to tuck in to the sacrificial pig), the shaman's dancing on a couple of very sharp knives was followed by a manic all-in dance session, in which normally reticent critics donned robes and masks to release a considerable amount of *gyee*.

In between these two moments came a number of performances reflecting the more modern face of Korean theatre. Young-Woong Lim has been staging *Waiting for Godot* since 1969 and has been able to build a theatre on the proceeds. The production we saw was his twenty-second attempt, and to western eyes it might appear that he still hasn't got it right. What has probably happened is that he has encouraged his actors to put a more and more Korean slant on the performance, with the result that the piece is now overloaded with skilled slapstick but underweighted with Beckett's own, grimmer world view. That Vladimir and Estragon could spend the first five minutes of the performance mugging at the audience without exchanging a single glance suggests that they have gone too far in this direction.

Seoung-Noh Kim offered a remarkable solo performance in *A Ghost in the Wall* (officially and rather unfortunately translated as *Fairy in the Closet*), an adaptation of a story first heard in the Spanish Civil War but now firmly Korean in its account of a young girl's close but curious relationship with her father, whom her mother kept in hiding throughout her growing-up because he had allied himself with the communists of the North. Ms Seoung effortlessly populated the stage with several dozen characters, as her

own narrative voice aged from four to fifty. It was at first jarring to find her interrupting her tale with some rather kitschy pop songs, but her delivery soon overcame any stylistic doubts. The bare staging, relying on the performance, is typical of the work of director Sohn Jin-Chaek.

On a completely different scale was Lee Youn-Taek's *Three Beautiful Soulmates*, performed by his Street Theatre Troupe in the fine modern amphitheatre of the Namsan Drama Centre. The piece uses the full resources of traditional Korean theatre, music, drumming, and acrobatic dance (it starts with a traditional mask-drama). Yet with energetic doubling from its cast of two dozen, it achieves an epic Western, almost Boubilil and Schonberg effect with the broad sweep of its narrative, which explores a key moment in Korean history through the different paths taken by a trio of monks. Highlights of a most ambitious production were the performance of actress Kim So-Hee and the lighting of Cho In-Gon. It's no surprise that this production carried off most of last year's theatre awards. Lee Youn-Taek is perhaps best known for his 1989 play *Ogu: a Ritual of Death*, which continues to play to full houses in Seoul.

Young director-playwright Park Keun-Hyung, another regular award winner, has had success with a more domestic play, *Kyung-Suk's Father*, a tragic-comic study of a common Korean problem, the absentee paterfamilias. By setting the story in and around the Korean War, Park gives the play a not completely earned political resonance, but much of the audience's pleasure comes from its comic elements, with some particularly fine supporting performances. The moment when the Holy Ghost arrives to sort out the muddle of Kyung-Suk's family, which has by now acquired two fathers and two wives, suggests a certain desperation on the part of the author, but the slapstick-realist style of the production, something I am beginning to recognize as particularly Korean, just about covered it.

In the Seoul Performing Arts Festival, apart from *Three Beautiful Soulmates*, Korean productions included versions of *Mother Courage* and *4.48 Psychosis*. On the international side there was Russia's Formalny Theatre (of *School for Fools* fame) with *Between Dog and Wolf*, another piece of scenic poetry. I caught Tel Aviv's Cameri Theatre with a bold devised piece, *Planter*, which translates roughly as *Tangle*. Its mixed cast of Jewish and Arab actors, directed by Yael Ronen, found rich dramatic material in the irreconcilable problems facing their country. Our Iranian delegation seemed to take special pleasure in the show.

And that is part of the richness of a meeting like this, where many views of theatre and the world can come together, not always in harmony but usually with respect as a guiding principle. We worked hard, too, setting up the mechanism

for a world exchange of theatre journals, and forming the IATC's first Asian members' board. A feisty group of new critics, graduates of our seminar programme, came up with some bright ideas on how the Association might develop in its next fifty years, and at the other end of the scale Eric Bentley, who at the age of ninety had travelled from New York to receive our first Thalia Prize, given for the impact on critics of his writings, was still full of provocation and pizzazz.

doi: 10.1017/S0266464X07220081

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A Farewell to Peter Hepple

Peter Hepple, who died on 12 October 2006, had been an Advisory Editor of *New Theatre Quarterly* from the first issue of the relaunched journal back in 1985, and worked with us in the late 1970s during the old *Theatre Quarterly*'s successful campaign to recreate a British Centre of the International Theatre Institute, of which he remained a council member. Here, in a tribute first published in *The Independent* on 14 October 2006, Ian Herbert remembers the man in the mac who was welcomed everywhere.

IN OVER half a century of reviewing and reporting on the entertainment industry, and twenty years as Editor of *The Stage*, Peter Hepple accumulated an unequalled knowledge of cabaret, variety, bands, theatre, and dance. He knew a fair amount about football, too.

Born in Wood Green, north London, in 1927, Peter Hepple was brought up from the age of nine by his maternal grandmother, while his father, working shifts at Cable and Wireless, introduced him to music hall with regular visits to the Wood Green Empire. He went to the City of London School, and was evacuated with it during the Second World War to Marlborough. Post-war National Service with the Royal Engineers took him to Orkney, Egypt, and Turkey; it was in Ankara, he said, that he developed a taste for night clubs.

He trained as a surveyor, but left to take a job in publishing with *Burke's Peerage*, where he met his wife-to-be, Josie. Later, he became editor of publications for the Institute of Petroleum, where he also helped organize the Institute's conferences. Already he was finding his true vocation in