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Ham Ik (Hamlet) by Eun-seong Kim (review)

Dukhee Cho

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(Review)

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It is not a surprise that the movement coinheres so well with the stage setting as both were done by choreographer/scenographer Tsukahara Yuya. With a stage crowded with objects including a large ladder, a tent, a rope light, stretcher, and a mini refrigerator, Tsukahara presents possibilities for the actors to invent and create a multiplicity of locations. The back wall of the theatre and the floor both served as projection surfaces; the story was enhanced through this use of multimedia with Facebook posts and other images projected throughout. In addition, the cast used a live camera which allowed for projections of close-ups such as the writing on protest signs or the actors' reactions to specific moments. These projections were fascinating and added to the theatrical experience. The only negative was that the projections on the floor were difficult to see from the audience perspective. In addition, the difficulty of trying to see the floor projection at times distracted from the action onstage.

Prathana was a powerful piece of theatre; while the play was a tad repetitive at times (the play was four hours long), it was a stunning exploration of the role of the artist in times of political chaos. Okada's work as a director was deft and accomplished; the performances by the Thai actors were truly extraordinary. Okada and Uthis Haemamool are to be commended for creating this exquisite piece of theatre, performing it in multiple countries, and allowing their audience to delve into the complicated world of art, politics, and sexuality in a time of chaos.

DAVID JORTNER
Baylor University

HAM IK (Hamlet). Adapted by Eun-seong Kim. Directed by Kwang-bo Kim. Se Jong M Theatre, Seoul, South Korea, 12–28 April 2019.

I am obsessed with either seeing a Shakespearean play or doing any Shakespeare-related activity in April, especially during the week of the bard's birthday celebration. When I lived in London, I counted the days until the opening of the Globe season and enjoyed exhibits along the South Bank. Then I moved to Stratford-upon-Avon and witnessed how British people and international visitors alike celebrated the bard's birthday in his hometown with parades, performances, and fireworks. After my return to Korea upon finishing my PhD, seeing Korean Shakespeare productions became my own ceremony. In 2018, I was lucky to see *Romeo, the ssit-gim* (cleansing), performed by Parandal (Blue

Moon), which attempted to appease Romeo's supposedly wandering soul by means of Korea's traditional shamanic ritual, *gut*. This year, I was able to see *Ham Ik* (Hamlet).

Hamlet is among the most popular plays in Korea and is often adapted for the Koreans' appetite. In particular, most of the current Korean productions of *Hamlet* have attempted to create a so-called "Korean Shakespeare" by incorporating elements of Korean traditions into the play. After the national and international successes of some localized Korean productions, such as Yang Jung-ung's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Oh Tae-suk's *Romeo and Juliet*, a number of theatre companies have indiscriminately incorporated Korean traditional elements into Shakespeare without any grammar or principle. This phenomenon led me to seek answers to the question: "What is Korean Shakespeare?" No one has been able to provide an authoritative answer to this question. However, I would say that an authentic Korean Shakespeare should not refer simply to the productions where actors wear traditional attire and perform traditional dance and music whilst telling the story of a prince of Denmark and young lovers living in Italy. What I believe crucial is not the incorporation of traditional elements but, rather, the naturalization of Shakespeare's stories and characters into those acceptably Korean (which can be well accepted or consumed by the contemporary Koreans).

Happily, this production of *Hamlet* deviates from the burden of tradition. The adapter attempts to give the masterpiece a contemporary Korean setting, thus making the play completely modern. In contemporary Korea, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's Danish prince, becomes *Ham Ik*, a woman (Ham is her last name and Ik her first name), who is a Korean scion of a *chaebol* (a large family-owned business conglomerate, such as Samsung, LG, or Hyundai, from *chae*, "money," and *bol*, "faction or clique"). *Ham Ik* studied in England, majored in drama at Royal Holloway, University of London, and is now a professor at a university founded by her father. Eun-seong Kim's switch of the protagonist's family background, from a royal family to a *chaebol*, is a clever move because a *chaebol* in South Korea is regarded as a modern version of a royal family. Even more intriguing is *Ham Ik* being a woman. According to the program, Kim sought a drama in which a weak and fragile being is forced to fight against the strong in order to achieve a difficult task, and she believes that a woman is weaker than a man in all societies (I would say that this is merely her own conception of the gender). In her imagination, therefore, *Hamlet*'s story of facing difficulties and overcoming them would be more dramatic if *Hamlet* were presented as a woman.

Rather than faithfully retelling Shakespeare's original story, this production focuses entirely on *Ham Ik*'s agony, which becomes the

central drama of the production. Her delicate psychology is caused by her mother's suicide, arising from the terrible shock of seeing her father's adulterous relationship with her present stepmother, who is similar in age to Ham Ik. Choi Na-ra conveyed Ham Ik's subtle emotion very well and drew empathy from members of the audience. She wore only black costumes throughout the play. Her voice was very low and heavy and her face was impassive; thus, almost every character appearing on stage criticized her attitude as arrogant. In addition to her acting, audience members observed Ham Ik's psychology through a mirror (transparent glass was actually used on stage) and her alter ego Ik. Ik is Ham Ik's alternative personality in a real sense (as a hallucination visible only to herself), yet presented as another character. Ik's bleached white hair not only emphasizes that she does not belong to this world (where everyone else has black hair) but also maximizes the mood of fantasy (or rather, Ham Ik's fantasy). On all such occasions when her father is captivated by her stepmother's charms and even her stepbrother disregards her, she resorts to her Ik identity. During the first half of the play, Ik's image or presence is only projected on the mirror, giving the appearance that Ham Ik looks into the mirror to narrate, to herself, the story of her desire to avenge her mother's death. However, in the second half, Ik eventually steps out of the mirror, consoles Ham Ik, and sometimes gives her advice as if the two were different characters (Figs. 1 and 2).



FIGURE 1. Ham Ik encountering Ik through the mirror. (Photo: Courtesy of the Seoul Metropolitan Theatre, part of Sejong Center for the Performing Arts)



FIGURE 2. Ik consoling Ham Ik. (Photo: Courtesy of the Seoul Metropolitan Theatre, part of Sejong Center for the Performing Arts)

“The thing is not ‘to be or not to be,’ but ‘to be alive or dead’.” When one of her students, the young man Yonu, raises the question of “to be or not to be,” Ham Ik’s world begins to falter. Ham Ik is becoming dead through lamenting her mother’s death and blaming her father’s marriage with her stepmother. This student’s straightforward or naïve approach to life provokes her to reflect on her own life and ask herself whether she is alive or dead. She is captivated by her student. She hopes that he will become a shelter, in a similar way as Ik has. However, she is poor at displaying her feelings, and her affection becomes an obsession. More importantly, Yonu does not share the same feelings. While her failure in love may not be the ground for her suicide at the end of the play, it certainly affects her emotional devastation.

At the very end of the play, Ham Ik takes off her shoes and walks offstage with bare feet (with her conscience Ik), which signifies her denial of this world. Her life is exanimate, and her shoes left on the stage symbolize all the burdens that she never wanted to carry but were born on her inherently by her tragic family affair (Fig. 3). The theatre was overwhelmed with Ham Ik’s agony and some audience members shed tears. I have seen a number of *Hamlet* productions; ranging from productions at the Globe and the RSC to some localized Korean versions that incorporated Korea’s traditions. However, I have never



FIGURE 3. Ham Ik abandoning this world. (Photo: Courtesy of the Seoul Metropolitan Theatre, part of Sejong Center for the Performing Arts)

been as emotionally affected as I was by this version. The production ran for two hours without an interval and the theatre was completely overwhelmed with Choi Na-ra, who played the part of Ham Ik.

DUKHEE CHO
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies