

Report on visit to PAMS (Performing Arts Market in Seoul) 2010

What is PAMS?

The Performing Arts Market in Seoul (PAMS) is an annual event organised by Korea Arts Management Service (KAMS) with support from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. Its aim is to strengthen awareness of the performing arts and to increase the presence of Korean performing arts and artists overseas.

PAMS has been in existence since 2005, attracts about 500 delegates from around the world, runs for a week every October and combines several elements. This year they were:-

Showcase performances. Featuring drama, dance, music and multi-disciplinary arts from selected companies and artists (aka PAMS Choice). These showcases present 3-4 works from each genre and each performance lasts about 30 – 40 minutes, enough to give you a pretty good feel for the performance.

Booth sessions. Basically a market place where companies, artists and arts organisations can set up a stall and delegates can go and chat to them about their work and touring plans and be given loads of promotional literature and dvds. A good chance to meet companies whose work was showcased as part of PAMS Choice – not just the current year but previous years too.

Speed dating designed “to promote intimate networking”. Hmmm. A four- on-one 30 minute exchange of information, no less, in which one programmer can get set upon by four participant organisations. Bookable in advance. But on this occasion not by me.

Theme sessions. Lecture/presentations designed to “take note of Korean and overseas performing arts policies and changing trends in the performing arts environment”. The theme this year was “Creative Cooperation: Conception to Circulation” and was made up of two parts. The first was particularly interesting as it looked at examples of how theatres and festivals who had historically been merely presenters were moving into becoming producers as well. The other part was a chance for participants to seek out partners for international collaborations.

Focus sessions. This years’ was Nordic Performing Arts and examined case studies of funding and support systems, distribution networks, cultural characteristics and policies in the Nordic region and also explored possibilities for cooperation.

Why did I go?

In recent years the Borough Theatre has presented three performances from Korea, and we have enjoyed a very positive audience response to these shows. We have made contact with these companies through Creu Cymru Go & See opportunities – especially the Edinburgh fringe visit – and found that there is a great desire from Korean companies to perform in Wales.

I went with aim of:

- furthering the relationship between the Borough Theatre and Modl Theatre, who invited me out there and paid for my accommodation, delegate fees (and fed me very well too) and transport. We are exploring the possibilities of a future collaborative project involving Korean and Welsh artists, as well as hoping to tour future productions from Modl.
- to also see as much work as possible (with the hope that I would find productions that could work well in Wales). So, as well as seeing the PAMS Choice showcases, Modl Theatre also took me to other performances in Seoul that were not actually part of PAMS.
- to assess the value of encouraging a delegation from Wales, through Creu Cymru, to visit PAMS next year

Is Korean Theatre any good?

Yes, some of it is very good indeed. And some of it isn't. So it's pretty much like theatre from anywhere else in that respect. However, the characteristics that I find appealing as a programmer are its very strong visual sense, the physical discipline of the performers, the insight it offers into a different culture, the powerful and uncompromising stories that the country has to tell, and the accessibility of the work to Western audiences.

The influence of American and western theatre and popular music forms is very strong and I personally find Korean theatre at its weakest when it forgets its own heritage and tries to imitate these both in style and content. Whilst retaining a strong visual style, huge doses of saccharin, sentimentality and schmaltzy music can ruin an otherwise technically accomplished performance.

The traditional ("old theatre") styles are probably not going to have a huge appeal to general theatre audiences in Wales, except in the way that NOH plays or Peking Opera might to niche audiences.

However where physical theatre styles familiar to Western audiences are combined with a story which is unmistakably Korean, or where a western story is adapted from a Korean perspective, then the experience can be memorable.

Some Highlights

For me, the outstanding performance on the visit was Mokhwa Repertory Theatre's **Romeo and Juliet**. This visited the UK in 2006 and is still available.

A very Korean take on the play, performed in a traditional style with dialogue spoken directly to the audience, dance, music and a good deal of humour. Performed in Korean but with English sub-titles it acknowledged the poetry in the language but focussed on plot. From a Korean perspective, the war between the Capulets and Montagues is the thing, and the climax of the play takes a breathtakingly apocalyptic liberty with the text. At 90 minutes it's a fast paced, helter skelter journey (no balcony scene), and well worth it. The company will be at the Edinburgh International Festival 2011 with their version of *The Tempest*.

I also saw a highly enjoyable small scale version of **Carmen**. In Korean, no subtitles, but performed Western-style. The physical style of the production made it easy to follow, and the performances were good. However, this was an example of a good quality piece of theatre where there was nothing in it to make it "Korean". It just happened to be performed by Koreans. Although it would probably hold itself up well in a festival context, it would be harder, as a theatre programmer, to understand why to programme it. As a piece of theatre it didn't do anything or say anything different from what you might expect from a UK company. I understand it will be at Edinburgh 2011 and can recommend it for a visit.

I was looking forward to Yohangza's **Peer Gynt**, and although the 10 minutes video intro looked stunning, the 30 minute excerpt they presented struck me as rather flat. However, this is a work that you need to be in with from the start and stick with till the bitter end, so it ain't fair to judge it from a quick toe-dip somewhere in the middle.

A Dwarf Who Loved Snow White succeeded in both amazing me and repelling me simultaneously. In so many ways this was beautifully presented and performed – you rarely see a company so together physically – and the production values were sky high. But ... this wallowing in saccharin and sentiment and the Disney-style values were too much to bear. There were times when I could quite easily have vomited. However ... there were so many things to admire too – the scene where Snow White is rescued from drowning was done brilliantly.

I enjoyed enormously the **Chungbae Traditional Performing Arts Troupe** who combined some fabulous costumes, some fairly athletic dance, some interesting traditional instrumentation with seriously heart pumping drumming.

The dance pieces failed to captivate me, although the showcases from previous PAMS appeared to be much more engaging.

a) PAMS Choice 2010 Showcase

Drama:

A Dwarf Who Loved Snow White Theatre Company Tuul

Peer Gynt

Yohangza Theatre Company

www.yohangza.com

Dance:

Darkness PoomBa

Kim Jae Duk Project

A Seventh Man

LG Arts Center

www.lgart.com

Pattern & Variable

Park Soon-ho Dance Project

Modern Feeling

EDx2 Dance Company

www.edx2.co.kr

Music:

Non-verbal performance One

Chungbae Traditional Performing Arts
Troupe

Dreams from the Ancestors

Miyeon & Park

www.miyeon-park.com

www.myspace.com/parkjechun

b) Performances outside PAMS

Drama:

Romeo & Juliet

Mokhwa Repertory Company

Carmen Sita

?

Dummy Bride

Yunheedan Company

Oneuli of Today

?

How does touring work?

There is usually a strong Korean presence at Edinburgh (fringe and international festivals). In 2011 there will be a dozen companies represented. We have been able to bring companies to Wales on the back of their visits to Edinburgh (pre and post) and the costs, whilst not insignificant, have been manageable.

To facilitate overseas touring of Korean music, theatre, dance and multi-disciplinary arts KAMS have developed Center Stage Korea. This scheme is linked into PAMS and means that any company which has been showcased at PAMS since 2005 is eligible for international touring support.

The main string attached is that the host organisation (eg Creu Cymru) would need to tour 2 or 3 Korean companies to at least 2 or 3 theatres. KAMS would then cover the costs of:

- International airfares of performing groups
- Marketing, PR support on Korean side
- Promotion support

- Visa support

The host organisation would need to cover:

- Accommodation and per diems
- Venue and technical support
- Visa cost
- Local transportation
- Marketing and PR support

If the company has been showcased then the fee is covered as well.

I certainly intend to go again in 2011. I hope that others may be interested as well...

Nick.