

WHEN EAST MEETS WEST

A Korean Visit

by Gareth Gibbs

International theatre tours are a long time in planning and then, before you know it, are over. Sometime last year at an International Theatre Exchange meeting in London, Peter Smith, Treasurer of ITE announced that a Korean Company from Chun Chon in South Korea were hoping to visit the UK and were looking for venues. As my company 'The Players' Theatre had visited Korea in 1999 and acted in the city of Chun Chon, I felt we should offer to play our part in any proposed visit to Britain. Obviously the Drama Association of Wales would be involved and as it turned out, so to would be the Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales, not to mention Coleg Glan Hafren, the Burleigh Academy, Newport and the Dolman Theatre, also in Newport. After this week long visit to South East Wales the Koreans would then move on to Brighton where they were to appear in the Brighton Fringe Festival.

Arranging any kind of tour from 6,000 miles away is a daunting task, as I know from personal experience, but when 'other' languages are involved sometimes things are not always what they seem. Imagine our consternation when an email requested that we purchase "a small fishing port" for use in their production! What could they mean? Clarification was sought and eventually we were able to decipher what it was - "a small goldfish bowl"!!

Accommodation is always a problem when a largish group go on tour and initially we were prepared to have four stay in Gelligaer with us, but we couldn't possibly take all seven! An American friend who has a house in nearby Bedlinog happened



Back Row L to R - Fflur Owen, Gareth Gibbs, Peter Smith, Nam soon Baek, Kyung Tai Kim, Kyeong yun Ko
Front Row L to R - Ji sun Lee, June Hwan Yoon, Do hee Kim

to be over from the USA and said "Why not put them in Bedlinog in our house?" So that's what we did. It worked out perfectly, we put extra beds in, plus a supply of food and drink and the Koreans were to be very happy there. I would pick them up every morning and drop them off last thing at night.

We, that is DAW Director Aled Rhys-Jones, Peter Smith from International Theatre Exchange, together with Mari and Windsor Major and myself met the Koreans at Cardiff Airport on the evening of Sunday the 4th May. Only one of the group spoke any English and allowing for their long flight they were in good spirits as I drove them away into the night and on to Bedlinog. They were delighted with their little Welsh cottage in the hills and I left them to settle in.

Monday was officially a free day so we took them to St Fagan's and the Museum of Welsh Life. It was a beautiful day and the Koreans were in high spirits as we wandered through the old buildings that cover the many acres of this National

treasure. My wife, Mavis had stayed behind to prepare a meal for the evening - she had a book of Korean recipes from our stay in Chun Chon and much praise was given for her efforts that night.

Workshops and performances begin:

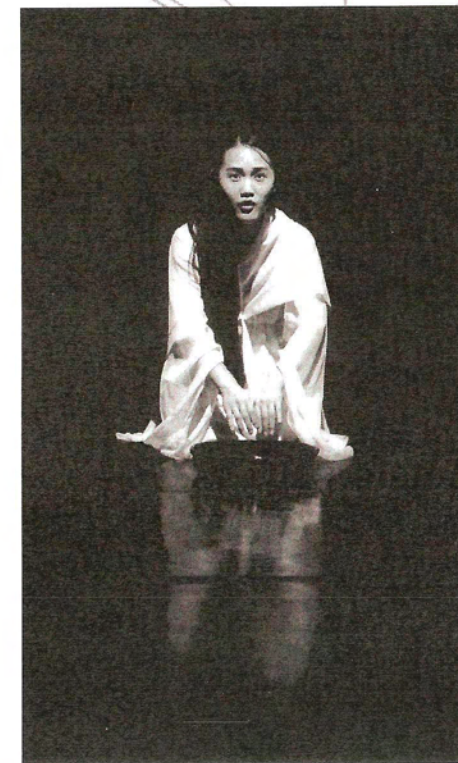
Tuesday the 6th May and their first big test. Communicating with Welsh school children studying drama at St Joseph's High School in Newport. At 10.15 am about 60 pupils assembled in the studio theatre and were to watch fascinated as Mr Kyung Tai Kim their leading actor went through his paces. It was explained through the interpreter and Director Eun kyung Joeung that in Mr Kim's opinion Western actors are too flamboyant, acting should be thought be more inward, more contained, more intense. The next hour and a half was spent demonstrating his technique. We were all spellbound.

St Joseph's provided lunch and the afternoon was spent sightseeing in Newport, including a trip on the famous Transporter Bridge. At 5 pm it was time to visit the Dolman Theatre for the next workshop with the keen Dolman Youth Theatre Players. They were a really appreciative audience and thoroughly enjoyed joining in with Mr Kim and other members of his company. In retrospect, of all the students that were played to that week, the youth of Newport scored the highest, their enthusiasm knew no bounds.

Wednesday the 7th on one of their most demanding days. A technical rehearsal at the Blackwood Little Theatre which went on all day! And in the afternoon, the actors left their technical crew to take a workshop at the Blackwood Miners Institute before students from the Ystrad Mynach College who were doing the Performing Arts course. The Chair of Caerphilly County

Borough Council, C C Viney and Mrs Viney dropped in to greet our visitors and then it was back to the Little Theatre to find problems aplenty! Nothing went right and just an hour before curtain the lighting board went down! An invited audience of 150 people was kept waiting until a replacement was brought in. Fortunately we had decided that this special audience would be given wine and nibbles on arrival so they didn't seem to mind the wait. And boy was it worth it....

The curtain rose just after 8 pm and for the next hour we were all totally engrossed as Mr Kim and his two fellow actresses Ji sun Lee and Nam soon Baek gave us a night to



Nam soon Baek in "The Dark"

remember. Mr Kim played an old man on his birthday. The chairs are set for visitors, visitors who never come. I could hardly breathe as I watched this most excellent actor portray the loneliness that can all too often accompany old age. The lighting - happily restored to full working order was superb, as was the choice of music. The spirits of optimism and pessimism were beautifully played too. The audience, never having seen anything like this before, gave the play the ultimate accolade by watching and listening in total silence, until the curtain finally fell and then the applause said it all.

The evening had been an unqualified success. Many thanks are due to everyone on the executive committee at Blackwood Little Theatre for all the enthusiasm and help they gave our Korean visitors that night, especially Peter Musto and Theatre Chairman Trevor Howlett. Afterwards we all adjourned to a Chinese Restaurant in Blackwood where The Players' Theatre were the hosts for what was left of the evening. It was a tired but happy company who were driven back to Bedlinog that evening.

Thursday the 8th May. An early start as we were due in the new Burleigh Academy in Newport for another workshop. This former Church has been beautifully and sympathetically converted by Sarah Lucas into an academy offering dance studio, main auditorium, studio theatre, meeting rooms etc., etc., and so well used by the surrounding community. Lunch was provided here too and both workshop and performance were much appreciated.

Friday the 9th May - the final workshop, performance and generous lunch in Wales took place at the Anthony Hopkins Studio Theatre of Coleg Glan Hafren, Cardiff in

collaboration with the BTech Performing Arts Course and provided a fitting finale to this enterprising group's visit to Wales. The studio is beautifully equipped lighting wise and three young guys from the BTech Course provided a Technical support dream-team overcoming language difficulties and setting and focusing a very complex piece of theatre with patience, skill, humour and against the clock. Full marks go to Meryl Hopwood and her students who also provided an enthusiastic audience for what proved to be another breathtakingly sensitive performance.

Our final "bash" was held near Nelson when 15 of us sat with our Korean friends for our final meal together. For our part we thanked them for coming, they in turn thanked us for having them. They said they had loved being in Wales and as the sun had shone all week, Wales in early May had looked superb.

I picked them up at 10.30 am on the Saturday when together with Peter Smith of ITE we set off for the long drive to Brighton and where Peter was to be in charge of that part of their trip. Peter had whispered to me as we left Bedlinog "I'll go to Brighton the scenic route". And so we did, but our Korean friends saw none of it for, before we got to the Severn Bridge, they were all fast asleep in the mini-bus. Worn out from giving us so much pleasure during their all too brief stay in Wales.

Thank you Art 3, from Chun Chon in South Korea. We enjoyed your visit immensely.

