"Is this an island or a boat?": The Tempest (dir. Tae-Suk Oh) at La MaMa Theater

by Matthew Zarnowiecki. Written on 2014-11-23. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: The Tempest (2014, La MaMa Theater Company, USA).

Late in Tae-Suk Oh's *The Tempest*, Antonio asks "Is this an island or a boat?" This production is the second of three in La MaMa's "Tempest: 3" series. Unwittingly, this line connects to the theme and tagline of La MaMa's series: "The Tide is Rising," an ominous reference to global warming, sea-level rising, and Hurricane Sandy. Neither the first production, directed by Karin Coonrod, nor this one, does much more than glancingly refer to the ostensible theme of the series. Oh's production, instead, is an unabashed, and highly successful adaptation. No longer an island we dutifully visit in the name of Shakespeare, this play is indeed a boat: it takes us to the places, times, and aesthetics which Oh has chosen. It is a *Tempest* of globalized contact, one that transports its audience.

The production has also already had a wide, global audience. The Mokwha Repertory Company, based in Seoul, produced the play for the 2011 Edinburgh International Arts festival, where it won the Herald Angel Award. It has been produced all over the world, and a version of it can be viewed online as well, on MIT's fabulous archive, *MIT Global Shakespeares*. Given a long list of ecstatic reviews for Oh's play from a variety of countries, its availability to a global audience, its emphasis on traditional Korean theater forms, and a plot structure melding Shakespeare's play with Korean chronicle history, this *Tempest* is entirely of its age. It fits right in with recent global Shakespeare festivals, films, and archives, like The Globe Theater's "Globe to Globe" festival of 2012, that emphasize adaptations in the vernacular and in the theatrical idiom of the adapter.

I join many others in praising this *Tempest*. It's a triumph of theater, a stream of delights, and a fully-realized artistic vision of what can be done to Shakespeare, and with Shakespeare. Given the successes it's already enjoyed, this review, freed from the duty of simply repeating accolades, can accent three areas that deserve attention.

First, Oh's integration of theatrical elements is masterful. This is entirely in line with Shakespeare's *Tempest*, which requires elements of pageantry, gross physical comedy, real and

DOI: 10.18357/scene00201418513

farcical illusions, music and ambient sound, and a wide variety of language, from ethereal and lyrical, to low-down punning, to magisterial oratory. Oh admirably answers this wide range of tasks: his direction; the costumes of Seungmu Lee; the elements of dance, masks, and music; and the combination of Shakespeare's text with Korean chronicle history all combine into a seamless, but multiply hybrid, work. The initial storm scene terrifies sonically: a menacing figure aloft bangs on two drums borne on the contorted backs of two figures who wear grimacing masks. But at the same time, it's gorgeous: actors signify the waves by throwing white fabric streamers into the air, leaping as though tossed by waves, and then snapping the fabric back down to the ground. Caliban (played by Seungyeol Lee and Minji Lim) is a hilarious, but thoroughly perplexing, two-headed monster. His second head sits delicately in the center of his figure. It's wise-cracking and boyish, with two tiny porcelain white hands, and it changes Caliban's vexations considerably. Ariel (Jeeyoung Jeong) is a human figure in alternating white or black robes, but with an oversized white mask fixed on the back of his head. Ariel often turns backward, and with a black or white background, the mask often floats magically on the stage. Ariel and other masked figures come out of Korean mask dance (*talchoom*) theater. However, Ariel is joined by a whole cast of animals, who constantly roam the stage with their goggle-eyed masks: chicks and deer, birds and monkeys and sheep and cows, and many other cute but unidentifiable animals, so that this island is no desert wasteland, but a rich and fertile dream world of both spirits and fauna.

Musically, this production most often gives us the haunting sound of a single melodic line, sung solo or in chorus, and often accompanied either by drums or by other percussion. The melodies are affecting; they are detached from any direct references to Shakespeare's lyrics, but they somehow seem like songs we've always known. The songs are, in fact, the lynchpin of this production. Two of them encapsulate its simultaneous faithfulness to, and departure from, Shakespeare's original. The banquet scene in Shakespeare's play involves the disappearance, through a "quaint device," of a richly-laid table of food, followed by Ariel's chastising of Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian. In Oh's performance, the banquet becomes a centerpiece of the play, in which all its strange elements meld together. Here, the "quaint device" is first a table of three oversized rubber pigs' heads. When one is pulled off, it reveals Ferdinand (the remarkably graceful Bonghyun Kim) himself. Ariel then declares that the prince is in hell, and Ferdinand is harried by a segmented white dragon, and in a chaotic and violently graceful dance, he is chased around the stage, thrown to the ground, and whirled about by the swift-moving, dancing figure. The others frantically try to strike the dragon as well, and Alonso collapses and convulses while the percussion reaches another climax. In short, the violence of the initial storm is mirrored here, but with much deeper pangs of emotional resonance: loss of the prince, horror at his suffering, and the guilt of both the survivor and the causer of misery.

The second set-piece of music and dance in this production is the wedding masque which Prospero puts on for Ferdinand and Miranda. This is a scene that presents most modern directors with a fair amount of difficulty, since Iris, Ceres, Juno, and a set each of reapers and nymphs, all called for in the Shakespearean text, are remote from our present-day experience. Most often this scene is largely abridged, or falls flat (as it did in Coonrod's production). Remarkably, Oh saves this scene, by reworking it into a praise-song for the bounties of earth's animal world. As Ferdinand and Miranda look on, a chorus sings a gently rhythmic song that lists a whole world's worth of animals: "praying mantis, dragon fly, snake, snipe, and wild goose, minnow, frog, giraffe and deer, sparrow great tit, stork and goose, jackal, raccoon, badger, duck and lotus seed … sparrow hawk, black crane, white crane, waterfowl and wren…" [quotes from *Global Shakespeares* subtitles]. The colors of the world burst forth as animals flock and cavort on stage, so that the celebration is one that captures, though in an altered version, Shakespeare's celebration of "Earth's increase, foison plenty, / Barns and garners never empty, / Vines with clust'ring bunches growing, / Plants with goodly burden bowing" (4.1.110-13). The animals, which had only been cute until now, achieve a beautiful fragility in this song. They, as much as Ferdinand and Miranda, are the hope of renewal, and they are as delicately vulnerable as the animals packed into Noah's ark. This moment is the closest we come to La MaMa's environmentally-conscious spirit for this series of plays. But none of the malevolence or anxiety of "the tide is rising" applies here, even when the lovely vision is dissolved by Caliban's interrupting revolt.

The delights of this *Tempest* are not all equally available to its audience. This is the second area of interest for this play, which it shares with other translations and adaptations that cross cultural and chronological barriers. Oh's production transports his audience to a different time and place, and given the concerns of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, an English-speaking audience familiar with the play can take on multiple roles in this theatrical transaction. In some ways, we become Caliban, in others Miranda, and in others the Italian visitors to the island.

With respect to the language of the play, an English speaker is somewhat like Caliban, with a crude but effective grasp of the language. Subtitles only go so far, and an audience who would recognize Ariel's "Full Fathom Five," Miranda's "O brave new world!" and Prospero's "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" are bound to feel the loss of Shakespeare's language without the accompanying gain of the Korean. In addition to assuming the position of Caliban, a subtitled foreign-language adaptation also puts an English-speaking audience into a strange and delightful position: We are twenty-first century groundlings, who can enjoy only the broad strokes of the performance's text. We get its grossest physical communications, but not some of

its jokes, nor the texture of its language, nor any but the most abstracted or circumstantial of its verbal beauty.

Not as the bitter Caliban but instead as the wonder-struck Miranda, we apprehend the Mokwha Repertory Company's mission to serve as a living repository of Korean theatrical practice. That is, we can watch and enjoy its "*sanmudo* (martial arts dance), *pansori* (singing), and *talchoom* (mask dance)," as quoted in program notes, with no knowledge of the vast history of theatrical idioms, fashions, venues, and intersections with political and social movements – but with a delight that is immediate, intuitive, and full of wonder and delight. The figure Ferdinand in Oh's production best exemplifies this delight. Bonghyun Kim's Ferdinand achieves a gorgeous, full-body expressionism both through violent dancing in which he is buffeted about the stage, but he also through cavorting with joy at other times. Not only this, but we can also wonder, Miranda-like, at the way in which Oh charges this character with the potential energy of multiple signification. Shakespeare's relatively loose and uninteresting treatment of this character (he mourns for his lost father, falls in love with Miranda at first sight, and then is forced to carry some logs by Prospero) we can recognize as unequal to this Ferdinand's mythic status as the life-force itself, and the embodiment of succession and hope, conveyed through his harried death-dance with the dragon, and his other dances. Just as immediate and beautifully arresting are Ariel's and Prospero's hovering, abstract masks. Even if they are steeped in theatrical-historic meaning, we nevertheless immediately grasp their magical presiding over the stage. They float with a disembodied power that is linked to the bodies that carry them, yet free from physicality as well. This effect is available to all: the human face rendered strange, yet beautiful, is precisely what Miranda experiences throughout the play (particularly at the end), and Oh's use of masks allows us to share in this experience. Even in song, we have access to the basic, immediate melodic beauty of songs that may have been in the ears of Korean people for centuries, as ancient and common as the mist that wafts from the stage into the audience in the first moments of the play. This is not the same as having the tune and the words already in our heads. But the experience may be one of greater beauty precisely because these tunes are so rich and strange to foreign ears.

Beyond our experience as Caliban and as Miranda, Oh's production puts us into the places of Ferdinand, Alonso, and the rest of the Italian courtiers, whose refinements and knowledge of their own history and culture has no force on this strange island, with its own history and its own logic. Oh also has grandly placed Shakespeare's *Tempest* into the context of fifth-century Korean chronicle history, drawing on the *Samguk Sagi* and its accounts of legendary Korean kings, princes, factions, and civil wars. We hear briefly of the "Silla king" and the "Garak King," and it is clear that Alonso, Antonio, Prospero, and Ferdinand fit into these historical roles. The

program notes inform us that this production is "inspired by a true story from the Korean *Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms*." Just as the Italian courtiers must forget their histories, therefore, this production imposes a new historical reality on the play. We spend a great deal more time with Oh's versions of Antonio, Alonso, and Sebastian. Alonso (Jingak Chung) in particular is a much more plastic, engaging character: he is at times a doddering old man, nursing the hope that his son is still alive, while also just wanting to sleep and avoid harm. At other times, he undergoes convulsions of grief and regret. He is forced, in much more immediate and affecting ways, to confront the excesses and wrongdoing of his rule, and their consequences. Oh's Ferdinand undergoes a much more expansive experience as well.

We are left to puzzle out these relationships, and do our best to graft them onto those of Shakespeare's characters. Oh's production, in other words, withholds the one position which audiences of many productions of *The Tempest* are best suited to occupy: Prospero's. Usually the audience shares Prospero's perspective because he dominates the action. We know what he knows, and he knows all. But in this production, we cannot share Prospero's panoptic view over the whole landscape of the island, his full mastery of theatrical magic, and his full knowledge of the past. The position of Prospero, as master of all these idioms, would only be available to some idealized audience, one with an encyclopedic knowledge of both Korean history and Shakespearean drama. True to the sensibilities of *The Tempest*, in which Prospero presides over a stage-drama of his own making, perhaps the only possible person who would fit this description is Oh himself, the director. This is not, in the end, a deficiency of the production. Instead, it has a new and interesting answer to the question of why the figure of Prospero is unsympathetic, why when he promises to drown his book and think only of his death, no one is particularly moved. The answer is not simply that Prospero is both directorial and dictatorial, but also that all the charms, beauty, and pleasure that the isle and the play offer us are sweet because they are strange, because they are unknown to us, because they are new. "'Tis new to thee," Prospero derisively retorts to Miranda, after her exclamation "O brave new world, / That has such people in't!" So much the better that this production withholds this undesirable, perfect knowledge, and instead gives us a share in the imperfect ignorance of Caliban, Miranda, and the Italians.

Oh's directorial position brings us to the third and final area of attention: his engagement with Shakespeare's enduring concern with the powers and deficiencies of theatricality. This is a rich and multi-layered adaptation, so Oh turns these concerns to his own purposes and fits them within his own theatrical idioms. He does so partly by significantly amplifying Shakespeare's treatment of forgiveness, which is always so dissatisfying in a *Tempest* that adheres to Shakespeare's text. Shakespeare's is a forgiveness "perforce," as Prospero himself says:

Prospero relinquishes his magical and theatrical power, but he does so while re-seizing political power. His reconciliation with Antonio, as many have noted, gives Antonio no answer to the insult "most wicked sir, whom to call brother / Would even infect my mouth" (5.1.130-1). But Oh creates an extended scene in which the brothers beg each other's forgiveness, each repeatedly offering his neck to the other's sword. Prospero, seemingly in all earnestness, confesses that he was wrong to give up his kingdom and to indulge his obsession with magic. And Antonio, upon being confronted by Prospero, asks, "Is this an island or a boat? We have been taken back twelve years." Oh's representation of this moment fully realizes the potential for human forgiveness to be truly transformative and transporting. This moment of theatrical forgiveness allows Prospero more truly to confess his wrongdoing, and allows both brothers the impossible: to return to the island of a prior time, and on that bank and shoal, to renew their former lives and their brotherhood.

Shakespeare's interest in the real effects of imagined or theatrical devices is present from beginning to end, of course: Miranda wonders at the storm, which Prospero assures her has harmed not a hair, and at the end of the play, Prospero's charms are all dissolved partly by the intrusion of real-world concerns (the plot of Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo), and partly by his own determination to give up the magic of illusions and effects. Oh's production imbricates these interests with the particular effects of Korean mask theater. Prospero's and Miranda's faces are themselves mask-like, hers a white, smiling, moon-white mask of delight, and his a contorted mask of anger and passion. But also, his and Ariel's masks, at the backs of their heads, remind us of just how flimsy the theater is: a thin cardboard mask painted with a few dots is sufficient to achieve the powerful illusions of danger, loss, fear, wonder, and rapturous beauty. Prospero also carries a fan, which in his moments of magical compulsion he flicks officiously, and when he does so, characters tumble across the stage. The magical effects are accompanied by sounds, most often by the ethereal sounds of a noise tube (which produces a high, airy tone when swung). But equally importantly, Prospero's magic is effected onstage by the precisely-timed leaps, tumbles, quaking knees, and grimacing faces of the characters whom he controls. The connection between these grimaces and the masks of Prospero and Ariel is not hard to make. And in the simplest form of this connection, even simpler than Shakespeare's references to Prospero breaking his staff and drowning his book, both Ariel and Prospero throw off their magic simply by taking off their masks. When Prospero does so, he astounds the courtiers by seeming to come back from the dead. And when Ariel does so, he just re-joins a larger set of figures, melting back into the island's other spirits and animals.

One more aspect of this magic-theater connection can't be ignored, and that is the wonderful moment Oh creates at the end of the play, when, in Shakespeare's version, Prospero recites the

epilogue and begs to be released by the audience's good hands (an unsubtle cue for applause). On the night I saw the play, this release was long in coming: there were many ovations, and when the applause showed no sign of stopping, all members of the cast clasped their hands together, and performed a deep, kneeling prostration. As the applause and prostrations continued, it became more and more apparent just how much they were in need of release. But also, in a very nice moment of meta-theatricality, Prospero offered his magic fan to a member of the audience, saying that the magic was now ours. Once the ovations were finally over, the audience member respectfully set the fan back on the stage. But Prospero noticed this, and very emphatically gave her back the fan, insisting that she take it. There are no returns, no real going back, no way to return the magic. We get on the boat, we push off from the banks and shoals of time, and we set sail.