

Hamlet Redux: Two Korean Productions that Re-stage Shakespeare's Play between Tradition and Today

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Abstract

This essay reviews two Korean appropriations of *Hamlet* that adapt Shakespeare's play to contemporary times, employing different traditional performing arts.

Hamlet Cantabile, by Performance Group Tuida, adapted and directed by Bae Yosup, compositions and musical director: Han Jeong Lim, stage and puppet design: Kim Kyung Hee, actors: Hwang Hyeran, Choi Jaeyoung, Choi Soojin, Gong Jun, Premiere: June 22, 2005. (Seen at Culture Space "Yesul Teotbat," Hwacheon County in Gangwon Province, September 19, 2015, 8-10 pm.)

Pansori Hamlet Project, by Gugak Musical Collective Taroo, adapted and directed by Park Sun-hee, musical director: Jung Jongim, stage design: Kim Dae-han, actors: Song Bora, Jo Ella, Lee Won-kyoung, Choi Jee-sook, Showcases: December 13-16,

2012, August 15, 2013, Premiere: February 20, 2014. (Seen at Seoul Arts Center, Jayu Theater, October 23, 2015, 8-10 pm.)

Maybe with the exception of German romanticists, all over the world creative theater-makers are struggling hard to make Shakespeare's most notorious anti-hero their own. That is no different in Korea, from quotations in progressive magazines of the early twentieth century to doublet-and-hose productions on proscenium stages in the 1950s and 60s and "intercultural" adaptations by directors interested in the resurrection of traditional Korean arts since the 70s. Lee Hyon-u (2011) focuses on "shamanistic" *Hamlet*-productions that incorporate rituals or scenes of possession, a trend that "emerged in an era of democratization, globalization, and extended freedom of the 1990s." He considers them a means "to exorcise the Korean problem of 'to be or not to be' that results from a century of colonialism, war, dictatorship, and economic crisis" (105-106).

Both Ensemble Tuida's *Hamlet Cantabile* and the *Pansori Hamlet Project* by Gugak Musical Collective Taroo feature incantations and share an obsession with death. However, in re-staging *Hamlet* for contemporary audiences in Korea, they focus more on methodological issues than national trauma. How can we talk and relate to a 400-year-old play from Europe today? That is the question they throw into the ring. While both productions allude to shamanist practices (*Hamlet Cantabile* in fact features as the "highlight of shamanistic *Hamlets*" among Lee Hyon-u's examples [2011, 119]), they also draw on other cultural traditions to show and tell the Prince's story. *Hamlet Cantabile* incorporates methods from a variety of folk arts, including puppetry, and commedia dell'arte. In Taroo's *Pansori Hamlet Project*, as the title indicates, the plot is presented in the style of *pansori*, a Korean singing-storytelling tradition. But these two productions, both of which I saw in 2015, also continue to create their own staging traditions through a continuing process of reflection, refinement, and update.

Right after the premiere in 2005, *Hamlet Cantabile* was invited to a Shakespeare-Festival at the National Theater of Korea. In the following years, the production underwent some modifications in cast, scope, and musical accompaniment, while touring extensively in Korea and also abroad, for a guest performance at the 2012 Salzburg Festival. Now a mainstay of Tuida's repertory, *Hamlet Cantabile* celebrated its tenth anniversary in June 2015 and was shown again in September on an open-air stage at the ensemble's basecamp in rural Gangwon Province, where the artists pursue "a life in community through theatre" (Pamphlet 2015). I saw the piece there, as part of a local

theater festival that attracted tourists, citizens of the surrounding villages, and soldiers from a nearby military base.

The *Pansori Hamlet Project* took off in 2012 with a series of workshops and showcase performances. In line with their motto "reinvigorating Korean traditional music," the members of Taroo, all trained in *pansori*, are seeking a middle-ground between tradition and contemporaneity, a philosophy that also motivated this production. In a first attempt, they tackled the problem of creating a *Hamlet* for today by literally time-warping the Danish Prince onto a basement stage, where they questioned his decisions and re-staged key scenes. In a second experiment they confronted the Western classic with radically personal perspectives drawn from their own life in Seoul. This meandering path between historical weight and reconsiderations of the play in light of the everyday lead to the final piece, first presented in 2014 and, slightly modified, again one year later at the Seoul Arts Center, where I saw it for the second time.

Tuida's *Hamlet Cantabile* opens with a procession. To a slightly swinging, but otherwise classical melody, four white-faced characters, barefooted, dressed in ragged clothes, and wearing tight hats like bathing caps but with little twigs attached and the ears sticking out, drag along a handcart filled with a variety of small objects, soon followed by a bigger hay wagon with even more "stuff." They set up their camp and, after finding the diary of dead prince Hamlet in one of their boxes, begin a ritual for his restless soul. What starts as a simple re-enactment of the well-known plot, soon turns into a wild spectacle with elaborate masks and puppets, solo and ensemble songs and dances. Often one actor, immersed in the prince's memories, becomes "possessed" and adopts the role of one of the characters as if in trance, only withheld by long ribbons that the others span across the stage. Jokes and chit-chat in-between these intense scenes structure the performance that loosely follows Shakespeare's play.

In contrast, the *Pansori Hamlet Project* begins in pitch dark. As the light slowly dims up, I become aware of some figures huddled together in a large wooden construction that resembles a climbing scaffold. The four women — three regular *pansori*-singers of Taroo and one guest performer trained in stage acting, a member of the theater company Gorae, as the Pamphlet informs us — all wear identical black costumes with cape, ruff, and pageboy-style wig. Obviously, these four "Hamlets" are waiting for the ghost of their father and promptly get scared to death by each other. Then, in broad light, they gather and explain the situation to each other and the audience. They are in Denmark, North of Germany, South of Scandinavia, "like Korea a peninsula." Their increasingly heated debate about the play's premises is cut short, however. Gong beats from afar, played by a single musician who handles various percussion instruments and a computer, initiate the ghost's next visit. With spoken dialogue, free discussion, and numerous stand-alone songs,

some in the characteristic hoarse *pansori*-voice, others more like numbers in a musical, the plot unfolds at a fast pace.

These two "meta-*Hamlets*" are strikingly similar in the visual uniformity of the performers. Their costumes render age and gender ambiguous and without any further means of identification their individual identities at first seem rather insignificant. But in their idiosyncratic acting the four performers of Tuida — only referred to as *gwangdae* ("clowns") in the pamphlet — soon turn out quite distinct types, simple but likeable, comparable to the stock characters in *commedia dell'arte*: One acts overwhelmingly considerate while another gleams of mischief, and a third repeatedly calls the others to order. It is a troupe of underdogs whose individuality does not count for much but who, each one in his or her own way, adds to the collectively staged ritual. The four "Hamlets" of Taroo, despite their recognizably different voices, appear much more interchangeable. Typical for *pansori* narratives, each of them is flexible in representing a variety of different aspects of Hamlet and his surroundings, talking both about and as him.

Both pieces share another distinct characteristic of *pansori* and other traditional arts, namely a loose, episodic structure that alternates between intense singing, dancing, and acting on the one hand, more reflective and discursive scenes of casual dialogue on the other. How the performers make use of space and objects, though, could not be more different. *Hamlet Cantabile* takes place on an empty stage, where the actors set up small ad-hoc structures as needed, such as an altar-like table or a puppet-stage erected on the hay wagon for the mousetrap-play. The clowns handle their beautiful props, some of them still dating from the premiere, with great care and affection, suggesting an intimacy that is usually reserved for heirlooms passed from one generation to the next. Finding peace for Hamlet's restless soul becomes a task that every generation needs to tackle again and again, with vintage objects from the attic serving as memorabilia. Different both in form and function, the elaborately crafted stage design of Taroo's *Pansori Hamlet Project* resembles a miniature (or oversize?) timber castle with holes, passages, trapdoors, and fences. The performers use the whole construction as their playground, moving here and there, climbing up and down, their heads popping up in unexpected places. As *pansori* storytellers, the performers are not dependent on props (although they use some on occasion) and even abandon the iconic fan. The books and musical instruments that fill the niches of their wooden fortress rarely serve scenic purposes but rather represent a dusty and estranged past. The Hamlet brought to life by the performers' show and tell is trapped in a labyrinth, which might just be in his head, but somehow has materialized on stage. It is only in the end that the four Hamlets leave this haunted house behind, take off their masquerade (ironically all revealing long white gowns, just another uniform), and walk away, through the middle row towards the back door of the theater.

Hamlet Cantabile ends on a slightly different note, at least in the version I saw. Unable to break the curse of repetition, but far from giving up, the clowns gather their goods, pack up their carts, and leave for the road. With some metaphysical solace in their baggage, as death is just another beginning, their tour will continue and the next gig might be just around the corner or somewhere on the other side of the globe. Wherever, whenever, these actors will bring the puppets of Hamlet and his extended royal family back to life with their enchanting songs, if only for a short while. I wonder, though, if the premise of Tuida's *Hamlet Cantabile* — eternal return — has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, given the continuing success of the play. This might explain why the performance I saw suffered a bit from a routine that seems to have crept into the quirky hustle and bustle between the incantations. However, the ecstatic play, the beautiful masks, and the music, at times mellow and dripping, then shrill and piercing, makes up for this little letdown.

Taroo's *Pansori Hamlet Project*, which hopefully keeps on its fruitful process of development, does not suffer from an overdose of ritualistic pathos, thanks to scenes of mutual self-ascertainment and interpretation that contrast with the stylized voices and gestures of *pansori*. However, the way the performers speak in these scenes seems undecided between rhetorical stage acting and hectic casual talk. A more conversational attitude, as explored in the preparatory showcases, might help to find fitting voices for a *Hamlet* of our times. Nevertheless, by integrating their debate into the play, sometimes a bit pedagogical, often outright hilarious, they render the absent (or overly present) prince a bit more into our contemporary.

Both productions succeed in offering new, accessible perspectives on an old yet inexhaustible play by juggling with traditional culture and more recent worldviews. Tuida's *Hamlet Cantabile* tends towards the poetic and esoteric side, Taroo's *Pansori Hamlet Project* more towards a critical contemporary stance. Rather than mining Shakespeare's text for hidden meanings, Tuida and Taroo present different ways of describing, debating, and re-imagining *Hamlet*, both the play and the character — loud and passionate, then again detached, ironic, even annoyed, raw or subtle, critical or compassionate, but always with a keen interest in details and open questions.

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On behalf of Ensemble Taroo, I permit the use of the [included] promotion images of "Pansori *Hamlet Project*" in the context of a performance review by Jan Creutzenberg, to be published in the journal *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* (<http://www.borrowers.uga.edu>).

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