

**Yun-Cheol KIM**  
**President IATC**  
**SOUTH KOREA**

**INTRODUCING TWO INTERNATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVALS IN ASIA:  
SPAF & BESETO**

**I. A Theatre Festival: As It Should Be**

I have been visiting quite a few theatre festivals around the world for the past 15 years, most frequently in Europe and Asia. My thirst for great theatre is rarely quenched in the domestic theatrical scene, and whenever possible, I accept invitations to international festivals with eagerness—even a kind of hunger. Domestically, I try to see as many shows as I can, to remain faithful to my profession as a critic, whose job is to “read” the relevance of the theatre to the times. It is quite usual for me to go to theatre without knowing whether the show I am going to see will be interesting, entertaining, worth my time—or not. I know I have to be very selective in order to keep my love and hopes for the theatre healthy, but unfortunately, that is not really how it works. To find a jewel, we need to examine innumerable stones in the rough; that is one of the basic requirements for us, that die-hard species called “the theatre critic.” International festivals, on the other hand, offer productions selected from among earlier selections, and their artistic quality is usually higher than those productions we see every day in our own cities.

Good selection of productions is by far the most important prerequisite for a successful festival in terms of audience development, but my long experience of theatrical tourism tells me that there are some other factors, too, that make international theatre festivals irresistible. As was observed so well by our hosts, Dr. Dragan Klaic and Dr. Ivan Medenica, these include efficient marketing operations, relevant programming concepts, smart communication strategies, as well as interesting educational programs. But there are not many festivals that meet all these requirements, even in Europe where theatre festivals seem to have become a part of everyday life, with their long history and high regularity. Some festivals are good in their selection of productions, but poor in marketing and communication strategies. Some are based on highly-enticing curatorial concepts, but the

productions selected are not aligned with them. Some have very strong educational programs but their management of the programs is inefficient. Some introduce quality productions, but with only minimal educational interest. Some are too commercially-oriented to interest serious theatregoers, while others are too artistically-oriented to attract general spectators. Some festivals are actually ambitious in all these respects, but their ambitions translate more often into quantity than quality. Festivals are human, too, just like theatre itself. Their ways cannot be all good, or, they cannot be good in all ways.

One particular international theatre festival in Europe has fascinated me in every respect mentioned above. That is the biannual Dialog festival in Wroclaw. While more and more international theatre festivals in Europe are apparently making it their aim at best to invite good productions, or at worst to invite productions both available and affordable, without showing any particular enthusiasm for other programs, the Dialog festival has been consistently faithful to all criteria. I have attended it twice so far, for its third and fourth editions in 2005 and 2007; I found that its curatorial concepts and operational policies are almost identical with my long-nourished idea of what an international theatre festival should be. First of all, it has more possibility of selecting good productions thanks to its being a biannual festival. It chooses from a much wider range of sources over a much longer period. In addition to these, its director, Krystyna Meissner, chooses most of the productions not from other festivals but from individual performances—which also explains why her selection is so different from the others. Secondly, the festival is organized around a provocative theme that is relevant both socially and artistically. These have included themes such as “Theatre as a reflection of Europe’s anxieties,” and “Art is nothing but exaggeration and distortion.” Thirdly, it involves as many people from diverse fields as possible and makes the festival a prominent social event: critics, philosophers, artists, journalists and students are all invited to join the festival in various ways. Fourthly, its educational programs are strong, featuring the new critics’ seminar, late night discussions with the artists, and a concluding panel discussion.

Although I would like to talk further about European festivals, national and international, I will leave them at the mercy of my colleagues from Europe, because Dragan and Ivan want me to focus on Asian festivals. I just hope my beloved European festivals will be treated kindly and nicely by my not-so-nice, not-so-kind colleagues from Europe. Now, I will focus on the two most prominent Asian festivals: the Seoul Performing Arts Festival and the BeSeTo Theatre Festival.

## II. The Seoul Performing Arts Festival: As It Is

SPAF is a young festival, established in only 2001. Not quite so young, though, if we consider the fact that it is a combination of two festivals that had been operated separately for nearly thirty years prior: the Seoul Dance Festival and the Seoul Theatre Festival. For the first three years, SPAF operated without an Artistic Director, and its chief aim was to attract as many productions and as large an audience as possible. All the programming and marketing policies were focused on that one specific aim. It was a huge festival, but hard to characterize. The average number of participating productions was seventy, and the average length of the festival was about a month.

It was in 2004 that SPAF began to employ an Artistic Director, and since then, the festival has changed in its curatorial concept and marketing. Its first Artistic Director, playwright-director Kwang-Lim Kim, served for two years, overseeing the fourth and fifth festivals for SPAF, in 2004 and 2005. During his term, the Artistic Director took the position that theatre festivals are first and foremost for theatre professionals, not for the general public. To realize this interesting notion, he decided the theme of the festival would be “Contemporaneity,” and invited 21 neo-avant-garde, experimental, post-dramatic shows from 10 countries. He also strengthened the educational programs, not for the general public, but for theatre students, creating criticism seminars, or criticism contests, intercultural production workshops, and finally, discussions with the artists right after each performance, moderated by the critics. This last public debate has since remained a must program, and the festival has organized the debate in such a sympathetic tone that the artists are given enough time to respond to the audience’s response, to talk about the conception of the work, and are rarely confronted with unsympathetic, critical challenges or judgments. In his first year, he attracted 25,258 spectators to the festival, which lasted for 15 days. His selection of productions, however, was just too ahead of his domestic peers, and bewildered and bored spectators so much that the effects were still evident at the time of his next festival offering: in 2005, he invited 22 plays from 12 countries and showed them for 24 days. But even with more productions for a much longer period, he was able to attract only 19,669 spectators—many fewer than the previous year.

In 2006, Kwang-Lim Kim was succeeded by stage director Chul-Lee Kim, who is still serving as Artistic Director now. This new Kim has slightly, but tangibly, shifted the direction of SPAF from its over-focus on an audience of professionals, to center instead on consideration of the public. He has made it his rule to see the shows himself before he selects, and he travels around the world,

cruising between national and international theatre festivals throughout the year. The theme of each year's festival is different, of course—but his basic notion is that a theatre festival is more for the general public than for professionals, that a theatre festival that discourages ordinary people from coming to theatre is not a festival at all. In this spirit, he tries to find the best shows for the festival. For him, the “best” means both “good” and “comprehensible.” Consequently, the selections have become more diverse and popular: they are now modern and classical, experimental and conventional, rich and poor (of course in Grotowski's terms), and this has affected the demographics of the spectators. Although the total size of the audience has not increased drastically, more and more people have come to the festival from the general public, and fewer and fewer from the theatre community. The current Artistic Director Kim has also invited more shows from more countries than his predecessor did. In 2006, his first year, he invited 26 shows from 12 countries and attracted 16,184 people. In 2007, he invited 37 productions from 15 countries and enjoyed an audience of 20,460 and in 2008, 38 productions from 13 countries attracted 22,840 audience members. The parallel programs remain on the whole the same as before, but this new Artistic Director's more public-friendly selection of productions has generated much more attention from the media, whose coverage of the festival has soared each year about 120% from the previous year for the past three years. The coverage is usually done with accessible language in the cycle of previews, interviews (mostly with directors), and reviews, and it helps a lot the ordinary people understand and enjoy somewhat unfamiliar theatrical forms with different production aesthetics. From this we can draw one crucial truth about theatre festivals: the selection of productions is what has the most impact on media coverage. This is especially true in a country like Korea, where theatre reviews are written for most of the popular media by non-professional journalists. In other words, selection of good and accessible productions is itself an effective communication strategy. An empty space can make a good theatre, but an empty auditorium cannot. Ultimately, theatre festivals should be able to satisfy not only theatre professionals but also general spectators, while entertaining, challenging, and moving or stirring all parties. There should be some balance of considerations between the two concerned bodies of the theatre: practitioners and consumers.

Despite its remarkable growth in popularity with the general public, SPAF is still far from being a prominent social event. The population of Seoul is approximately eleven million, out of which only 23,000 or so citizens attended this once-a-year festival, and nearly 80% of those 23,000 are college students. Only 63.01% and 70.28% of the available seats were filled for the festivals of 2007 and 2008 respectively. Some foreign colleagues say that the future of Korean theatre is very bright

because of the dominantly young demographics of the auditorium, while we Korean skeptics keep saying that it is in crisis because of the lack of diversity, or because of the homogeneity, in the generational structure of the audiences. In order to help make theatre matter, I have suggested publicly that SPAF creates a specific theme for each year's festival that is more than just "Good Selection," but something which reflects the philosophical and aesthetic *Zeitgeist*. I have also suggested that they have more aggressive communication strategies—ones that involve academics, critics, artists, journalists and students in intellectual activities such as symposia, seminars, and workshops towards discovering the relevance of the theatre to the world. I have to admit, however, that I am getting more and more skeptical of the intellectuality of our contemporaries, national or international.

SPAF is by far the greatest international theatre festival in Asia in terms of the number of participating countries and performances. It has indeed achieved a lot, introducing different approaches to theatre by having artists from different cultures treat common, global subjects such as corruption, greed, sex, violence, absurdity, etc., as well as widening the general public's horizons in terms of the production aesthetics of contemporary theatre. But still, it has a long way to go to establish itself as a prominent international festival that matters much to the theatre community on the one hand, and to society on the other hand.

### **III. The BeSeTo Festival: As It Should Not Be**

The BeSeTo Theatre Festival was created in 1994 by three Asian visionaries: Korean playwright Eui-Kyung Kim, Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi, and Chinese critic Xu Xiao-Zhong. They agreed without much difficulty to launch the festival for contemporary Asian theatre, because they shared a common fight against the Western impression that Asian theatre is traditional theatre. And this is still the ruling idea of the festival today. It is *kind of* an annual festival—that is, it alternates festival cities every year, in the order of Korea-Japan-China. So for the organizers BeSeTo is an annual festival, but for the local spectators it is triennial.

The first BeSeTo Theatre Festival was held in Seoul. It was quite successful in terms of raising consciousness regarding Asian theatre aesthetics, thanks to the remarkable artistic achievements of the four participating shows. Can you believe it: *four*? Yes, it is true, only four shows participated in this inaugural festival: two from Korea, which was the host country, and one from each of the other

two visiting countries. We can hardly call it an international festival. But the names of the participating artists and theatre companies were very big; they included Korea's most outstanding directors, Oh Tae-Suk and Sohn Jin-Chaek; internationally-known Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi; and one of China's most outstanding companies, the People's Art Theatre of Beijing.

In 2003, the BeSeTo Festival celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and the ceremony was held in Seoul, which was hosting the festival that year. One of the keynote speeches was given by Mr. Suk-Kee Yoh, the father of modern Korean theatre criticism, who looked back at the ten years of BeSeTo and found the first festival to be by far the best. His remarks were published later that year in a book entitled, *The 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of BeSeTo Theatre Festival*. He wrote:

Among those shows I have seen so far in the frame of the BeSeTo festivals, if I exclude Korean productions, two plays were particularly remarkable: *The Best Restaurant Under the Heavens* from China, and *King Lear* from Japan. Both plays were performed in Seoul for BeSeTo's very first festival. To be very honest with you, I found myself enjoying the festival less and less each year because of the loose organization of the festival and the deteriorating artistic quality of the participating shows. (87)

Indeed, I cannot disagree with him at all! The "loose organization" was inevitable from the very beginning. As I said above, BeSeTo is a triennial festival for each of the three countries and they host only once in three years. To make matters more difficult, no country has a permanent secretariat for the festival. It is always organized on a contingency basis. We cannot expect any secretariat of this kind to be efficient in preparing for and managing the festival.

The BeSeTo Festival is still taking place annually, and the fact that it is still alive is its greatest achievement. Its artistic achievement is not remarkable and its contribution to audience development is also minimal. Alas, for many of us it has become a forgotten festival. Here are the three "whys" I have come to:

Firstly, the number of participating productions is too limited. On average, it has been fewer than six. The festival has often consisted of four shows: two from the host country, and one from each of the other two. With this small size, you can hardly attract attention even from the local theatre community, let alone from the general media. The founding fathers of the BeSeTo Festival had the grand vision of promoting peace in Asia and showing contemporary Asian theatre to the world. That dream sounds only grandiloquent when we take a look at the minimal number of participating performances. We can hardly call it a festival.

Secondly, there is no theme other than contemporaneity that is strong enough to interest theatre people and the general public alike. Of course, this is a fairly common problem around the world, but still it is a great weakness. If they want to experiment to create or uncover some Asian production aesthetics, why not have a theme or a curatorial concept, such as “Re-Creation and Absorption of Traditions,” or “Asian Re-Creation of Western Texts,” or “Asiatic Traditions Found in its Contemporary Theatre”? A relevant theme with proper implementation can make a festival interesting, create audience anticipation, and be a good communication strategy.

Thirdly, there is no educational program of significance. A roundtable discussion is usually organized by the host country, but it is hardly educational even for the theatre practitioners. The roundtable is usually about how to improve the festival, and the same talks and arguments emerge every year. There are no workshops in which local theatre students can explore the aesthetics and methodologies of the other two Asian countries. Such workshops could be a means for students to expand their theatrical languages and define their Asian identities, or just to discover their common ground. If the festival can involve scholars, critics, practitioners, journalists and students in educational programs such as these, just as they do in the Dialog Festival, BeSeTo can make quite a big difference, moving from its current minimal status, to contributing to audience development for the present and future.

My talk today has focused mostly on two Asian theatre festivals. If I am invited to talk about other international festivals, including European ones, I may have to say essentially the same things, because the differences will be only a matter of degree. Thank you.

**Yun-Cheol Kim** Ph.D.(South Korea) is a professor at the School of Drama, Korean National University of Arts. He is the editor of The Korean Theatre Journal, a quarterly. Author of 9 books, including 2 collections of theatre reviews, he has been the president of the IATC since 2008.

email: [yunckim911@yahoo.com](mailto:yunckim911@yahoo.com)