

Han Tae-Sook

Lady Macbeth's Weapon

*It was, as I had intended,
the portrayal of a human being
who possesses
a very sharp-edged weapon.*

*While performing
Lady Macbeth, Joo-hee Suh
used to complain
about the utter exhaustion
and pain she suffered as
the role literally consumed
all her energy.*

As I embarked on my career, I intentionally chose to do some experimental staging while directing Shakespearean plays in English with Korean college students majoring in English. My primary interest was to explore and find fresh creative interpretations. My attempts in those days were, no doubt, rather limited to conventional interpretations suggested in the Shakespearean texts. Nevertheless, I was attracted to the possibilities of interpreting anew well-known plays from different and enlightening perspectives. In 1998, a group of young artists who had been yearning for new aesthetic expressions in theatre came to me and suggested creating a collaborative work.

At that time, I contemplated selecting a piece with a simple yet strong plot that balanced fine art, music and acting as if they were equal sides of a triangle. Eventually the idea of creating a version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* conceived exclusively from Lady Macbeth's viewpoint occurred to me. In particular, I was interested in Lady Macbeth's mental state and the psychological effects this had. I was also attracted to the basic concept of structuring the play in a way that would reveal how Lady Macbeth incited her husband to commit a crime only to be haunted by her own guilty conscience, which ultimately led to her demise.

I thought that it would be possible to represent human greed and the subsequent guilt in simple yet highly effective theatrical terms. Although I suspected the dramatic material for the performance text itself would be rather predictable to the point of being clichéd, it still seemed to have the advantage of easily connecting with the other arts as the text liberally allows for interpretation particularly in terms of fantasy, incantation and dreams.

Through the production of *Lady Macbeth*, I hoped the extremes of innocence and evil hidden in the human psyche could be somehow conveyed successfully to the audience. Through this performance, I wanted to explore whether and to what extent we all share, deep in our minds, the qualities

of the characters in *Macbeth* including the witches, the doctor, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth herself.

When my *Lady Macbeth* was first performed in 1998, neither the people involved in theatre nor the audience paid much attention to it. The general reaction was "Oh, just another one of those typical Shakespearean productions". But when it was re-staged at the 2000 Seoul Theatre Festival as an official entry, *Lady Macbeth* was very warmly received by many. In fact the response could not have been more different. Suddenly, people began to notice that they had finally discovered a strong female character on stage - as if for the first time. And in fact, a number of well-known actresses in Korean theatre expressed their desire to play the role of Lady Macbeth, and wanted to work with me on future productions, assuming such productions were to be conceived in a similar vein.

Many actresses thought that I, being a female director, could portray female characters rather well, and so were quite willing to listen to my direction faithfully. When I was directing *Lady Macbeth*, I asked the actress in the title role, Joo-hee Suh (who is recognised as one of the best actresses in my country), to express both the most feminine and the most masculine feelings on stage. She deeply immersed herself in the character. She passionately transformed herself into Lady Macbeth in the course of the performance. It was, as I had intended, the portrayal of a human being who possesses a very sharp-edged weapon. While performing *Lady Macbeth*, Joo-hee Suh used to complain about the utter exhaustion and pain she suffered as the role literally consumed all her energy. By her own account, the performance demanded nearly three times more energy than other roles she played. As a result, she had to endure extreme mental and physical fatigue. I regu-

larly checked on her energy level to make sure it was sufficient to play the character of Lady Macbeth appropriately. In retrospect, such demands must have been harsh on her. Every night after the curtain went down, Joo-hee Suh would have to lie down to recover her energy.

As I commented in the production note for the publicity leaflet, I do not believe *Lady Macbeth* has reached completion yet. This is not to imply that the piece was done in a state of artistic incompleteness, but that I continue to vary its creative motivation with new approaches every time it is re-staged. For instance, for the touring performances at the Kontakt Festival in Poland, in May 2002, I attempted to incorporate a specific ritual from traditional Korean funeral proceedings called *yum* with the death of Lady Macbeth. And for the immediately ensuing performances back in Korea, we constructed, according to the stage design plan for this version, a huge three storey iron wall upstage from which the court servants dangled precariously to lure Lady Macbeth into the illusionary world in the air.

Lady Macbeth tells me that both her life and death stem inherently from herself, and it is this point that I wanted to emphasise.

On the whole, I purposely avoided using realistic techniques in interpreting the subject matter and stylistic concerns of *Lady Macbeth*. Although the basic story is taken from traditional European material and not Korean, this performance has established its own dynamic style and features giving it an independent life of its own. And I believe all artists, regardless of their nationality, who are so inclined, can enjoy the freedom to do the same.

Because this unique stylistic concept originated from a well-known classical text, people are able to pay more attention to how the original plot has been restructured. In a way, the audience can relax and further their

appreciation of the play. It is, indeed, a theatrical piece into which fine art, music, and dance have been meaningfully infused. The main difference between this version and many other Shakespearean productions can be summarised thus: I borrowed a well-known story from an existing text, but only some of the dramatic motifs, and the rest I created on my own.

My dream is to pursue a world tour with this production, performing in different countries while continuing to polish the work with new ideas and fresh perceptions. If given the opportunity, I would also like to introduce to the world stage some challenging new versions of classical Korean works in the same vein as I have approached *Lady Macbeth*. The human aspect of the character defies language and national borders, and can be understood in different countries because of the communicative power of the actors and musicians.

Following the production of *Lady Macbeth*, many female critics have repeatedly asked the same questions: whether this work was conceived as a feminist piece, whether I considered myself to be a feminist, whether my vision as a woman director in presenting *Lady Macbeth* is different, and so forth. Perhaps as a female director I have been more successful at dramatically extending and bringing to the forefront *Lady Macbeth's* particular female psyche. However, I do not normally like to categorise theatre in terms of being feminist or not. After all, theatre is, in its essence, very much about the relationships between and among all human beings. For me personally, there is no overriding need to stress the rights of women in my work.

Once I even entertained the idea of casting a male actor in the role of *Lady*

Macbeth. One of my most recent plays dealt with the issue of male gender involving historical episodes in association with the ancient Chinese King Jun. As a woman in Korea, currently I am leading a rather typical family life. Nonetheless, I think I could write about and work on pieces that involve homosexuality and the love, wounds and grief that are an inherent part of that condition. Because I am a female artist, such pieces might be interpreted differently and thus could be staged quite uniquely in comparison to what a male director might do. In short, I do not agree with the notion that a female artist cannot have sufficient understanding of the male gender to create a male character and *visa versa*.

Above all, I think artistic creation should, in any case, be natural. In other words, we should let things flow just as the rivers flow - instead of forcing new ideas through certain movements or deliberately imposing some direction. In this way, the illumination of the position of women in this world, or what women mean to humanity, can be more readily achieved.

Translated from Korean by Tae Kyung Kang

HAN TAE-SOOK (Korea) founded her own theatre company, Moollee, in 1988, directing about twenty plays. Before then she worked as a freelance director. Besides directing her own company, Han Tae-Sook makes collaborative projects, frequently at the Seoul Arts Center. Her career has been dedicated to the staging and writing of original Korean drama, including *Cello*, *Na Un Kyu*, and *Baejanghwa Baehongryun*.