



Profile

Jeong Jae-wal:

Born in 1964, Jeong Jae-wal graduated from the English Literature Dept. of Korea University and then went on to complete the graduate course in Theater and Film at the same university. In 1990 he joined the *Hankook Ilbo* newspaper and in 1994 moved to the *JoongAng Ilbo* newspaper, thus accruing 14 years of work experience as a journalist in the area of culture. Presently, he works at *JoongAng Ilbo* about twice a week writing his regular "Theater is Beautiful" column. In 2003 he was appointed General Manager of the LG Arts Center, where he heads the administrative and planning departments. Jeong is also a member of South Korea's theater critics association and writes extensively as a critic in the fields of theater and cultural policy and arts management.

Data



LG Arts Center:

Opened in March of 2003 as an establishment of the LG Yonam Foundation, a non-profit organization of South Korea's LG Group. The theater has 1,104 seats on three levels. It is serving as the venue for outstanding overseas productions in a wide range of genre in theater, dance and music.

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Presenter Interview

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プレゼンターインタビュー

LG Arts Center is an emerging theater in Seoul operated but a corporate philanthropic foundation and targeting a middle- to wealthy-class audience

中間富裕層をターゲットにした新劇場が台頭
企業メセナで運営されるソウルのLGアートセンター

The LG Arts Center opened in the year 2000 amidst talk of corporations entering the world of performing arts, and now this theater enters its fifth year. Here is an interview with former newspaper journalist and present General Manager of the theater, Mr. Jeong Jae-wal, who talks about these five years of activities and directions for the future, as well as the present state of performing arts in South Korea.

(Interviewed by Noriko Kimura)

I used to meet you as Jeong Jae-wal the theater reporter for the cultural department of the *JoongAng Ilbo* newspaper, so it now feels a little strange to receive your new calling card and talk to you as the manager of the LG Arts Center. How did you come to make the switch from newspaper journalist to theater administrator?

I took my present position at the LG Arts Center two years ago. Before that I was involved in the performing arts as a newspaper journalist, and it was at a time when I was beginning to see that my role in that capacity had just about reached an end when I got the offer to come to LG Arts Center. I had been thinking that I eventually wanted to be directly involved in the performing arts, rather than indirectly as an onlooker. And it happened that that opportunity occurred a little quicker than I, or the people around me had expected, but when it did I thought the timing was right. After finishing graduate school I entered the *Hankook Ilbo* newspaper and later moved to the *JoongAng Ilbo* newspaper and in all I was a journalist for 14 years. But, throughout that time what I guess you could call my real dream was to be involved in the performing arts scene in a way that would enable me to begin to build something that you might call my own type of Jeong Jae-wal performing arts in an inclusive way. From that standpoint, the LG Arts Center offer was a very attractive one for me. Still, I continue to go to *JoongAng Ilbo* about twice a week to write my column "Theater is Beautiful." And I can write freely now about cultural policy and the structure of the creative theater environment without being shackled by the bonds of the journalistic world as a newspaper writer! (laughs)

I would like to ask you about the LG Arts Center where you work now. This theater is under the management of one of South Korea's largest corporate groups, the LG Group. What was the LG Group's purpose in establishing the theater? It is not unusual for corporations to turn their attention to culture when their business is successful, it is happening often around the world, and in the case of the LG Group they chose theater.

The use of marketing strategies in areas other than a company's immediate field of business, like sports marketing and cultural marketing is on the increase in Korea like other places. In the case of the LG Arts Center it was on a different dimension from that kind of marketing strategy. The purpose was to return some of the company earnings to society by creating cultural infrastructure that promotes creativity in the arts and international exchange. The LG Group had already established its LG Yonam Foundation back in 1969 and began programs aimed at

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Schedule of performances for 2005, the theater's fifth anniversary

April:

ROSAS, Belgium "Bitches Brew/Tacoma Narrows"

Pat Metheny Group 2005 World Tour "The Way Up"

May:

O.K.Theater, Lithuania "Romeo & Juliet"
Matthew Bourne's "Swan lake"

June:

Goran Bregovic Wedding and Funeral Band

Steve Reich "Drumming"

Pina Bausch Tanztheater Wuppertal 2005 New Production

LG Group:

One of South Korea's largest corporate groups, having developed under the parent company Lucky Chemical Industrial Co. the forerunner of LG Chem founded in 1947. Today the group consists of 44 companies and an international network of some 300 overseas subsidiaries in Japan and other countries.

<http://www.lg.co.kr/english/index.jsp>

contributing to society. From the same kind of philosophy, the Hyundai Group has been put its efforts into the art field by operating a museum and the like, while the Kumho Group has gone into the field of music. But I think none of the other corporations had attempted to enter the theater field because, in reality, it is very difficult for a corporation to run a theater. A theater facility needs constant maintenance, also the staff needed to run a theater is rather large, and it is not an easy thing to tear down either! (laughs) And, once you have built a theater it is not easy to decide what you are going to do there either. In the case of the LG Arts Center, at the time it was built there were still few opportunities to view outstanding foreign theater in South Korea, so that was made one of the main purposes. This not only offered the Korean audiences the opportunity to see foreign plays but I think it also served as a big stimulus for Korean artists and companies. Also, thanks in part to its location in the Kangnam area of Seoul, it served to broaden the performing arts audience from its former base of almost solely college students and young people.

What kind of foundation is the LG Yonam Foundation?

Within the LG Group there is the LG Public Service Foundation, which includes the LG Yonam Foundation, LG Welfare Foundation, LG Evergreen Foundation, LG Yonam Education Foundation, and the LG Sangnam Press Foundation. In other words, the foundation functions are divided between culture, the arts, education, welfare, the environment and journalism. LG Arts Center is a part of the LG Yonam Foundation, which is run as a non-profit organization with a fund of 53 billion wan (approx. 5.3 billion yen). After its founding in 1969, it concentrated mainly on supporting educational activities. Then it opened a library in 1996 and the LG Arts Center in 2000 and now supporting culture and art activities has become one of its main roles. There are a number of this kind of culture foundations run by corporations in South Korea today and they vary in size. Among them I suppose the LG Group's is one of the larger ones.

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The LG Arts Center celebrates its 5th anniversary this year and it seems that the repertoire has changed somewhat in direction. When the theater first opened there were primarily experimental art theater works including invited foreign productions of noted contemporary works of theater like Pina Bausch, but now there seem to be mainly large-scale mass-audience musical productions like *Phantom of the Opera*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aida*.

That is what everyone says (laughs). But, of the musicals you just mentioned, the only one we were involved in was the joint production of *Beauty and the Beast*. When I say a joint production, we didn't actually invest anything other than providing the theater facility. With the other two productions we just leased out the theater. There has been no change in the theater's original mission of "broadening artistic horizons by offering high-quality foreign theater works that are current, with no time lag. Thanks to the present musical boom it is easy to draw attention with a musical, especially with the large amount of advertising accompanying a large-scale musical. That has given everyone the impression that the LG Arts Center has changed into to a commercial theater. As I have just said, our theater belongs to a LG Group that runs a cultural foundation. Nonetheless, it is hard for a theater to operate purely on its own productions especially now that the interest rates are down (laughs). We have to be able to lease out the theater to commercial productions, and the reason we have leased the theater out for long-run musicals is that there are few theater facilities in Seoul that can handle large-scale musicals. There are a number of theaters that can handle musicals but because they are public facilities, they can't commit themselves to leasing for long-run productions. The fact that a number of companies have grown to the point where they can mount large-scale musical productions has also increased the need for theaters that can handle musicals. In specific terms, the product of *Beauty and the Beast* was put on by three companies, the Korean companies Zemiro and Seol & Company and Disney Theatrical Company. Zemiro and Seol & Company also put on the production of *Phantom of the Opera*. The organizers were LG Arts Center, RiseOn Inc. and the SBS broadcasting station along with a production investment company. We decided to lease our theater for the purpose of creating samples of how long-run productions are possible and for surveying audience trends. Also, the process of supplying our own quality productions begins with going abroad to survey works, and the entire process takes two to three years. We are able to devote time to those kinds of preparations while we are leasing the theater out to outside productions. At present, the ratio between our own productions and leasing out to outside productions is about 50:50. Our own productions range from 15 to 20 works. But, since our productions cover the genre of plays, dance and a variety of different kinds of music like chamber music, solo concerts and jazz, there are not many productions per genre. Still, it is a busy job and we have from seven to nine people working in each of our three departments, including the technical department handling the theater's technical jobs, the administrative department in charge of administrative jobs, overall management and production selection and scheduling, and the planning department in charge of actual production and management of theater leasing.

Looking at the repertoire of the LG Arts Center's own productions, we see that in each genre they are almost all invited foreign productions. What are your thoughts about doing productions of domestic theater works?

We have done some productions of domestic works, but due to factors like the location of our theater, the kinds of plays performed along "University Road" (the

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area of Seoul where some 50 small theaters are concentrated) have never been successful. The LG Arts Center has a membership of 130,000 and most of them live in the new town area extending south from Kangnam, with women in their 20s and 30s making up the largest group. These people are our audience, our customers if you will, and they are a group that shows little interest in domestic works. We need to have domestic works that fit this audience and the LG Arts Center style. But works aren't created that way, by first taking the type of audience into consideration. There is a need to develop a whole new type of theater. Toward that end we are going to be involved long-term in efforts to encourage exchange with foreign artists and joint productions with them, with the aim of broadening the scope and diversity of domestic theater works. As one of these efforts we are now preparing a Pina Bausch project for June. This is something we are doing that is different from the pattern until now, where we have basically "paid" to bring in foreign works. Until now there have been very few projects where the LG Arts Center did everything from the initial proposal to the final production work. This new project will be a true "original production" in the inherent meaning of the term. And in that sense, I consider it the true start of our "original productions" at LG Arts Center.

Can you tell us about plans for the LG Arts Center activities from now on, including the Pina Bausch project?

Over the past five years, as I said earlier, we have worked primarily to broaden the artistic horizons here in South Korea by bringing in high quality foreign works and building an international network in the process. And, I think we have been successful in that role to a good extent. Of course, this will serve as an important pillar from now on, but at the same time we also want to direct efforts into creating stage productions and new works as well. I want to see us use our exchanges and joint projects with foreign artists to encourage the creation of new works by Korean artists, with "Korea" as a key word. The coming Pina Bausch project (performances June 22-26) will be a first step in that direction. Pina Bausch brought productions to our LG Arts Center for our opening in 2000 and again in 2003. We had her come in the autumn of 2004 and stay for two weeks, during which time she met with Korean artists and saw many aspects of Korean arts, including the traditional arts. This project will involve a world premiere. The actual training and rehearsals have not begun yet, and this will be the first time that we have created a work with a foreign artist on a long-term basis, so they will surely be a lot of trial and error, but I hope to investigate what kind of system we can create to make this kind of foreign-exchange production work successful for the future. I hope a lot of people will come from Japan to see the production too (laughs). Also, although the overseas works we have brought in until now have been primarily Western works from Europe, we are now investigating the possibilities of exchanges with Japan and other Asian countries. Since we have this theater facility, I want to see us work step by step with a long-term perspective to build up relationships and projects.

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The things we hear about the Korean performing arts scene today are mostly negative, like the decrease in audience due to the recession, a lack of interesting works and an overall slump in theater. What are your views of the present situation?

I think we can say that audiences will gather for a good production even during economic recession. We may have a recession but people are still willing to pay the cost of admission on "University Road" if there is a play they want to see (laughs). At the LG Arts Center we have actually seen an increase in audience compared to last year. Our membership is continuing to grow as well.

Earlier you mentioned that you have 130,000 members, which is a considerable number. What kind of members are these?

It is a free membership that people can apply for on the Internet or by phone. When we opened as a theater in 2000 we developed Korea's first Theater Management System (TMS), which involved thorough membership management in areas from ticket sales and reservations to communication with members via the Internet. For ticket reservations our members can choose the seats they want while looking at the theater seating map on the Internet. As member benefits, 5% of the cost of tickets is saved in a point system that can later be used toward ticket discounts or the cost of programs. This system, along with the repertoire, has helped build a solid audience for the LG Arts Center. The number of registered members is 130,000 but the actual information is a corporate secret (laughs). Recently, theater and dance companies have their own home pages on the Internet and are managing membership systems, but the management of one of these systems is in itself quite a job and requires a good amount of work. But, there are probably few membership systems on the scale of ours at the LG Arts Center.

Can we return to talking about the present state of the performing arts in South Korea?

I think it is true to say that the performing arts as such are in a slump right now. I believe that one of the big reasons is that even though the audience is changing the performing arts world continues to produce the same kind of fare as before. And I think this is influenced greatly by culture policy. It seems that programs in the name of cultural support have actually destroyed the power of performing arts world to grow itself. The performing arts world that had become dependent of the support system seems to have lost the drive to compete, and now that this boom in commercial musicals and plays has come they are stuck and can't keep pace. The government agencies that provide most of the support are aware of this situation too. But I think solutions can be found if the people on the scene apply themselves to the problems that are causing this confusion and search for a way out. This is a time when the performing arts world has to fight seriously for the right to survive. And it will surely be from these efforts that the next generation of performing arts will be born.

Have you begun to get glimpses of the next generation?

I don't think there is a need to give actual names, so let's speak in terms of the general scene. When speaking about today's performing arts in South Korea, theater is centered in the plays created and performed in the theaters of University Road, while in dance the center of creation and performance activities is not school dance companies but "schools" of dance led by the teachers. Under this kind of system there is no way that these groups can create productions for the mass market, either in theater or dance. And it is only natural I believe that the stimulus

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for people to want to see performance should decline and the consumption along with it. Within this overall situation, however, there is a group of people who are actively looking overseas. You can call this the area of overseas exchange and international joint projects. These people are placing more emphasis on exchange and cooperation than on works and hoping to break out of the present situation by getting involved internationally. International involvement can bring changes and greater diversity to the vocabulary of performing arts. This is sure to stimulate the [Korean] performing arts world and lead to new movements. We are also seeing new movements in the field of performing arts management. Until now, productions were created primarily by the artists or companies in both theater and dance, but now we are seeing the emergence of a third group of presenters and producers who have considerable power now. I think you can say that the South Korean performing arts world is standing on the start line of a period when a new map will be created. This will be the new generation and I think I am beginning to see how it will take shape.