



## Profile

Kim, Chul-Lee, Artistic Director of the Seoul Performing Arts Festival (SPAF)

Born in 1953, Kim, Chul-Lee is a director who graduated from the Press and Broadcasting Dept. of Sogang University. He took a postgraduate degree at the graduate school of Sungkyunkwan University in the Performing Arts Dept. From 2002 to 2003 he served as artistic director of Korean National Theater Company and from 2004 to 2005 he served as artistic director of the Suwon Hwaseong Fortress International Theater Festival. In 2005, he became Artistic Director of the Seoul Performing Arts Festival (SPAF). He also serves in various other posts such as Chairman of the Committee for Korea-Japan Theater Exchange. As a director he has won the New Director Award of the 26th Baeksang Arts Awards (1990), the Director Award of the 29th Donga Theater Awards (1993), the Director Award of the Baeksang Arts Awards (1997) and as a translator he won the 29th Seoul Theater Festival Translation Award (1991).

### Seoul Performing Arts Festival (SPAF)

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# Presenter Interview

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Held in the Daehangno (University Road) district of Seoul with its more than 100 theaters, the Seoul Performing Arts Festival (SPAF) is South Korea's largest-scale performing arts festival. In its seventh holding this autumn from September 20 to October 14, SPAF presented 38 programs by 33 companies from 16 countries including India, France and Germany as well as South Korea. In this interview we spoke with Kim, Chul-Lee, the festival's artistic director who constantly travels the world's leading performing arts festivals to see with his own eyes the programs that will eventually be invited to SPAF. We spoke to him shortly after the end of the festival and just before he took off for Shanghai to begin preparations for next year's festival.

(Interviewer: Noriko Kimura; interviewed on Oct. 16, 2007)

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule for this interview. The Seoul Performing Arts Festival is a comprehensive performing arts festival that resulted from the merging of the Seoul Theater Festival (founded 1977) and the Seoul Dance Festival (founded 1979) in 2001. It was first organized jointly by the Korean Theater Association and the Korean Dance Association, but in 2003 a separate organization was formed to run it under an artistic director format. This was your second year as that artistic director. Can you begin by telling us about the operating policies of the festival?

There are three policies that were set down when the festival was first launched. The first is that we develop it into a festival worthy of the great international city that Seoul is. The second is that we break down the barriers between the artistic genre and stimulate the expressive potential of performing arts by creating new works in the lines of the "musical theater" that has always been a mainstream of traditional Eastern performing arts or works of "total theater." The third is to aim to make the festival serve as an "incubator" for new performing art works born of artistic encounters.

By the way, our budget for this year's festival was one billion won (approx. 1.1 million USD). Normally, to do a proper international festival of this type takes about three billion won. And, since we can't cut back on the budget for invited works, the organizing office is run basically on a volunteer basis. Our money comes from the Bureau of Culture and Tourism, the Korean Culture and Arts Committee, the Seoul Culture and Arts Foundation as well as sponsorships from corporations and broadcasters and the various countries' embassies.

A comprehensive festival must be difficult to organize with its mixture of genre.

I believe that we are no longer in an age where the artistic genre needs to be divided. My roots are in theater and I am from a generation that couldn't look beyond our own genre. To be in a job like this, which I have the opportunity to experience so many genre is almost too good to be true, and it is such a good learning experience for me. I am just worried that people will wonder if I really

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appreciate dance and music fully and that I am concentrating too much on theater. I feel like I am in a position that is beyond my capabilities.

You served as artistic director for the Korean National Theater until 2003 and until 2005 you were director of the Suwon Hwaseong Fortress International Theater Festival. You are also the representative of the Pipa Theater Company and director of productions of plays such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Cirano de Bergerac* and *Titus and Andronicus*. You are also active as an actor and translator of plays. Amidst these wide-ranging activities, how did you serve as the artistic director of the Seoul Performing Arts Festival?

My profession is actually directing theater. As a director I have mainly done foreign plays in translation. But, in Korea creative (experimental) theater is the mainstream and plays in translation are traditionally not as highly regarded. And grants and other funding go mainly to original creative plays. There are also many directors like Oh Tae-Sok of Mokwha Repertory Company (<http://www.mokwha.com/>) with very distinctive personal styles of theater direction. In contrast, I am a type who doesn't use one distinct style, and that makes it harder to win recognition here in Korea. I have even been told by a theater critic that if I created a style of my own they would give me recognition (laughs). Also, as I get older I have come to feel that theater is defined by the [quality of] the actors, but due to the lack of good actors in Korea, there simply aren't actors who can do Chekhov and Shakespeare well, even if I wanted to mount a production. These are some of the many realities of the Korean theater scene that I have struggled with as I have now entered my 50s. It was just at the time that I was reaching this impasse as a theater director that the offer to take over the artistic directorship of the National Theater Company and I served in that post for two years beginning in 2002. During those two year, rather than directing plays there myself, I gave younger directors the opportunity to direct using the National Theater stage. I believe I am the only one who has tried programs using young talents like that at the National Theater Company. It was a very rewarding experience for me working with the young people in that way. It made me realize that creating my own works is not everything, and that searching out wonderful new talents is another way one can contribute to the development of performing arts. It was then that I felt for the first time what an attractive job a festival directorship could be. After that, and quite by chance, I was put in charge of the Suwon Hwaseong Fortress International Theater Festival and was able to work officially as a festival director for the first time. It was not a full-time position, so I was able to continue working as a theater director at the same time, and in fact you might even say that I took the job partly as a way to support myself and keep myself alive in the profession (laughs). Then in 2005 I applied for the job of artistic director for the Seoul Performing Arts Festival. And that is how I got where I am today.

As artistic director, in what ways do you want to see the Seoul Performing Arts Festival develop?

When I took over the job of artistic director I had what might seem to be two rather vague goals. One was to make the Festival a place that would introduce truly world-class works, and the other was to make it a place that would serve as a platform for Korean performing arts to step out onto the world stage. In the area of Korean artists being introduced to foreign presenters for overseas activities, the Performing Arts Market, Seoul (PAMS) was launched at just the same time I was taking over as our festival's artistic director in 2005. And, since it was also held in

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the same time of year, we were able to work the PAMS showcases into our festival's program. That allowed us to concentrate our efforts instead on the presentation of foreign performing arts. South Korea lies at the far eastern edge of Asia, so it is not easy to see foreign theater here. When you are in Korea it is difficult even for the people in the theater profession to grasp what the trends are in the international theater scene. What's more, when people think of Asia, they first of all think of Japan, and lately China. Despite the current overseas boom in popularity of Korean film and drama, there are very few people overseas who know about Korean theater. So, we have to make an effort to show people internationally that South Korea is a place with a discerning audience and places where performances can be given and foreign productions can be invited. By inviting foreign works to Korea as part of our festival program, we can both show the Korean audience what is happening in international performing arts and also show foreign people in the arts what Korea's cultural ground is like. In fact, as a Korean festival there is an underlying assumption that we have an obligation to show Korean arts, but actually, in the past two years, we have tried to increase the number of foreign works we invite as many as possible. At present, I believe that we have about half and half Korean and foreign programs in our festival.

There have been several different types of festivals starting up in Korea in recent years. What do you see as the positioning of the Seoul Performing Arts Festival among them?

There has certainly been a growth in the number and variety of festivals, including festivals with distinct color like the Gwacheon Hanmadang Festival as a street performing arts festival, the Uijeongbu Music Theater Festival, the largely outdoor performance Suwon Hwaseong Fortress International Theater Festival and the Chuncheon International Mime Festival, as well as regional festivals like the Keochang International Festival of Theater, the Busan International Performing Arts Festival, and then the various dance festivals. In 2004 we formed a "Korean Performing Arts Festival Association" for the purpose of exchanging information and mutual cooperation, and it presently has 12 member organizations. Of course there are also some organizations that are not members, but I believe that these 12 are the main performing arts festivals in South Korea. However, each of the regional festivals has different conditions under which they are held that inevitably color their festival contents. That is a factor that limits the size of these festivals. In contrast, our Seoul Performing Arts Festival, taking place as it does in the city of Seoul where there are always a wealth of performing arts events going on, rather than coloring the contents of the festival in any particular direction or genre, I believe it is important that we should be dedicated to presenting programs of a higher quality within a larger framework that will truly make it a worthy showcase of the international metropolis that Seoul is today.

We hear that you always make a point to go and see productions with your own eyes before inviting them to SPAF. I would like to hear your thoughts about what the criteria for selection should be.

In the last four years I have been to about 30 festivals around the world besides the Avignon and Edinburgh festivals. Avignon and Edinburgh are festivals with long traditions, so they are not really a good model for Seoul, and many people go to see them as well. I always go to see the actual performances of the works before making my decisions, and in the case of theater the criteria for judgment is quite

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simple. It is that it be a “good work.” So, what makes a good work? Although it may sound somewhat abstract, it must be a work that is strongly rooted in human life. If it is a good work in this sense and one that will be stimulating to the Korean theater scene, there is no need for it to be what you would call cutting edge, and there is no need to limit the style of expression involved. In the field of dance, Korea already has world famous dance festivals like Modafe (International Modern Dance Festival) and SIDance (Seoul International Dance Festival), so we choose works that have different color and styles from the works on those festivals’ programs.

### What about the selection of domestic works?

Domestic works are selected through an open public application process. We have the applicants submit a production plan, a statement about the intent of the play or choreography and video of performances. Then we review these applications to make our selections. In the case of domestic artists, the more knowledge you have of the domestic scene, the more difficult it can actually be to discover new talent. This open application system expands the possibility of discovering new talents we knew nothing about. We disregard experience and focus only on potential and level of quality.

### Can you describe your festival’s audience for us?

The audience consists mainly of people in the theater scene, students and performing arts aficionados. There are not so many people from the general public and that fact has led to some cynical comments about whether or not the Seoul Performing Arts Festival is really a festival to promote the arts for the public (laughs). I believe that since the people who are moved by these performances will influence people or cause change indirectly in the long run, the initial interest of the general public or the size of audience the festival programs draw is not the issue. But I do believe that increasing the general-public audience is one of the issues we must address for the future. And, by the way, we did have larger audience draw this year and that was a gratifying result. The festival has just ended and we don’t have any specific figures yet but the invited foreign works drew a total audience of about 13,000 and including the domestic works a total audience should be about 30,000, and while some of the audience was invited, almost all of the houses were full. And a lot of the press and our young staff were really surprised to see the response of the audiences when the performances ended—there were standing ovations and curtain calls like you might see at a popular musical. Seeing these people who are learning to watch these performances and to feel something from them, I sense the possibility that even if it isn’t immediately, these people from the general public will be coming back to the performing arts. Yes, don’t you think that we should measure the success of programs not just in terms of audience numbers but also with an applause parameter?

### The theme of this year’s SPAF was “Challenge! Dare to dream of Provocation.”

I don’t really like the general idea of having festival themes, and in fact the program is usually decided before the theme. The things that you are thinking about day-to-day end up influencing the selections of works you make, so when you look back you can find a theme they followed in that sense. And, that is how it usually goes. This year’s theme was “challenge” and when you look at Latvia’s New Riga Theatre’s *Long Life*, Germany’s Schaubuehne am Lehniner Platz’s *Death of a*

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*Salesman*, Romania's National Theater's *Waiting for Godot*, they were all definitely challenges. The *Waiting for Godot* from Romania was a realism theater production that had no script and I think it succeeded in breaking down the common concept in Korea of realism theater as something with lots of script and long dialogues in everyday language. And we got the strong feeling that it is not enough just to have a style that makes a strong impact like so many Korean productions. We realized that beyond the style there has to be depth of content as well. As for *Death of a Salesman*, it has been 40 years since this play was first performed in Korea and numerous directors have mounted productions of it since. But, none of those productions have differed significantly from the way the play was originally staged in the U.S. And while Im Young-Woon has done repeated remakes of *Waiting for Godot* and continued to develop it, there have not been any other productions coming out. I deliberately chose these three works with the hope of stimulating some new developments in this area.

Also on the schedule you had *Rain in Seoul* (the Japan-Korea joint production directed by Koji Hasegawa) and *Performing Women – Medea, Jocasta, Helen*; a joint Uzbekistan, India, Iran and Japan production produced by Japan Foundation). Including these kinds of joint productions is not really a specific part of our programming policy. In the future we want to produce joint productions in the area of music theater, but efforts like that take time and money and we are now investigating methods that will make such productions possible for us. *Rain in Seoul* is a work that was recommended to us by director Park Gun-Hyeong of Golmokgil Theater Company. Hasegawa wrote this play based on Japan-Korea history, but I believe that in fact it is more of a lovely story about relationships between man and woman or human relations. Also, I feel that there wasn't enough time for actors speaking different languages and from different cultural backgrounds and with differing style of expression to really come together in this production. I am a member of the Committee for Korea-Japan Theater Exchange and we used to go ahead with a project whenever someone put forward an idea for one. But, I think we are perhaps at a stage now where we should rethink how Korea-Japan collaborations are handled. Personally, I would like to explore the possibilities of collaborating on works from a third country rather than limiting ourselves to works from either Japan or Korea.

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### What are your thoughts about the present state of the Korean performing arts?

At present, our theater district of Daehangno in Seoul is said to have more than 100 theaters. However, in terms of the contents of what I being performed there, I believe that the theater scene is past its peak and is now in a period of decline. There are probably a number of reasons for this and one of them I believe is the fact that small theaters have become the mainstream. The small theater world has moved in response to small signals coming from its audiences (the public) to become increasingly perceptual (based on specific sensitivities) and commercial, the theater becomes more trivial and the boundary between TV and theater is disappearing. Personally, I feel a sense of crisis. On the other hand, musicals have a strong and healthy popularity now. Personally, I am not very interested in musicals, but I have had the opportunity to direct some too. It functions as a form of live entertainment and I believe that it is getting more people in the habit of coming to the theater. Dance is outside of my field of specialty but I feel that it is a genre with a strong potential for growth. Being primarily a form of physical expression, it also has the potential as an international form of art. On the whole I would say that the Korean performing arts world is not in especially good shape, and that is the very reason why we at the Seoul Performing Arts Festival should try to stimulate the Korean performing arts scene by providing high quality works.

### What do you think next year's Seoul Performing Arts Festival program will look like?

We already have some candidates for the overseas works. For the domestic works we will continue to use the open public applications system, but there are some choreographers, directors and writers that we want to leave some of the programs to. The theme of next year's festival is still vague, but it is beginning to take shape in my mind. They may be overused words, but I am thinking about "Confrontation and Harmony." The reason these two words are joined by the word "and" is because there has to be confrontation before there can be accord and harmony. Still, I am not sure if this theme is good enough (laughs). Anyway, the selection of works comes first and the theme will follow. Another year of tough choices has already begun. Also, for next year's festival I plan to decrease the number of works and increase the time span of the festival. This year we had four different works conflicting time-wise with each other on the last day of the festival. I want to create a schedule that will avoid that kind of conflict between works. In November I will be visiting Japan twice to do research for next year's schedule.

### Do you have any particular policies for choosing the Japanese works for your festival?

Japanese theater has a lot of diversity and I have always felt envious of the wealth of artists (writers) and works you have. There is a diligence to the writers that I feel, and it keeps them from being swayed by the latest trends or commercialism in their writing. The Committee for Korea-Japan Theater Exchange has a contemporary Japanese drama reading program and the work *Hinemi* by Akio Miyazawa that was presented in that series and in fact I acted in it. But, I don't have any special selection theme that is specific to Japan. I simply hope to encounter good works, works of high quality.