

Connecting through Culture

Director Jung-Ung Yang of the Yohangza Company from Korea talks about how his version of Shakespeare's comedy went down well with the Chennai audience



BLENDING OLD AND NEW Producer Seok Kyu Choi and director Jung-Ung Yung of Yohangza Company

"When we began the audience was stiff, reserved. But the moment the actors sprinkled a few Tamil words in their Korean dialogues, the people got excited, even exuberant, until they gave us a standing ovation," laughs Jung-Ung Yang, director, "A Midsummer Night's Dream". This jubilant farce by the Yohangza Company from Korea, opened The Hindu Metroplus Theatre Fest 2008, making the hall echo with chuckles, roars, and infectious guffaws. Amazingly, Yang managed to retain the spirit of Shakespeare's original text, while infusing it with equally rollicking elements of Korean folklore. His midsummer night sees the Dokkebi, the mischievous, meddlesome imps of fables, plunging into muddles of their own into which four humans get unwittingly trapped. Lovers Hang and Beuk escape into the forest with Beuk's fiancé Loo chasing them in fury, while Ik who loves Loo, follows the trio. The flirtatious Dokkebi Chief is tricked with a love potion by his clever wife, to get infatuated with Ajumi, an old herb collecting crone with donkey's ears. Twin Pucks strew the action with pungent antics. Yang's love for Shakespearean tragedy produced "Macbeth", "King Lear" and "Romeo and Juliet". "I was influenced to try comedy when a friend kept complaining about being trapped in a love triangle." He did sacrifice some of the lyricism of the original in his slapstick fare, "though a bit of it is really lost in translation."

Impressive music

Poetry is evoked by the music of 127 instruments, mostly Korean — part recorded, and part played live by the actors who take turns to move in and out of characters to become musicians. Three music directors created the live, recorded and percussive elements. Says Yang wistfully, "I am not a musician but I want to be! I've directed two operas for our national theatre. I'm an amateur Pansori singer, it's a traditional Korean genre." Yang's experimental theatre of strong, disciplined physical movements gains its dynamism from this live orchestra. Music becomes the binding force for mime and movement, it establishes character and mood. The sense of timing, essential for comedy, is promoted by its pace and shifts. The actors themselves providing much of the music creates a rare, vibrant sense of continuity. "Ideally I'd like musicians to be my actors, but since that's impossible I look for actors with a feel for music. We train them to play and sing. A struggle. So much of our regular theatre is dialogue-based. To get actors to do what I want is not easy." Yang's 10-year-old Yohangza Theatre Company has trained its own actors in new techniques that blend old Korean styles with contemporary forms, experimenting with physical vigour and poetic imagery. Secure in its Korean cultural identity, their universal appeal has won acclaim and awards in other parts of the globe. "It is a challenge to incorporate phrases from local languages as we do — Czech, Polish, English, Spanish, now Tamil! On tours it's great to absorb something from other cultures." Shakespeare has the male Oberon teaching his self-willed consort Titania a lesson. But Yang's gender switch has the Dokkebi wife punishing her flighty husband. "The 21st Century witnesses a gain in women power. We are moving slowly towards a matriarchal system." He explains that his old crone Ajumi is a take off from Ajuma, the older married matriarch, a staunch family guardian. "In Korea we say the Ajuma have a special 'third' gender!" The son of well-known writers, Yang reveals a contemplative side when he talks about his trek in the Himalayas years ago. He realised the importance of interaction between different cultures. But returning to everyday realities he admits, "It is difficult for actors to survive, except in the National Theatre. But our theatre has had better luck with subsidies and sponsorship than other independent companies in my country. Of course we don't have enough money to fulfil my big dream of a major production, with lots of time for the processes of research, rehearsal, experiment... May be one day...."