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## The Poetics of Body: Representing Cultural Imaginations in Yang Jung-Ung's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

**Abstract:** This article explores the psychology that motivates Yang Jung-Ung and his actors in the process of translating Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into a Korean style. By focusing on the ways of showing the theme of the play in modern styles fused with traditional modes of theatrical practice, the director attempts to develop his own ways of expression to communicate with the modern Korean audience. In this process, Yang reconstructs the dialogues between the characters rather than rely heavily on Shakespeare's text and language. For this reason, his production has often been criticised for missing Shakespeare's poetry. However, the beauty of poetry is not only in Shakespeare's language itself, but rather it is in the mental process of how the artist and audiences understand and translate its meaning in their cultural contexts. Shakespeare's language includes a great deal of imagery that provides the artists with concrete information for constructing the stage *mise-en-scène*. In Yang's production, Shakespeare's poetry is expressed through the visual images created by the performer's physical bodies, which reflects the director's interpretation of the play in his cultural context. By analysing the performers' physical movements, this article studies how Yang perceives the theme of Shakespeare's *Dream* in relation to a Korean cultural context and presents his unique vision on the play.

**Keywords:** *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Korean Shakespeare, poetics, Yang Jung-Ung, Yohangza Theatre Company.

### Introduction

When performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one of the main points of adaptation might be how the directors visualise the fairies in the forest during a midsummer night, which is traditionally "a time of magic" (Barber 123). In this play, the mystery of the supernatural beings such as the fairies, which are

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usually described with the aura of evanescent and ambiguous beings, represents unknown and invisible aspects in human life. His imagery provides specific information about actors' appearance as fairies, especially their bodily gestures and actions. The image of the fairies' appearance and actions provides a visual landscape that directs attention towards the invisible and liminal aspects of the world. There have been a number of modern directors who attempt to construct the invisible world based on their own interpretations and perspectives on Shakespeare's play. Through their performances, the spectators can see how the directors attempt to construct the unseen, invisible presences to be seen and embodied in theatrical reality. By examining the figures of fairies depicted in theatre, it is possible for the audience to learn what sort of belief held the attention of the people in Shakespeare's time and how it is interpreted and newly embodied in modern performance.

In this sense, studying the metaphorical features in Shakespeare's language to illustrate the fairy world raises a question of how modern directors from different backgrounds translate this metaphoric imagery into their own cultural style of expression. In Korean theatre, Shakespeare's *Dream* is not staged as it is but freely reimagined and readdressed by Korean artists who also explore the possibilities of the play to be read and embodied differently from culture to culture. Shakespeare's *Dream* "contains the elements of magic, fairy lore, and classical mythology, which inspire Korean directors to imagine the presence of the fairies and design their illusory world in an embodied form" based on the depictions in myth and folklore in the context of their indigenous culture (Choi 437). Since the 1970s, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was often translated and performed in traditional Korean theatre forms. By analysing and adapting the distinctive elements from their own theatre culture, or in other words, by using indigenous cultural sources and traditional theatrical form, Korean directors are able to deal with the subject of their cultural identity while developing their own views of a modern Korean aesthetic.<sup>1</sup>

In this case, the concept of translation is not limited to the work of translating Shakespeare's language into Korean, but it includes the process of *cultural* translation. Kim Hyon-Mi claims that cultural translation includes the

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<sup>1</sup> Korean directors such as Oh Tae-Suk and Lee Yun-Taek have tried to deal with the subject related to modern society by reusing or reinventing traditional theatre forms, which focus on actors' bodies as a central place connecting nature, human, and society. Notably, Oh Tae-Suk attempts to "deal with the current social issues and problems through Korean traditional theatre forms" and argues that the social responsibility of theatre is today more crucial than ever. Kim Bang-Ock points out that "Oh Tae-Suk and Lee Yun-Taek have attempted to emphasise the importance of traditional theatre which had been weakened by the influence of Western theatre forms and re-establish the effect of theatre as play, the relationship between performers and audiences."

act of “perceiving the internalised cultural meanings of other languages, behaviour patterns and cultural values, and remaking them according to the context of target culture” (48). She also insists that “[cultural translation] includes the work of decoding the meaning of words in the original text by analysing its context and re-coding new meanings, rather than being limited to the work of transcoding a word into another word” (53). Korean directors focus not only on the basic meaning of each word, but find other ways to convey the internal meaning behind the use of particular words and expressions. Since the subjective view of directors as translators is always involved in the work of cultural translation, their work cannot be neutral or indifferent from social ideology. Directors need to concern themselves with their position in the network of various cultural elements in order to work both roles as active readers and creators. They also need to have a critical view on how different cultural elements are working together in a broader context and participate in the dynamic work of cultural interactions to present their interpretation.

Among others, Yang Jung-Ung<sup>2</sup> modernises traditional Korean theatre forms by combining various elements of modern Korean theatre with foreign performance styles. This exploration of aesthetic hybridity in turn allows Yang to create an unusual and unique quality of expression.<sup>3</sup> Based on visual information from indigenous folktales and legends in Korea, Yang visualises the fairies’ physical appearance and movements in a highly stylised design and manner. In this way, he tries to show how he perceives the differences between the cultural backgrounds of Shakespearean and Korean theatre cultures and how he merges these incongruent aspects through his theatrical techniques, revealing his artistic vision. For this reason, studying the performers’ physical presences in Yang’s productions provides an opportunity to get a new vision of constructing the fairies’ world reflecting Shakespearean culture as well as a deeper understanding of Korean culture. By using various cultural sources and artistic forms from the past and modern theatres, Yang explores new ways of approaching the collective imagination toward the invisible and supernatural figures.

In his adaptation, Yang visualises his perception of the fairies in Shakespeare’s *Dream* by exploring his own cultural sources to find well-suited

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<sup>2</sup> In writing Korean names, I followed Korean naming convention; the family name is written first, followed by a given name.

<sup>3</sup> Some elements of traditional Korean theatre forms such as *talchum* (traditional Korean mask dance) and *pansori* (traditional Korean musical storytelling) are often practised by Yang. *Talchum* originated in Korean villages as part of shamanic rituals during the Three Kingdoms Period (18 BCE-935 CE), and became a form of popular entertainment since Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392). *Pansori*, first performed in the late seventeenth century, has been preserved as an Intangible Cultural Property by the South Korean Government since 1964.

physical parallels to the symbolic and psychological implications of Shakespeare's fairy world. In particular, he attempts to develop a new aesthetic of physical expression distinguished from typical images of Korean fairies such as *dokkaebi* (a mythical spirit that appears in old Korean folk tales) with which the audience is already familiar.<sup>4</sup> This article explores the performers' bodies—focusing on their aesthetic and phenomenal qualities in relation to a cultural and social context—by examining Yang's adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. By investigating the relation between social ideology and the shape of the body, this article reveals how Yang translates Shakespeare's ideology of the body for modern actors and audiences into a modern vocabulary of physical movement and image, which signifies familiar cultural codes to a modern audience. Also, this article focuses on how the director reimagines traditional values and theatre forms as a creative power to deal with the phenomenon of modernisation in which a society pursues a standardised system and mentality.

### **(Re)Staging Shakespeare in Korea: Cultural Translation through the Body**

Yang is one of the best-known directors to experiment with Shakespeare's plays in Korean traditional styles, which have been very popular and commercially successful in Korea and other countries. Previously, Yang worked as a playwright and actor in Korea, then joined the Lasenkan International Theatre Company in Spain for two years (1994-1996) gaining an international approach to dance and theatre in a multi-cultural space. Through this experience, he has explored how a play can be interpreted from different perspectives and described in Korean culture. Yang has presented an experimental collision of past and present theatrical modes by exploring traditional Korean styles and forms infused with elements of modern Western and Korean theatre. In this way, he suggests a compelling and fresh mix of energetic dance, voice, and music interwoven with stories of not only Korean folklore and mythology, but also Western canonical playwrights such as Shakespeare, which are always combined with a characteristic of Korean theatrical *mise-en-scène*.

The director's choice of combining different cultural elements from the past and present is related to the history of Korean theatre, which has been greatly associated with the influence of modern Western social system and culture. According to Kim Mo-Ran, when Shakespeare's plays were first introduced to Korea through Japan during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), Korean

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<sup>4</sup> The term, *dokkaebi*, was first mentioned in *Samguk Yusa*, a collection of legends and folktales related to the Three Kingdoms of Korea by Ilyeon in the 1280s, and it was also featured in many folktales during Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897).

intellectuals utilised Shakespeare as a way of popularising their political principles, which were related to anti-colonial struggle against Japanese rule (201). Since the intellectuals considered the West as the “true master” (Kim “The Stages” 201) influencing the modernisation of Japan, they believed that learning from Western culture would be the most effective way to become independent from Japan. Under such historical and political circumstances, the authority of the West was reproduced and reinforced in Korea.

Although Shakespeare’s plays could have been adapted at any time, Koreans did not think that they could freely adapt his texts which also embodied their local theatrical contexts. In early Shakespeare performances in Korea, presenting a faithful understanding of the original text was considered as most important. It was only after Korea’s independence in 1945 when Shakespeare started to be staged in a lively manner by commercial companies for the public, and Korean dramatists began to be attracted to the idea of remaking Shakespeare in familiar forms (Kim “The Stages” 203). Along with the national movements to revive Korean culture and traditions around the 1970s and 1980s, directors became concerned with the status of traditions in relation to Korea’s Westernised social life and cultural identity. According to Baek Hyun-Mi, “people tend to think that tradition is cultural heritages in the past before the Western social system and culture became a part of Korea through Japan” (120). Since the succession and preservation of traditions were interrupted during several historical periods such as the Japanese colonial period and the Korean War (1950-1953), rediscovering and reinventing the value of tradition have always been an important task for Koreans. When Japan was influenced by Western-style modernisation, the nation and the public officials attempted to preserve Japanese identity by inheriting the traditional forms, which were designed for the upper classes (Baek 113). However, since there was no government in Korea during the period of Japanese colonialism, people explored their own traditional forms in radical and creative ways. In this historical context, “tradition is not an objective or universal concept in Korea; its meaning and function can be changed and reconstructed depending on individual perception and the alternation of hegemony” (Baek 120). Thus, tradition has been involved in the process of modernisation as local and individual activities in Korea.

Through the self-examination of their own theatre culture in relation to the influence of Western-style modernisation, contemporary Korean directors are attempting to connect to the past in the form of nostalgia for an older Korea before its possibilities were foreclosed by Westernisation. Yang reveals that there are two main reasons to produce Shakespeare’s plays:<sup>5</sup> the first is to

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<sup>5</sup> Yang has staged several Shakespeare plays: *Romeo and Juliet* (1998 & 2014), *King Lear* (1999), *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (2002 – present), *Macbeth* (2003), *Twelfth Night* (2008 & 2011), *Hamlet* (2009 & 2015), *Pericles* (2015), and recently *Coriolanus* (2021).

explore his own identity as a Korean artist; the second is to help modern audiences understand both Korean traditional culture and Shakespeare's works. Yang states that "Shakespeare offers great opportunities for performance; his plays always involve a relatively large cast and offer lots of dramatic scenes and complex ideas that make the stories more playful and dynamic to excite the modern audience" ("Shakespeare"). Although there are big differences between each culture, he believes there is a universality in human nature that makes it possible for an audience to understand other cultures. According to Yang,

the essential theme of a play can be universal; it is not only a matter of Shakespearean or Western culture, but also a trendy issue that current Korean people are also experiencing. To explore this, I believe artists need to design a certain form for the modern audience to have critical views on the theme in present context. (Yang "Shakespeare")

The lack of specific and concrete information on Shakespeare's intentions in his plays allows Yang to explore the unanswerable questions by experimenting with various styles and forms. Jang Eun-Soo also points out that the main features of Yang's performances can be "the fusion of disparate elements from different cultures and genres through collaborative work with the designers and actors" (361). Yang's unique style of combining traditional Korean theatre form with modern Korean and Western theatrical style can be also observed in his Shakespeare productions. Among others, his *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been the most popular and frequently performed since its premiere in 2001. Critics also stated that the production "opened a new paradigm of Shakespeare adaptation based on the aesthetic of Korean culture" (Jang 363). Although Yang borrows the title and the general plot from Shakespeare's play, he rewrites most parts of the dialogues and the ways of communication between the characters. He does not rely heavily on the original text, but focusing on how to represent the themes of the play in a modern style combined with traditional modes of theatre practice.

Above all, he has struggled to reuse the old practices and theatrical forms which have been forgotten or undervalued due to the dominant influence of Western-style modernisation in the late twentieth century. Yang's *Dream* shows his attitude towards Shakespeare, his ideas of using Korean traditions, and his anxiety as an Asian artist adapting a Western play from a very different cultural and theatrical context. As Maria Shevtsova points out, Korean directors including Yang commonly try to recover and explore the value of the traditional culture of Korea for the contemporary spectator, and Shakespeare becomes a "source of local self-consciousness, self-exploration and self-affirmation of the kind associated with motions of cultural identity" (167). In other words, the adaptation of Shakespeare sets the condition for "renewed cultural awareness

and renewed concern with cultural identification” (167). Through the performance, it is possible to discern how his cultural and social background has influenced the development of his directing style and the acting method of the company. Regarding traditional theatrical forms, Yang states:

I think adopting Korean traditional forms into modern theatre forms does not mean just repeating the past work without change. More importantly, I am concerned about how these ancient forms can be changed and replaced with the images of performing bodies. In the process of collaborative works, the actors and I have transformed the images inside of our heads into a form of actual movement. [...] This production [*A Midsummer Night's Dream*] could be created by this eclectic process of fusing Western and Eastern elements along with Korean styles. (“Creating”)

Yang’s adaptation contains a number of visual imageries parallel to poetic forms of symbolic expressions to present a concrete shape of the illusionary world. To emphasise the performers’ physical expressions to depict the shape of fairies’ bodies, Yang cuts the first and last acts; therefore, the number of characters is reduced to only eight, and the drama is set entirely in the forest outside Athens. He then adds some lines to the dialogue between the young lovers, explaining what happened to them before they arrived in the forest so that the audience understands the eliminated parts.

In addition, he tries to keep the rhythmic effect of Shakespeare’s language with careful consideration for the musical quality of the meter and syllables of Korean expressions. In addition, he prefers using pure Korean words (without Chinese characters) to appeal to the beauty of *Hangeul* (the Korean alphabet) to the audience. For instance, Yang renames the four lovers based on the four directions of stars in Korean astrology: the name Beok (Hermia) signifies a northern star; the name Hang (Lysander) means an eastern star; the name Ik (Helena) is a southern star, and the name Rue (Demetrius) represents a western star. Each one must keep its own position in the celestial map, and therefore each character dresses in red, blue, yellow, and green to signify their location in the sky. In his production, Yang explores the idea that “the stars were believed to be intertwined with the mortal world and reflect or foretell events in the earthly realm” (Huang). When they enter the realm of the fairies, however, they all change into white-coloured costumes, reflecting how they are totally under the power of the spirit world. From this perspective, the troubles among the four lovers stand for a disorder as the stars deviate from their position in the constellation, and their reunion with a true lover symbolises the restoration of the order since the stars regain their original place. Thus, each character as a symbolic figure represents cultural beliefs and imaginations inherent in Korean society.

Interestingly, Yang makes the fairies play as *dokkaebi*.<sup>6</sup> Duduri, representing Robin Goodfellow the puck, is played by two different male actors to emphasise the strong power of *dokgabi*'s magic – aiming at a dramatic effect. The actors also play with the audience and vigorously encourage them to respond to their actions or even participate in the dramatic situation. They wear white make-up on their faces and put a red rouge spot on their cheeks, originating from the marriage custom of Silla (57 BC-935 AD).<sup>7</sup> Their make-up seems to be inspired from the designs of *talchum* masks whose shape and colour designate the personality and nature of each character in the traditional drama. The presence of the *dokgabi* themselves becomes a dramatic metaphor for the dream world: they basically wear white on their faces which evokes the mood of the illusory spiritual world, and their mischievous and exaggerated bodily actions and facial expressions enhance the comical and humorous atmosphere. At the same time, their face make-up makes *dokgabi* look rather gentle and friendly, which is far from the frightening and scary face of *dokkaebi* in Korean traditional culture. Minor Latham insists that Shakespeare ignores the details of the traditional fairies of his time to reinvent the fanciful beings for his concept of the poetic and imaginary fairyland of the play (178-179). In the same way, Yang invents his own fairyland and recreates the fairies with a delicate and graceful fancy in which they seem to have a more pleasant nature in highly picturesque images.

In his production, Yang emphasises the visual images shaped by the actors' bodies; above all, he includes various physical expressions presenting the natural landscape and the animal world. The importance of visual imagery and physical embodiment implied in Shakespeare's *Dream* has been pointed out by many scholars.<sup>8</sup> Among others, Peter Hollindale focuses on the physical theatricality of the play. He claims that "[m]ost of Shakespeare's important groups and clusters of images have their physical parallels and analogues in the action" (110). In particular, he insists that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is "the most theatrically physical of all Shakespeare's plays", which shows "a similar correspondence between the dominant images and the visual and active elements of the play," and "all are directly linked to the drama's physical embodiment, those parts of its theatricality which no audience can miss" (111). In Yang's performance, the space functions as an open site, not a closed one; the

<sup>6</sup> Yang uses both '*dokkaebi*' and '*dokgabi*': the standard term, *dokkaebi*, is used for the stage directions whereas *dokgabi* is used in the dialogues. The small distinction seems to be between the magical beings of common folklore (*dokkaebi*) and the individual version of them created in the world of this production (*dokgabi*).

<sup>7</sup> Silla (57 BC-935 AD) was a kingdom located in southern and central part of the Korean Peninsula. Along with Baekje (18 BC-660 AD) and Goguryeo (37 BCE-668CE), Silla was one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea.

<sup>8</sup> See Spurgeon (4-11, 43-45, 67, 259-263) and Hollindale (110-120).

empty space allows the actors to create various spatial configurations through different bodily forms. The core concept of his stage setting is a 'bare stage' in which an audience can interpret and create various meanings depending on their social and cultural circumstances. Yang states that "[t]he main stage in the centre is an empty space, which is very close to the work of *madang* in a Korean traditional performance, *madangguk*"<sup>9</sup> ("The Path"). In this space, the audience not only enjoys the representation of a play, but also realises that the fictional world is actually an allegory of the real world through the dynamic interaction with the actors.

### The Actors' Bodies: Visualising Poetic Landscapes

In Yang's adaptation, the performers use the stage as both an actual and imaginative space in which the performers show particular physical images derived from a combination of Korean traditional dance and modern pantomime gestures. According to Yang, it is important that each actor is aware of his or her own body and its ability in movement. He states that "the actors have regularly practised various types of movement for several years, from traditional Korean dance such as *subak* (a specific or generic ancient Korean martial art in the fourteenth century), *taekkyeon* (a traditional Korean martial art in the eighteenth century), and *talchum* to modern styles like acrobatic dance and pantomime" (Yang "Shakespeare"). Through these practices, the actors come to concentrate on their bodies and control their energy. Their bodies have become familiar with different rhythms; consequently, this kind of training helps the actors make their bodies more flexible and suitable for any improvised actions to be created (Yang "Twelfth"). Aside from traditional Korean acting styles, Yang reveals that he has been "influenced by Western theories and practitioners such as Grotowski, Artaud, and many others" ("Twelfth"), so the images of the grotesque nature-mortal form might be the result of the combination of various styles of Korean traditional acting forms and Western styles like modern dance and mime.

These disparate elements seem well suited for the magical spirit world of the fairies. The clash of eclectic images is an effective strategy to accentuate the mysterious sense of the atmosphere. For example, as Hang and Beok are walking through the forest, a group of *dokgabi* playing as if they are trees and

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<sup>9</sup> *Madangguk* arose in the 1970s and was inspired by older Korean traditional performances such as *talchum*. 'Madang' literally refers to the front yard in a traditional Korean house, which was used for housework and entertaining guests, whereas 'guk' simply refers to a work of theatre. In *madangguk*, actors perform "a variety of entertainment ranging from puppetry to mask dance-dramas. Their performances not only provide diversion from the monotony of rural life, but also served to bring communities together." ("Madangguk")

branches interrupts the couple by blocking their way. They also keep changing their posture to make the characters confused to find a way out so that they finally decided to stay in the forest for the night.

*The stage blacks out to music for a while. When it lights up, a group of Dokgabis enter acting as trees. They form a forest with quick and extraordinary movements. Hang and Beok attempt to move through the forest, but the Dokgabis tease them by continually forming a forest ahead of them.*

Hang. I have forgotten our way. (*The forest changes.*) (Yang “A Midsummer” Scene 2)

Dokkaebi’s acrobatic gestures present the stage landscape of forest, rocks, and wind, which look a bit grotesque with their detailed hand gestures visualising branches and air flow. Their physical movements are changing according to the psychological state of the characters whose actions are also influenced by the external conditions shaped by Dokkaebi. Regarding the landscape of the forest, Marjorie Garber states that the landscape of the forest forms a spatial pattern of natural and supernatural transformation, and points out its importance through a psychological perspective:

We have touched upon the question of the landscape of the mind, the correlation between psychological and geographical description. This phenomenon might well be called “visionary landscape,” because it is a projection of the subconscious state of mind upon the external state of terrain and climate... (70)

In Yang’s *Dream*, according to the Dokkaebi’s gestural images, the audience can see nature’s various aspects: it shows a friendly and gentle attitude to the characters while it also has a dark side reflecting vicious, mischievous, and jealous characteristics. It seems that the performers’ bodies as a visual code symbolise the emotional state of the characters. In this case, their bodily images signify that the dream is partly a nightmare, which can be noticed by the audience through the performers’ bodily gestures changing their shapes from animals to insects. In addition, Yang rewrites many parts of Shakespeare’s lines to emphasise the clarity of his text by using symbolic images familiar with Korean audiences. In the original text, when Lysander and Hermia have to stay one night in the forest, Lysander insists that he should lie beside Hermia so that they can make “one heart” in “a single troth.” But Hermia turns down his suggestion by emphasising the importance of “courtesy” (2.2.62) and “human modesty” (2.2.63).

LYSANDER. O, take the sense, sweet, of my innocence!  
Love takes the meaning in love’s conference—

I mean that my heart unto yours is knit,  
 So that but one heart we can make of it.  
 Two bosoms interchained with an oath;  
 So, then, two bosoms and a single troth. (2.2.51-56)

In Shakespeare's text, this part can be read as a sexual flirtation that shows how Lysander wants to sleep with Hermia. However, in Yang's adaptation, this scene is rewritten to emphasise the eternity of their love by changing Lysander's lines into a duet for Hang and Beok:

HANG and BEOK. (*singing together*) You are my love, your star is my star.  
 You are my love, your star is my star.  
 In the dead of night, across the Milky Way  
 I lie here with you, you must be an angel in the sky.  
 What should I do if this turns out to be a dream.  
 Even in a dream, my love will never falter.  
 Our love will never alter till our sweet life ends.  
 (Yang "A *Midsummer*" Scene 2)

Here, Yang changes "one heart we can make of it; / Two bosoms interchained with an oath" into "You are my love, your star is my star" to stress their love pursuing a pure and spiritual condition rather than following sexual desire since their relationship represents a more serious meaning that symbolises the harmony between Hang and Beok as stars. In other words, the relation between the characters does not only represent the mortal world, but also the order of the constellation. To emphasise this idea, Yang uses very specific words like "star" and "Milky Way", which give the audience a clear concept of the images used on stage. While Hang and Beok are singing together, a group of Dokkaebi shows choreographed gestures behind the couple according to the lyrics of their song. By using their hand gestures, Dokkaebi create a shape of numerous twinkling stars in the sky. They also visualise a "Milky Way" by standing in a row hand in hand. As previously mentioned, Hang and Beok represents eastern and northern star, respectively, their musical ensemble has a particular meaning linked to the cultural context of astrology. As they are lying down on the ground, their sleeping places become the traces completing the "Milky Way." In this scene, Yang successfully visualises their love through the symbolic metaphors along with the harmonious duet which give strong impressions of poetic sense.

The effect of these images not only helps the audience understand the characters in Shakespeare's *Dream*. They can also physically experience the story through the performers' visual bodies that construct the spectacle on the stage. To create the stage landscape, Yang uses his own imagination inspired by "the stories such as Korean folktales, myth, and traditional fairy tales that he

first heard as a child” (“Shakespeare”). As it is often said that dreams can reveal the unconscious, Yang’s *Dream* shows what parts of the old stories are left in his imagination and how he uses certain elements to replace some elements of Shakespeare’s play with his own *Dream*. Garber argues that “the image of the poet’s transforming power to make ‘shapes’ of the ‘forms of things unknown’ follows closely the processes of dream” (86). In this sense, Shakespeare’s words become the raw material that provokes Yang to explore his (sub)conscious to complete his poetic drama in a concrete visual form. Regarding the use of imagery in Shakespeare’s play, Caroline Spurgeon argues that images “naturally surge up into his mind” (5):

The imagery he instinctively uses is thus a revelation, largely unconscious, given at a moment of heightened feeling, of the furniture of his mind, the channels of his thought, the qualities of things, the objects and incidents he observes and remembers, and perhaps most significant of all, those which he does not observe or remember. (4)

Likewise, Yang chooses a similar process of creating imagery in the space through “the channels of his thought” in his own cultural experiences. The imagery on the stage illustrates his unconscious in a form of analogy. Moreover, he states that “many parts of the scenes in this production are actually constructed by the cast members” rather than himself alone (Yun 36). Yang often emphasises that the production is the outcome of improvisational work with the group of actors and designers he works with.<sup>10</sup> In the creation of certain images, their abstract concepts are shared, discussed, and experimented with during rehearsal. In this sense, the images can be read as condensed and accumulated forms representing the history and psychology of the theatre community. Yang states that “I have explained the general concept of the performance—background, time, and personality of each character—to the actors and work together with them” and in this way “the actors think of not only their own character, but also the theme of the whole play that leads them to participate in the work in very creative ways” (qtd. Yun 36). The adapted work becomes a locus of the artists’ intuition and instinct. Based on their own interpretation on the characters and the play itself, the performers can freely explore the ways of expressing their ideas and perspectives through their bodily movements.

In Shakespeare’s *Dream*, there are a number of descriptions of natural creatures, which reflect a dynamic vision of the universe emphasising the

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<sup>10</sup> This is not only the case with Yang’s productions. Since the 1990s, the ways of revising performance in Korea have changed a great deal; rather than one director managing the whole process, other members of a theatre company freely participate in the process as collaborators.

importance of harmonious relation between human and inhuman worlds. According to David Young, Shakespeare uses a great number of imageries that provide “geographic and aesthetic senses” (80) of nature to create “a fully realized world” (83). In Act 2 Scene 1, Oberon’s lines particularly contain numerous visual imageries of nature as he describes the detailed information of the place where the magical flower is placed (“I know a bank where the wild thyme blows, / Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows, / Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine, / With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine” 1.2.249-252). Then, Oberon becomes excited with his own plan to punish Titania, who would not obey his command, by mentioning some “vile” things such as “ounce, or cat, or bear, / Pard, or boar with bristled hair” (1.2.29-30) beside her. Yang’s adaptation faithfully configures these visual images with the actors’ physical images and gestures. For instance, Yang translates Shakespeare’s lines in his own cultural context to help the audience understand how the magical herb affects the body of Gabi as well as what sort of “vile” things can be seen at first as soon as he opens his eyes:<sup>11</sup>

DOT. Over the hill around the graves,  
 There are abundant lilies.  
 They are the cure for his infidelity.  
 Come, mortals or *dokgabi*.  
 With one sniff of them, their hearts swirl,  
 And their minds twirl.  
 They will dote on the first creature they see.  
 I will put it under his nose when he’s asleep.  
 Upon waking, what will he see?  
 Be it a mortal, corpse, flea, spider, centipede, bat, or earthworm.  
 Be it something vile. (Yang “*A Midsummer*” Scene 2)

The poetic effect of these lines lies in a succinct representation of visual images, which produce a sense of fragmentary imageries. By imitating the appearance and movements of the animals and wild creatures in Dot’s lines, Duduri comically describes the creatures’ images as if they strike a pose for a snapshot. This scene clearly shows that Duduri keeps changing their appearance in different shapes of body, which reflects their unstable, variable, and incomplete features. As their bodily shapes are transformed into another

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<sup>11</sup> Yang believes that Korean society becomes a kind of matricentric society and, accordingly, he reverses the relation of Gabi and Dot by setting Gabi as a philandering husband who is tested by his wife (“The Path” 20). Thus, in Yang’s *Dream*, the authority of the male-oriented sovereign is deconstructed; Dot (representing Titania) manipulates Gabi (representing Oberon) in the position of queen who is the representative of the fairy world as a ruler.

forms, their physical images create significant meanings that becoming animals, insects, and something else leads the audience to think about the potentials of their physical presences. In other words, the performers' bodies become the central place in which different forms of nature are fused into a single body that freely crosses over the limitation of the physical boundary.

These creatures are selected based on Yang's imagination that composes this somatic *Dream* in which the underlying meaning of the displacement is bound to his cultural unconscious.<sup>12</sup> In several respects, this process is analogous to the work of dreams that is often explained with words such as 'image' and 'symbol' as common analytic terms for the psychoanalytic interpretations. In other words, Yang's work might be the process of searching for "subconscious and associative meanings which have been transformed or translated into the finished artefact, poem or dream" (Garber 69). His production as a psychological metaphor represents the essential power of transformation from literal symbols into visual allegories reflecting his (sub)conscious. Therefore, the process of creating the production becomes the main structure that reflects the theme of *Dream* full of condensed forms of visual images and imagination from the experiences of real life.

### **Reconsidering Shakespeare's Poetry in Cultural Context**

The performers' bodies become a key place where the harmony between themselves and the audience can be achieved through collective communication in theatre. In this case, Shakespeare's text is used to revive and reinvent traditional Korean culture and performance forms that can still lead the audience to feel and experience a sense of community spirit. For Yang, one of the important functions of theatre is to foster a dynamic communication with the audience to help them to discover pertinent meanings and values in the play and relate those ideas to their own lives. The audience members mainly focus on the effect of visual images because they appeal immediately to the audience's senses, which can be direct communication without the necessity of translating the language. As Yang insists, the images induce the audience to use their own imaginations and senses to understand the significance of the visual signs ("The Path" 21). In particular, they were fascinated by the aesthetic of Korean traditions such as dance and music that were presented in a harmonious way through the performers' physical expressions. Jang reviewed:

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<sup>12</sup> The term, "cultural unconscious", is used in the sense that the director as a cultural being carries not only personal associations and memories, but also a layer of collective experiences and conscious through which the audience can perceive the pattern of the culture.

[Yang's theatre] company drastically reduced verbal lines and enriched the plays with Korean sentiment and aesthetic, but their scripts contained many poetic lines full of overtones. They showed a theatrical *mise-en-scene* of images, energetic dance, songs in chorus and percussion. [...] Their performance combines music, mime, song and dance to create an exhilarating adaptation of Shakespeare's inventive and glittering comedy. (384)

Yang creates the condition in which everyone can share their cultural imagination rooted in their unconscious by borrowing some elements from the traditional and modern theatre forms. Yang states that he was "influenced by the media between 1970 and 2000 in which there were dynamic social and cultural changes in Korea" ("Shakespeare"). Yang agrees that the influence of popular culture during these periods was extremely powerful in his youth. In fact, modern life has changed the mode of perception from a written culture to a visual culture in which images are circulated as a mixed form in many different kinds of genre and media. Especially in the 1990s, access to the Internet became available and so popular that many people have been exposed to an enormous stream of commercial images and iconic signs. Yang was one of those who experienced this visually dominated culture. A contemporary audience might be familiar with such visual codes from a wide range of media rather than being experienced in interpreting a series of metaphors in the poetic language. Yang said that he "borrowed the ideas of gestural movements such as exaggerated body and facial expressions and unrealistic actions in slapstick comedies from visual media like films, cartoons, and various TV programmes" ("Shakespeare"). Therefore, such images in his production present not only his own ideas but also the social imagination of a specific popular culture that continuously prods the artist into composing the eclectic scenography based on the hybridity of a modern Korean culture.

Yang's *Dream* reintroduces Korean culture not only for a Korean audience but also for a foreign audience. In particular, the actors' physical expressions and their visual images are significant in terms of their 'translatability' to appeal to both Korean audiences and international audiences who are not familiar with Korean culture. For almost two decades, the production has been performed in many different countries, such as Japan, China, Poland, Colombia, and Ecuador; it was also staged at the London Barbican Centre in 2006 and the Globe Theatre in 2012. In this case, the actors' physical expressions are significant in terms of their 'translatability' appealing to international audiences who are not familiar with Korean culture. There were critics and audiences who also found the "poetic" effect of Yang's production from the images of the actors' physical expressions. Dione Joseph points out the values of the linguistic features in the production: "While retaining the

eloquence and rhetoric of Shakespeare, the translation offers a sample of the beauty of the Korean language with its rich intonations, cadences and rhythms” (Joseph). Adele Lee states that “the cast did a great job of overcoming the language barrier and forming an excellent rapport with the predominantly English speaking audience” (Lee). One member of the audience commented that “[o]bviously the finer details were hard to grasp if you had no knowledge of Korean, but still, the universality, if that is a word, was amazing, it was not hard to follow at all!” (Kiwi). Another audience member made a more detailed analysis:

The purists will doubtless say that no translation of Shakespeare can ever possibly match the original, but this production played to a full house nonetheless. [...] And in Korean, this play—perhaps all too familiar to me in English—seemed suddenly like an entirely new work. [...] It was absolutely hilarious and although we were scared of not being able to understand the play, this Korean production is proof that Korean comedy surpasses all language and cultural barriers. (Liutkute)

Yet, some critics raised the question of the authenticity of Shakespeare’s text since Yang cuts out many lines of Shakespeare’s in his adaptation. Fiona Mountford in her review, ‘*Dream* lost in translation,’ insisted that “[u]nfortunately, what Yang omitted to lift from the original is any real sense of magic, peril or poetry” (Mountford). Sam Marlowe, a critic from *The Times*, saw the production has “a jolly storybook aspect that, while it rarely ventures anywhere near the play’s dark emotional underbelly, jogs along amiably enough. What’s entirely missing is the poetry” (Marlowe). Like Mountford, Marlowe argued that Yang’s adaptation does not “enhance our understanding of Shakespeare”; rather it “diminish[es] the play’s metaphorical richness” (Marlowe). Consequently, Yang’s “inelegant text” failed to “offer much lyricism or psychological complexity” (Marlowe). The critics were in agreement that Yang’s performance does not successfully deal with the depth of Shakespeare’s text and its aesthetic as poetry. From their responses to Korean production, it is possible to assume that they believe there must be something essentially ‘Shakespearean’ in Shakespeare, and it may disappear when his text is translated into a new language or performed in a radically unfamiliar performative mode in different cultures.

However, what they fail to take into account is the radical contingency of performance, which is unpredictable, often the result of the intersection of history, social context, and reception that promotes a wide range of varied readings contingent on cultural context. Surely, the cultural differences motivate the audience to see Shakespeare’s texts from different perspectives, so there is a continuous interaction between the written text and the performance text.

When we understand Shakespearean productions staged in different countries, the main focus should be about how the director attempts to present his idea and insight into his own culture through Shakespeare's text, rather than whether the director was faithful to the original text or not. Yang's productions are not translated works of Shakespeare's texts. Rather than focusing on the meaning of Shakespeare's poetic language, he attempts to reposition Shakespeare's *Dream* in a Korean context by exploring traditional Korean theatre forms, which are again reused and reframed in accordance with the taste of contemporary audiences.

In this sense, Shakespeare's texts cannot be simply read or understood as literature, but rather should be considered as ongoing work that imagines a new version of cultural events in contemporary theatre. Roland Barthes insists that the text is not an object but the field of production which can be best approached through "the activity of associations, continuities, carrying-over" through "playing" (158) in the postmodern sense. Also, Jerome McGann points out that "a 'text' is not a 'material thing' but a material event or set of events, a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced" (21). He argues that performance is the work of the process of cultural negotiation through which the production can continue its existence rather than a derivative re-visioning of text as an authoritative reproduction. Likewise, in Korea, Shakespeare's texts have been involved in ongoing negotiations of the text's own identity continuously changing according to their indigenous cultural conditions. Shakespeare's work as a text for a performance prompts the modern Korean directors to understand and communicate heterogeneous historical, social, and cultural situations. By reinterpreting and revising Shakespeare's texts in their own ways, the directors can reinvent the aesthetic of traditional theatre forms, which allows them to explore and express their own cultural imagination and vision in creative ways.

The purpose of Yang's *Dream* is not to perform Shakespeare's play *per se*, but to share how the director and performers have struggled to understand his work from their own cultural perspective and explored the process through their new production. Thus, the point is to question *how* the production is related to the original text and *where* the liveness of the work (both the text and production) comes from. What might be the ways of exploring the relevance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which was written around 1595 to modern Korean culture? Certainly, performing Shakespeare without considering the imagination of local artists or the audience's perspective cannot be a satisfactory answer. As Shevtsova argues, the appreciation of the performance form "must surely have shaped Yang's sense of the relative importance of words," as the production shows "his sense of their relativity for the *specific* performance that he devised with his company" (176, emphasis in original). Perhaps this is the part that the audience needs to seek out through the performance. The "poetry" is not only in

the text, when it comes to performance, it is also in the expressive qualities of cultural imagination displayed with lots of synesthetic effects of visual and aural signals. Yang's *Dream* is the ensemble of his memories, experiences, and interpretations all combined into a symbolic form of 'a poetic drama.' In this sense, the effect of the imagery in the production, although its styles and forms look different, makes a parallel with that of Shakespeare's poetry. Thus, the poetry of Shakespeare is not missing "entirely" in Yang's production. The performers' bodies certainly compose a poem that is constituted by verbal, visual, and emotional elements used to explore their own *Dream*.

### Conclusion

Yang believes that the role of actors is to make a harmonious ensemble among different theatrical expressions such as the use of their own bodies, sounds, and stage landscape within the limited theatre space. Like poets, performers have to orchestrate the different imagery to be conveyed as a complete embodied form to the audience. Under this condition, which fosters a dynamic communication between the performers and the audience, audiences can achieve a complete theatrical experience as active participants of their performances rather than as passive spectators. Whether the experience happens to an individual or a group, the feeling becomes a co-experience and is maximised through the process of mutual communication between the performer and audience. By adapting various sources and artistic forms from past and modern theatres, modern Korean directors attempt to find new ways of exploring the collective imagination of Korean culture. In traditional Korean theatre, according to Lee Yun-Taek, performers are not different from poets who inspire the audience to explore their own imagination and memory toward the concrete images of the performers' bodies (99). In other words, actors express their ideas about a specific experience or event through their bodies as an embodied form of imagery that reflects the conditions of their inner world and vision for the outer world. In a similar vein, Yang emphasises the theatre space as a meeting place not only between performers and audience but also between their present experiences and imagination through the performers' physical presence. After all, the theatrical performance is always a creative process, referring to a shared imagination that bridges the distance between theatre and our life, dream and reality.

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