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From: Eli Simon  
Associate Professor of Acting  
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UC Irvine

**REPORT ON “PAN PACIFIC PLAYERS RESEARCH AND COLLABORATION:  
THE BIRDS BY ARISTOPHANES”**

- Our collaboration with Suk-Man Kim and Korean National University of the Arts – Pan Pacific Players’ production of Birds in DMZ was successfully completed in August of 2005.
- Our American team flew to Korea on August 5<sup>th</sup>.
- We rehearsed and completed work on our script from August 7<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup>.
- We performed at the Suwon International Theatre Festival on August 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- Our scheduled performance on the 24<sup>th</sup> was rained out but we performed at Korean National University of Arts instead.
- We received critical acclaim in the Korea Times (article enclosed).
- Our project was featured on Arirong Television: Heart to Heart – broadcast to South Korea, China, and India

**Attached, please find photographs of the performance, Birds in DMZ.  
Attached, please find our review in the Korea Times.**

**We are currently editing over nineteen hours of footage into a one-hour documentary of the project. I will send a copy of this tape to you when it is completed.**

**Brief report of principal findings**

Given the generous funding from the Pacific Rim Foundation, the University of California, Irvine Drama Department and The Korean National University of Arts collaborated to create the Pan Pacific Player’s production of Birds in DMZ, based on The Birds by Aristophanes. This research project combined American and Korean actors in a trans-national production that fused diverse theatrical techniques such as traditional Korean Mask Dance Drama, Commedia dell’Arte, original Korean music, and original masks. Birds in DMZ addressed fundamental issues of division and reunification and was enthusiastically received at the Suwon International Theatre Festival, South Korea.

The project was featured on Arirong Television and broadcast throughout South Korea, China and India. The play received critical acclaim in the Korea Times.

### **Detailed overview**

#### **Getting there**

On August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005, The California Commedia Troupe, newly minted as members of The Pan Pacific Players, flew from Los Angeles, California to Seoul, South Korea to create, rehearse, and perform a new production entitled, Birds in DMZ. Joining me on this endeavor were my UCI colleague, costume designer Madeline Kozlowski, and four Master of Arts actors trained at the University of California, Irvine. We arrived on August 7<sup>th</sup> and were united with the rest of the company: esteemed co-director Suk-Man Kim, six Korean actors, and four Korean musicians. The following day we traveled together to Suwon, south-west of Seoul, to visit the ancient fortress where we were scheduled to perform Birds in DMZ at the Suwon International Theatre Festival later that month. We “walked our stage”: a large, circular performance space located in the courtyard outside the main gates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century fortress. After several hours at Suwon, testing acoustics, planning the audience space, and determining potential staging areas (upper balcony and massive hinged doors), we returned to the Korean National University of Arts, near Seoul. Rehearsals began the next day, August 9<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Rehearsals**

Given the rigors of travel and limitations of budget, we agreed on a two-week rehearsal process, leaving one week for performances at Suwon. Rehearsals began at 10 a.m., continued throughout the afternoon, and ended at 10 p.m. Mornings were dedicated to Bongsan dance training and singing songs that our talented musicians had written for the production. During the first week, we staged the play in the afternoons. In the evenings, I led the actors in bird characterization exercises. By the end of the first week, the play was staged and fourteen individual birds had been delineated. Temperatures soared over the 100 degree mark, and the company, drenched in sweat throughout the rehearsal process, began to bond through hard work and extreme dedication to the project.

On the fifth day, the actors designed masks for their two unique birds. Mask making was structured along the lines I established during successful masking experiments in phases one and two of our project. In all three phases, these were actor-generated characterizations filled with pure artistic inspiration. Having chosen which birds they would play, and having experienced each bird’s physical and vocal nature, the actors created individualistic bird visages. The actors were never instructed how their masks should look, how they should be worn, or what the final effect should be. As a result of this expressive freedom, the masks were not the typical cover-your-face variety. Some were built atop baseball caps, some sported huge foam beaks, and one was a sock puppet that operated high above the actor’s head. The masks were built of divergent objects: the Falcon from a pressed piece of tin cornice, the Peacock’s eyes from foam cartons found blowing down a street in Seoul, and the Penguin’s nose from a shoe horn. Throughout this process of artistic inspiration and expression, the actors worked side by side, lending each other support, and furthering the troupe’s creative vitality. By day’s end, the actors had traveled a significant distance toward the comprehensive inhabitation of their bird characters.

#### **No rest for the weary**

Time (or lack thereof) was a strong factor in the creation of Birds in DMZ. Whereas most repertory companies rehearse for several weeks followed by several days of technical rehearsals and previews, our play was developed start to finish in twelve days. This work included completing the script through improvisation, creating fourteen bird and eight human characters, creating masks, designing and building costumes, and incorporating original musical numbers and live sound cues. And yet it was in our daily use of time, that a striking difference between American and Korean rehearsal practices became manifest. In America, rehearsal schedules are announced, artists show up a bit earlier in order to warm-up and prepare for the rigors of the day, and rehearsals begin and end on time. In Korea, it is acceptable, even expected, for actors and directors to show up late, chat for fifteen or twenty minutes, and then, slowly, begin to address the day's work. Initially these practices created tension in the rehearsal hall. It felt criminal to us to waste even one precious minute of rehearsal. I found myself wondering if we would find enough time to get our play on its feet. But eventually, annoyance gave way to acceptance. I held my peace and the American actors followed suit. After all, how could we complain about the Korean approach when one of our primary objectives was to learn and experience new ways of working? We were guests in the Korean studio and, as such, their methods of rehearsal necessarily prevailed. Interestingly, we accomplished our critical objectives (with time to spare). How was this possible? 1. The troupe's spirits remained high regardless of late arrivals to the rehearsal hall. 2. Each participant's keen awareness of the impending performance in Suwon contributed to a consistently high level energy, focus, and creativity. 3. The actors were asked and expected to work well past midnight (this would never be allowed in an Equity production in America).

### **Divisiveness and re-unification**

Months before our trip to Seoul, I was reading about the Korean peninsula's division issue when I came across a National Geographic article that described the rare migratory birds found in the de-militarized zone between North and South Korea. In the fifty years since Korea was divided along the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel, the DMZ had become one of the world's most pristine natural preserves. It made instant sense to me to set The Birds in the DMZ. Suk-Man Kim agreed that doing so would provide relevance for the action and he renamed our project Birds in DMZ. Professor Kim began to craft a story about a man who had been trapped in the DMZ during the Korean War. This man came to be known as Mountain Spirit. The story went as follows: An American actor looking for paradise decided to move to the de-militarized zone (in his naiveté he believed that *de*-militarized meant the area was devoid of weapons or war). On the way, he met a Korean wildlife photographer also bound for the DMZ – in her case to bring a rare egg there to hatch. They fell in love. Upon arriving at the DMZ, they encountered the Mountain Spirit and discovered that they were on dangerous land filled with land mines and snipers. They asked the Mountain Spirit to call the birds together in order to build a bird kingdom – a paradise where the birds could rule the world of mankind. After the kingdom was established, the birds descended on mankind to declare their independence. They built fences to keep human invaders out. But the humans infiltrated the kingdom anyway. At the end of the play, the birds discovered human refugees surrounding their kingdom, crying for help. In a rousing musical finale, they sang, “Roll up and remove the weak and rusted wire fence and let the stream flow free again.”

We found that our story resonated deeply both for the actors and for our largely Korean audiences. At its core, the production addressed the ever-present issue of Korean division and re-unification. We regarded the division of the Korean peninsula, the existence of the DMZ, and the struggle for unification as emblematic of nationalistic divisiveness. Our play touched on a universal struggle: unification of fractured lands and families. Birds in DMZ addressed border issues and political estrangement throughout the world.

Interestingly, the Korean and American actors faced divisions too. The chasms they confronted began with language and extended to education, customs, and theatrical traditions. Foreign ideas, techniques, and theatrical approaches presented constant hurdles, some that seemed too difficult to overcome. For example, the Koreans were not accustomed to the bawdiness of commedia, nor the necessity of capitalizing on a good joke and turning it into a viable lazzi (repeated gag). The Americans were not accustomed to the rigorous dancing demanded by Korean Bongsan Mask Dance Drama. Yet comedy and dancing were integral to this production; without them our efforts would lack the visceral energy that powered our play. And so we danced together. And then we found common ground for jokes, pratfalls, and amusing bits of business. These steps were difficult to navigate but necessary to tread. Ultimately, the players demonstrated in performance the central issue of Birds in DMZ: that people with divergent points of view can rise together to find harmonious ways to coexist. The final result was a work of art that not only addressed unification but demonstrated a living model of how to bridge wide chasms.

### **Dance training**

A primary mode of expression in this play was derived from Bongsan dancing. This highly codified form of physical expression is one of the central forms of traditional Korean Mask Dance Drama. The actors wear masks and sport long sleeves (chalchum). There is a skipping motion that, when coupled with an alternating flutter of the sleeves, resembles nothing so much as birds in flight. Indeed, it was this motion that prompted our creative vision of Aristophanes' The Birds. We found that the Bongsan dancing consistently supported the action of the play, whether birds were using the dances to fly on/off stage, or to establish bird speeches with highly stylized Bullim (monologues framed by danced entrances and exits).

The dancing sessions were extremely rigorous and forced our actors to learn complex choreography quickly. They gained core strength for those movements as they worked. Our dance instructor, Professor Che, considered a Korean National Treasure of the Performing Arts, was at once respectful and skeptical of the American members of the team. He was quickly lavishing them with praise. "No other foreign performers have *ever* learned these steps so quickly. No others have looked so natural. You are very talented and deicated. I applaud you." Soon, rather than dividing the dancers into their respective nationalities, Master Che combined the actors freely; he saw little difference in their dancing skills.

### **What did you say?**

Communication demanded patience in the face of potential frustration. Of the six Korean actors and four musicians, only two spoke English. None of the Americans spoke Korean well enough to put together meaningful sentences. Many of the Korean artists seemed to understand English, if not speak it, but their level of comprehension varied and was often faulty. This meant that virtually all general direction (given by me) in English was translated into Korean, and likewise, all Korean direction (given by Suk-Man Kim) was translated into English. Thus, the normally efficient process of giving notes was slowed to a snail's pace. Every communication, from simple questions to complex theoretical discussions, burned twice the usual time. By the second week of rehearsal, we had learned to minimize unnecessary conversation. Rather, we spoke from the heart about consequential matters.

### **Humor**

There were three levels of humor:

1. What was funny solely to the Americans or solely to the Koreans. These were generally verbal quips with standard set-ups and punch-lines. Very amusing to the native speakers but incomprehensible to the non-speakers.
2. What both the Americans and Koreans found funny. These were very simple verbal jokes, in-house company humor, or physical pratfalls.
3. What made the audience laugh. Never in-jokes and rarely American quips, these laughs were landed with Korean wit, pratfalls, and lazzi (repeated physical humor).

We discovered that everyone laughed when the American actors attempted to speak Korean, especially if they spoke poorly, mispronounced words, and were willing to be laughed at. We constructed several scenes where mispronunciations were intentionally given. And we created a running gag with our American ostrich: he would run out and yell the names of food (since that was what the actor playing the ostrich was learning in Korean). The audience laughed uproariously when he ran out and screamed, "Sedgagoogee!" (Pork!), for no apparent reason except that the actor happened to know that word.

### **Performances**

A full house of several hundred people gathered for our performance in Suwon. Due to steady rains the day before, we were not able to hold technical rehearsals. Thus, all of the lighting and sound cues were improvised during our opening night performance. The audience was transfixed by the action (I later learned that this was the first commedia-style production with American actors in the area). They were generally reticent to participate in the shenanigans but they laughed and applauded with vigor. Many of the funniest jokes in English landed with a thud. But the physical humor and the Korean quips were received with hearty guffaws. The company received a standing ovation. The entire event was filmed by Arirong Television and that footage, along with an interview that featured me and Emily Rogge, was broadcast to South Korea, China and India the week after our performance in Suwon.

### **Future**

Our future plans include restaging Birds in DMZ next summer, performing it in America, and then touring to Greece. We are currently researching various festivals in Europe where we can perform in 2006.

Thank you once again for your generous support of this endeavor. Please do not hesitate to ask if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

Eli Simon