

## Arts Professional 2009

# Child's play

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Peter Wynne–Willson finds a more relaxed approach to international collaboration through children's ability to transcend language and cultural barriers.

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In the last few years, I have worked a great deal in South Korea, in the field of young people's theatre. 2009 sees the launch of the latest project to come out of this connection, and it is the newest example of what has become a particularly fruitful collaboration. 'Looking for Yoghurt' is a new play in three languages (English, Korean and Japanese) aimed at an audience of 8–12 year olds. There are three actors – one from each country – and a Japanese musician. Behind the project, three writers, three producers, four companies, and some very complicated logistics. We hope that on stage there will be something very simple and significant. As I prepare to set off for Seoul for the final stages of preparation, it seems a good time to set out some of the approaches we have been taking, and the things that have made this work so exciting..

### **Bridging continents**

The connection with Korea began in 1999, with a request to set up a theatre in education module on an MA course. Over five years this developed into a range of collaborative work, and in 2004 we formed a company to carry it forward. Our first project, 'The Bridge', was performed in Korea and the UK in 2005 and then revived last year for the World Congress of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, in Adelaide, South Australia. 'Looking for Yoghurt' has the extra complication of a third language and culture. The relationship between Korea and Japan, its former colonial power, is complex, and we were keen to build links in the field of theatre for young audiences. When the three writers met to discuss the play, our starting point was agreed easily, because it in turn had evolved from the previous work. We wanted to look at what children can teach us about crossing

cultures and understanding each other. We had all observed, as we wrestled with cultural difference and multiple interpreters in the rehearsal room, how our children played effortlessly together in the streets of Seoul. So we embarked on a series of workshops in the three countries, exploring young attitudes to big problems and issues. We were struck by the similarities between the ideas of the children across the countries, and the universal truths about their hopes, fears, ideals and energy.

Ultimately it is the fact that we are working with children that has been the single biggest facilitator for our project. The three writers, simply by being parents, share much more than divides them, and the children seem to share even more. In each country we have continued the work with children throughout the rehearsal and devising process, and in many of the decisions we have been led by them. In the UK, supported by 'Bright Space' in Birmingham, we are doing a long project with two primary school groups who were involved in the devising of the play. One particularly interesting element of this is the development of a Playstation game based on the themes of the play, and designed by 10-11 year olds, which will be launched during the performance weeks, and will allow children from all three countries to play together online. I would be hesitant to give advice to others about how to approach international collaboration in a general way, because there is much variation in the nature of these collaborations. But for me, certain approaches have evolved over the past ten years and there are two that seem worth sharing.



*Photo: Yeon Choi*

## **Embed equality**

The first is about one of the most difficult areas in any collaboration across cultures: language. From the beginning, the principle of trying to create an 'equal' collaboration drove the work. The perception in Korea has often been that 'Western' artists will come and work there in the kind of partnership that from outside at least looks far from equal. An example of this is in approaches to interpretation. The general standard of English amongst Korean theatre workers is much better than our Korean, and so there is a strong temptation to work in English. But if half the company is working in a second language, how can that collaboration still be equal? We have for this reason tried to work with interpreters at all times, and use both (or all three) languages. This is obviously a comparatively slow and expensive approach – which is why it is so tempting to use shortcuts – but the principle is crucial.

## **Learn from children**

I remember hearing on many courses one form or another of the mantra, "it is all about planning", and I have often felt guilty about not being the kind of person who really plans very well. I wonder if there are others out there in the arts who share my guilt. If so, I may have the answer, because my other key approach is actually not to plan too much. When you enter an area with as many unknowns as will be inevitable across a big cultural gap, it is not a good idea to have too fixed an image of the outcome, or even of the process. If you have made a detailed plan and have a clear understanding of it, you may well find that your partners' perception is equally clear, but different. I have seen people, used to or expecting a particular way of doing things, become quickly frustrated by difference. They waste time and energy in working on getting people to do things their way, or forcing a process to the outcome they are seeking. The alternative, more comfortable and ultimately more rewarding approach is to keep faith, relax, and genuinely embrace those different approaches. It would not be possible to have had the discussions needed to plan every detail of our process accurately in advance, and yet that process has been stronger and more fulfilling than many. This is because it has been allowed to evolve slowly, as we learn together, and there is a well of mutual respect which underpins it, and a real enjoyment of difference. We may travel

by different routes, but we know that we are involved in a joint expedition which will be powerful and rewarding. Where did we learn this easy-going, flexible and tolerant approach? Like everything else, we learned it from the children in Seoul, Tokyo and Birmingham. When they met, they looked for a game they could play together. They could not discuss the rules in advance, so instead they just played, and they became friends.

Peter Wynne-Willson is Director of Hanyong Theatre Company, and a freelance Theatre-in-Education writer and director, based in Birmingham. 'Looking for Yoghurt' opens at Birmingham REP on 15 May, followed by performances at the Leicester Spark Festival, and in Linz, Seoul, Tokyo and Okinawa.

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