Creating Theatre where Different Worlds Coexist within the Theatre – Focusing on the Cases of Korean Language and Korean Sign Language

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I am constantly searching for the necessary variables to make Korean and Korean Sign Language coexist in the theatre. It feels like I'm building a virtual equation in the theatre: by adjusting variables, I generate a world that operates according to its own internal logic, different from the one outside. Even if that world disappears the moment the audience steps outside the theatre, I am still building it—inside, a distinct system is in place, operating with its own logic while the performance lasts. I'm not sure if we can call it a barrier-free world, but it's clear that what we must build is a world inside the theatre that is intentionally and structurally different from the reality outside.

1. Perhaps This Is a Story of Failure; Originally Titled Into the Unknown

The work titled *Perhaps This Is a Story of Failure*; Originally Titled *Into the Unknown*(hereafter *Perhaps This Is a Story of Failure*) began with the question, "What kind of language is sign language?" To explore this, I felt it was necessary to meet Korean Sign Language (KSL) users, so I went to see a Korean Sign Language theatre performance by Handspeak, a Korean Deaf arts collective. The day before the performance, I received the Korean script and read it. The performance was entirely in KSL without Korean subtitles. Watching Handspeak's performance made me feel like I had stepped into a completely different world. It wasn't awkward or difficult; it felt like watching a play in a foreign language. Experiencing that performance made me start using the word 'world' frequently. And this shift eventually led me toward exploring the world of Deaf actor Park Jiyoung, who deeply moved me during the performance.

I met with Jiyoung, a Deaf actor who uses Korean Sign Language (KSL), to set up our working environment before the rehearsal. We sat opposite each other in a small room equipped with computers and communicated via KakaoTalk—without an interpreter. We set a few rules for smooth communication. The rules were simple: Jiyoung could give feedback on the sign language interpreter at any time; rehearsals could be stopped at any point; and the interpreter could be replaced if needed. These principles weren't about being difficult—they were about making communication work. Some interpreters called us demanding, but I wonder why. Think about it this way: if you were working with a foreign director, what kind of interpreter would you want? In matters of interpretation, Jiyoung's opinion took priority. Since I'm not part of the sign language world, it just felt natural to me.

The production team took a month-long sign language course—not to become fluent, but to understand the nature of Korean Sign Language is. We learned that it is a completely distinct language from Korean, with a very different word order. This was surprising because, in Korea, sign language songs are often taught by matching signs one-to-one with Korean words.

The performance featured Park Jiyoung, a Deaf actor using Korean Sign Language (KSL), and Lee Wonjun, a hearing actor using Korean. During rehearsals, Jiyoung and Wonjun communicated through various methods, and their conversations were collected to create the script. Our goal was to show two different worlds through these conversations. At our first rehearsal, we rearranged the desks so that actor Jiyoung and the Deaf assistant could clearly see the interpreter. We needed this setup because Korean is spoken and linear and Korean Sign Language is visual and spatial. After finding the best seating arrangement for smooth communication, we began recording rehearsals in multiple ways: the hearing assistant wrote down all the Korean spoken in the room, the Deaf assistant wrote down all the Korean Sign Language used, and we also filmed the rehearsals. These were some of the ways we explored how Korean and Korean Sign Language might coexist within the same rehearsal space.

Looking back, the rehearsal process resembled a social experiment similar to studies in psychology and sociology. We placed two actors in a controlled setting and observed how they navigated communication through multiple modes—interpreters, body language, notes, and more. As rehearsals progressed, various conversation methods were tried, and gradually our rehearsal space developed its own unique and unusual way of communicating. Laptops were placed in front of the actors, allowing them to type their thoughts; these were then projected behind them. A whiteboard was also frequently used for handwritten communication. An interpreter moved between me and the actors. A stenographer transcribed all spoken language from one side of the room and sent the text to the actors' phones during rehearsals. This wasn't meant to be the perfect system for every rehearsal, but we created a strange world where we found our own unique way of communicating.

As we explored various ways of communicating, the conversation naturally shifted to how the Deaf actor and the hearing actor could perform together on stage, each using their own language—Korean Sign Language and spoken Korean. We began asking: If I don't understand my partner's language, how can I still respond honestly as an actor? Of course, we could just memorise each other's lines, but we wanted to go further and see if we could still be affected, surprised, or moved by what the other person was saying. We tried rehearsing the famous balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet, things quickly became complicated. In the middle of the rehearsal, Wonjun got stuck and, half-laughing, grabbed a marker and started scribbling all sorts of ideas on the whiteboard: "What if I learn sign language?", "What if the interpreter stands next to me as a

character?”, “What if a Deaf actor hides behind me and just sticks out their hands?”, “What if my lines are shown in subtitles on screen and Jiyoung reacts to that?” Jiyoung smiled and said, “I guess I really need to act with a Deaf actor for the emotions to come through.” Wonjun joked back, “Same here! “. This conversation became our final scene. We entered the theatre carrying the result of our failure to have a hearing actor and a Deaf actor perform Romeo and Juliet together. Our goal of the performance was not harmony, but to convey Jiyoung’s world accurately and as it is.

When I left the rehearsal room and entered the theatre, I felt the world we had built through rehearsals had crumbled. There were numerous hearing staff members in the theatre, all speaking Korean—a variable I had not anticipated. Jiyoung seemed overwhelmed by the large number of hearing people. I worried that instead of conveying Jiyoung’s world, the theatre had become Kim Mi-ran’s world.

However, this problem was solved in an unexpected way: the Deaf audience members who filled the theatre transformed the space into Jiyoung’s world. Although there were only about 10 people in each performance, it was a moment that truly confirmed the three essential elements of theatre—the play, the actors, and the audience—because the audience completed the meaning of the performance.

2. Macbeth

Years after *Perhaps This Is a Story of Failure*, the National Theatre of Korea commissioned me to direct a "Barrier-Free Week" production. The result, *Macbeth*, is a show that extends the questions and approaches I explored in *Perhaps This Is a Story of Failure*.

As in the previous work, I focused on setting up a rehearsal environment where Deaf actors could work using their own language and methods. Creating such a structure was central to the entire process.

This time, all the roles in *Macbeth* were performed by Deaf actors. In the rehearsal room, I was surrounded—thrown into the midst of Deaf performers, rather than the other way around, as it was in my previous work. *Macbeth* is a performance that brings Korean and Korean Sign Language together on stage, aiming to create a world where both languages coexist, but where Korean Sign Language holds primacy as the main mode of communication. I wanted the audience to feel with their whole body that there is a world of Korean Sign Language in Korea.

The translation of *Macbeth* into Korean Sign Language was the most crucial part of the entire production process. The process of translating was essentially about finding a way to convey the world of *Macbeth* as interpreted by Kim Mi-ran to the Deaf actors in their own world (Deaf audience). We had a Deaf dramaturg lead the entire translation process, and after the translation and scene creation was complete, we wanted to have a Deaf reviewer visit the rehearsal room and rehearsals to continuously check the accuracy of the translation. The involvement of the language's native users was very important. Professionalism was also a key concern. Although it may sound demanding, it felt like telling the audience something that wasn't true to create a theatre world where Korean Sign Language is the main language, but use an inaccurate translation.

The performance included Pansori singers (traditional Korean narrative singers) recruited for audiences who do not understand Korean Sign Language. These singers performed pansori in Korean, with the lyrics displayed as Korean subtitles. Pansori singers and Deaf actors performed together on stage, using an LED lighting system that flashed rhythmically to help coordinate their timing and pace.

The LED lights flashed only during sections that the actors had specifically requested during rehearsals, rather than throughout the entire performance. In traditional pansori rehearsals, the gosu (drummer) and singer typically set only minimal agreements—such as tempo or which rhythms to use—just enough to guide their flow. During the performance, they adjust to each other freely in the moment. I wanted to explore applying the onstage communication style of the gosu and singer to how singers and Deaf actors interact. I call this a "loose connection."

Having fewer singers than Deaf actors was also an experiment in this loose connection. There were four pansori singers and five Deaf actors, and importantly, the singers and actors were not delivering the same lines. Instead, the singers simply narrated the story through their pansori singing.

While a 1:1 match might seem ideal, I decided against it because hearing actors cannot adjust their timing or nuances based on the sign language performed by Deaf actors, as they don't understand what is being signed at all. Since hearing actors cannot understand sign language, Deaf actors themselves usually find they end up adapting their performances to match hearing actors. In my opinion, it's not because someone is bad or selfish, but because of a long history of social learning. I don't want the rehearsal room and the theater to be that world. I think it occurred to me that maybe the answer is to just not try too hard to fit in with each other.

Additionally, as a very personal preference, I'm not a big fan of the idea of hearing actors layering their performances over Deaf actors' performances (and I know many

already do this, so this is just my personal preference). I often feel that the hearing actor's performance does not align with the Deaf actor's interpretation (rendition), and that's not anyone's fault — it's just natural. How dreamlike it is to have two different individuals playing the same role with one interpretation. Sometimes, it feels limiting for both actors to be expected to think alike. Isn't that impossible, even for a couple who have lived together for 20 years? Anyway, in *Macbeth*, our strategy for co-existence was to let each person exist independently without trying to match with others.

3. closing remarks

With the two performances in Korean Sign Language, I often hear concerns that hearing audiences might feel excluded. To those who might feel excluded, I want to quietly say: if you feel excluded when you walk into the theatre, then maybe it's okay to experience that feeling for a while.

The second concern was the exclusion of blind audiences. These concerns were much more pronounced in *Macbeth* than in *Perhaps This Is a Story of Failure*, since the stage was filled entirely with Deaf actors. I am still struggling with this and don't yet know how to solve it. I hope to get feedback from blind people about their experience of accessibility in the show.

My use of Korean Pansori in Macbeth was intended to make the plot explanations more engaging for audiences whose first language is not Korean Sign Language. I also hoped that this element would create a playful connection between the Deaf actors and audience members with visual impairments during the performance in Korean Sign Language.

One of the things I really wanted to address in this presentation is the attendance of disabled audiences. I find it unfortunate that theatres often take the absence of disabled audiences for granted, as if it's just the way things are — "They don't come even if we promote it." However, many disabled people may not even realize that performances they can enjoy are available at the theatre. Because of this, if they don't come, it's time to reflect on the deeper reasons why. I'm not exactly sure what "barrier-free" means, but if I had to define it, I would say it is the willingness to break down the existing world and build a different one within the theatre space. I hope to see more efforts to move beyond conventional forms and rules, from publicity to ticketing.

Although the title of this talk is "Coexistence of Other Worlds in the Theatre", I always tell those who ask me to create a show that is "for everyone" that I am not capable of doing so. I am aware that my performances can only be realized because someone is willing to endure certain inconveniences out of goodwill.. At the same time, I understand that theatre cannot be made by relying on such kindness forever. If

coexistence means providing everyone with the same amount of information and enjoyment, then I do not yet have the capacity to achieve that, and that is why I always say my shows are not barrier-free.

My show is essentially a superimposition of two worlds. I feel hesitant to label my performances as barrier-free because, from an informational standpoint, they are quite limited. What I'm striving for is to find an aesthetically pleasing form that allows each world to exist independently while still making sense together. I hope that accessibility statements, which sometimes seem set in stone, can continue to evolve from show to show. I hope there will always be room to add and subtract variables, to keep building new worlds within the theatre. This has been the coexistence strategy I've been using so far.