

Culture Clash: disOriented Uses Dance to Examine One's Roots

"Who am I?" is a question often asked in dramatic works; the search for one's identity has been a familiar theme going back as far as Oedipus Rex's trek to the Oracle of Delphi. Kyoung H. Park's most current work, Theatre C's *disOriented*, tackles that very question in a contemporary way, looking at what it is to straddle separate cultures.

disOriented is the story of Ju Yeon (Amy Kim Washke), a Korean immigrant living in New York. A family crisis forces her to visit her homeland and face the family and lifestyle she has abandoned, reflecting upon the choices that led to her geographical and emotional estrangement.

For Park, the road to *disOriented*'s evolution is also a long and winding one. "I wrote *disOriented* for the Royal Court Theatre's Young Writer's Programme," Park said. "During my residency, I actually wanted to write a political play; I had this really crazy dream of writing a play for world peace. However, at the Royal Court, I was handed a copy of *A Raisin in the Sun* and the suggestion to write a 'debut play.' I thought to myself: I'm going to have to write about my family, and I really don't want to do that."

However, the personal and the creative blended in a way that proved very fulfilling to Park. "When I was brainstorming for ideas, I remembered a bus ride I took in Seoul after visiting my ill grandparents, and I thought that it would be interesting to write a play about my mother's line. Until 2005, I had never lived in Korea, but [going there] to meet my mother's family was like returning to the motherland, and though I was reluctant at first, writing *disOriented* helped me learn my family's history and find my roots in Korea." It took four years for the play to take shape, including two workshops and a reading.

disOriented may tackle traditional themes of family and identity, but it is performed in a far more modern way, in keeping with theatre C's mission of blending distinct performance art forms in order to tell Ju Yeon's story, particularly dance, since that is the protagonist's chief passion.

"I was trying to write a modern, Korean family drama, but I wasn't able to make the play linear," Park said. "I decided to keep the dancer and just dig deeper into the fragments of memories and history I was trying to write. Structurally, *disOriented* goes back and forth in time and place, and a Korean fan dancer kept on appearing on stage.

Once the story itself began to take shape, the next challenge was how to physically incorporate dance into the work. "The greatest challenge in fusing dance to the story was finding a performer who was well-versed in Korean fan dancing as well as contemporary western dance, and a choreographer who could help us both create the dancing narrative and integrate it into the text as scripted," director Carlos Armesto (and artistic director of Theatre C) explains. It fell upon lead actress Lee, a contemporary Korean fan dancer with a background in ballet and modern dance, and choreographer Elisabetta Spuria, a frequent collaborator of Theater C, to create the dances for *disOriented*. The company worked together to determine how dance, movement, sound (including the snapping of fans) could coalesce in a way that furthered Park's story and remained true to the work's original Korean sources.

This, of course, is much easier said than done. "The greatest challenge in writing *disOriented* was remaining true to traditional, Korean cultural values while writing this play for Western audiences," Park said. "Koreans are very expressive people, but we do a lot of non-verbal communication because unlike America (or the West), Korea is a mono-cultural society in which everyone shares extremely similar values, beliefs, and social practices. I had to negotiate how much I would write into the play as dialogue, and how much I would keep unsaid in the text. That active choice of not speaking certain truths, especially when they can be hurtful

to others, is a bizarre and confusing choice for those who may not understand Korean culture.” The multicultural theme permeated the entire production of *disOriented*; collaborators come not just from Korea, but also Italy, Chile, Colombia, the Philippines, China and the United States.

All of which leaves a lot of the aforementioned non-verbal truths to be communicated through the show’s choreography. The dances in *disOriented* are scripted to underline specific themes and moments in the play, functioning both at a narrative and emotional level (influences include Pina Bausch, Mark Morris and Shen Wei Dance Arts). “We also use traditional, Korean percussion music as inspiration for the play, so the voices scripted slowly disintegrate into an almost percussive ensemble song towards the end of the play, and this progression is deliberate to examine how the modernization of society affects and transforms social units, such as a family,” according to Armesto.

disOriented may take place in a specific, foreign culture, but Armesto, Park and the rest of Theatre C have gone to great pains to make sure that all the elements portray a story about family struggles in an ever-changing world. Stories don’t get much more universal than that.

disOriented runs from February 16 through March 5 at the Peter Jay Sharp Theater. Further information can be found at www.theatreC.org.

About douglas

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