

The Mystical in Tae-Sok Oh's Play *My Love DMZ* and Shakespeare

Beau La Rhee

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul
107, Imun-ro, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul, 130-791, Korea
Email: beaularhee@gmail.com

Abstract *My Love DMZ* is a carefully crafted play using Korean mysticism, which points to history and pollution. Though its theme is grave, the play presents it in such a pleasant and delightful way. Oh borrows magic, just as Shakespeare treats his serious themes of betrayal and revenge lightly with magic in *The Tempest*.

Key words Tae-Sok Oh; Shakespeare; *My Love DMZ*; *The Tempest*; Mysticism; magic

Tae-Sok Oh was one of the best playwrights in Korea. His representative plays include *Chun-pung's Wife* (1976), *Bicycle* (1984), and *Why Did Shim-Chung Plunge into the Sea Twice?* (1990). His latest play *My Love DMZ* (2002) is concerned with the environments of the planet Earth with a backdrop of a divided country, Korea. It is basically a comedy and has a milieu of the mystical and fantastical that can also be found in William Shakespeare; in fact, Oh is also renowned for his adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. More than thirty of Oh's plays are continually being staged in Korea, and he also stages his own plays, in his own theater Aroong Theatre run by Mokwha Repertory Company, which he founded in 1984. His recent play *My Love DMZ* has been staged repeatedly since its first successful performance in 2002. His adaptations of Shakespeare's plays have been received enthusiastically in Korea and in neighboring countries including China and Japan, and reviewed favorably also in England. His first adaptation of Shakespeare *Romeo and Juliet* was performed in 1995, and this continued to evolve every time it was staged until it reached its final version in 2005. He only concerned himself with this one play of Shakespeare while he continued to focus on his own plays during that time. His adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* finally got invited to be performed in London's Barbican Centre in 2006, which turned out to be a great success. Adapting the western play *Romeo and Juliet* to his own culture, and taking it back to its birth place to be judged and critiqued by the London audience were a challenging and daunting task for the Korean director

writer. However, his bold adaptation of the play captured the attention and interest of the Western audience and took his reputation to another level nationally and internationally. This in turn seemed to have made director Oh motivated to work on other plays of Shakespeare. Oh staged *Macbeth* in the following year in 2007 and *The Tempest* in 2010.

Even before Oh worked on his adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in which sorcery and magic serve as the driving force moving the action forward, Oh uses a similar motif of fantasy in his play *My Love DMZ*. Both are fantastical comedies with a mixture of seriousness, but with a cheerful, festival ending. *My Love DMZ* is about animals living in the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) trying to prevent humans from building Kyongwon Railway in their territory. They are afraid that as soon as humans remove all the mines in the minefield in the DMZ, they will build the railway, which will pollute their environment; human footsteps on the land in turn will bring a catastrophic ending to their peaceful lives. However, they are powerless to defend themselves against the humans. They decide to resurrect the dead soldiers killed during the Korean War. This can only be done through the help of a Shaman; with her help they bring the soldiers alive. Upon accomplishing their mission to protect the DMZ, however, they should return to the world of the dead, but before they disappear we get to hear what they had suffered from during the Korean War. Although the play has a different storyline from that of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in which Prospero the protagonist takes revenge on his brother Antonio, who usurped his rightful place 12 years before, and in recompense and in the attempt to marry his daughter off, who has come of age, to the son of Alonso being attendant with Antonio, Prospero creates a tempest with his magic to bring them to his island. The romance culminating in fruitful love and the revenge changed to forgiveness in *The Tempest* are the parts that differ from the storyline of *My Love DMZ*. However, both plays, set in natural environments separated from human touch, render similar moods. Such settings create a perfect atmosphere and mood for illusion and fantasy. Influenced by tragicomedy, the two plays — one from the West and the other from the East — deal with illusion rather seriously. They each create an aura of magical illusions similarly.

The way spirituality, fantasy, and the supernatural in *The Tempest* work is very much based on the idea that man can control the supernatural with learned magic. Prospero explains to Miranda that he had been deeply engaged in occultism and paid less attention to the government, which led his brother to have complete control over the government and to usurp his dukedom. He spent most of his time studying magic while he was duke of Milan and even after he survived his brother's plan to kill him, he continued to study magical arts through the books that were retained and given to him by Gonzalo a nobleman from Naples before he and his daughter were sailed away

from Milan. When Prospero and his three-year old daughter landed on an island and discovered Ariel trapped in a tree, he freed it. In the opening of the play, Prospero is able to wield the weather so as to create a tempest as well as conjure up spirits. At first, the spirit Ariel seems to follow all of Prospero's orders willingly: "All hail, great master! Grave sir, hail! I come/ To answer thy best pleasure, be't to fly,/ To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride/ On the curled clouds. To thy strong bidding, task/ Ariel and all his quality" (I.ii.189-193). Ariel has followed Prospero's command to take care of the tempest and business following it, but upon his giving another mission, Ariel protests: "Is there more toil? Since thou dost give me pains/ Let me remember thee what thou hast promised, / Which is not yet performed me" (I.ii. 242-43).

Ariel begs for freedom that Prospero promised him, but Prospero says he should speak no more of it until he accomplishes the mission. Prospero also threateningly reminds him of the fact that he saved him from the torture of being stuck in a pine tree in which Sycorax the evil witch had trapped him. He then says,

Prospero It was mine art,
 When I arrived and heard thee, that made gape
 The pine and let thee out.
 Ariel I thank thee, master.
 Prospero If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak
 And peg thee in his knotty entrails till
 Thou has howled away twelve winters. (I.ii. 291-96)

Prospero does tell Ariel that he will set him free in two days, but it is only through threats and manipulation that he lets him have his own way. Ariel in some theatrical film productions of *The Tempest* has been performed with bitterness. One example of this is Ariel played by the middle-aged, portly Simon Russell Beale in 1993: "This Ariel was unsprightly, resentful of Prospero to the point of, famously, spitting in his master's face at the moment he was freed . . ." (Brokaw 25). Ariel as a servant is loyal to Prospero not from his heart but from the pressure that he should be grateful for his master's action of generosity offered in the past. He is a good spirit because he believes that he owes Prospero as much. In truth it would not terribly hurt the soundness of his morale even if he escapes from him without carrying out his orders at this point of the play because he has paid off his debt by doing him a favor of creating the tempest and bringing the people boarded on the ship to the island safe and sound. Ariel, however, obediently follows Prospero's next orders regardless of his threatening and condescending words. Though Prospero tells Ariel that he loves him as he says, "Dearly my delicate Ariel" to Ariel's question, "Do you love me master,

no?” (IV.i. 48-49), Prospero’s treatment of his servant is not always pleasing.

It is interesting to see the difference in the treatment of servants by magicians between *The Tempest* and *My Love DMZ*. Maybe, the difference lies deep in us the eastern people and the western. That is, the way the magician treats his servant in Shakespeare is greatly different from the way the Shaman treats hers in Tae-Sok Oh’s *My Love DMZ*.

In *My Love DMZ*¹, the Shaman, the mediator of this world and the other, is sought out by the senior member of the animal world the Goat. The Goat is wise and tries to be in control of the precarious situation the animals are facing. Yet, the magic can only be performed by the Shaman to resurrect the dead soldiers. As soon as the Shaman comes into view, she demands the animals to get her garlic, ginger, mug-wort, acorn curd, two bags of corn, three bowls of chestnuts, and so forth to perform the ceremony for reincarnation. She exclaims with charisma, “Go get fire from the Eight Provinces of the Korean peninsula” (Kiln).² What is interesting about the scene is that her demands for the ceremony are rather detailed, asking for all the ingredients and contents necessary for the spell to work. Traditionally, the Shaman is female in Korea, and the Shaman in this scene acts and speaks with much authority as she commands the animals to prepare for the ceremony. Although her voice shows her authority, she comes across more as a messenger offering guidance to the animals. She can wield her magic, but in cooperation with the animals that she asked to run errands. One of the humorous scenes in the play is when she asks for a gallbladder from a bear. To this, the Badger says, “Well not quite. We didn’t know what you wanted—either the gallbladder from a bear or from a rabbit—so, we have whispered into the ear of the rabbit to pull out his gallbladder and hang it in the wind” (Kiln). But the Shaman insists that it should be one from a bear. Oh creates some complication in this scene for intensity by telling the animals that “The four-footed animals’ bladders should be taken out after the 15th, when the tide is full. If not, the bladder rots, and can’t be put back” (Kiln). Of course, there are no sacrifices or deaths in the play as there is none in *The Tempest*. The shaman is very specific about her demands concerning how the animals should obtain the materials and the attitude they should have as they perform the ceremony. Part of her commands is delivered by singing. Oh also draws on mystical elements about Shamshin Goddess, who is responsible for enabling women to conceive, and when dealing with getting the bladder out from the bear, the Shaman evokes the image of a woman giving birth to a child by making the bear thrust the bladder out from his body. The stage direction says, “The gallbladder is coming out at length. Ox wraps it up with the leaves of plaintain” (Kiln). The fire imagery that Oh uses in the scene also adds to the atmosphere of the mystical; the Stork was responsible for getting fire from the eight provinces in Korea. Shaman

chants consistently to arouse the dead souls, and at last, the Shaman says, “ Samshin Goddess,/ Sit behind the top of the kiln and help it force them out/ With as much power as a volcano eruption/ Or with the power of hauling up the buckets of water from the well/ In a nine-year drought” (Kiln). Oh relies on the audience’s knowledge of mysticism, and the whole business of reincarnating dead soldiers invokes the traditional belief in supernatural power in the Korean audience. Shakespeare also does this in *The Tempest* in Act 4 scene 1: Prospero calls forth spirits to bless the love between Miranda and Ferdinand. Iris enters the scene and describes the beautiful landscape of the groves which Ceres has inhabited and asks Ceres to come and join them to celebrate their marriage. Iris, Ceres, and Juno speak briefly about their own affairs, but soon sing together to wish the couple a happy marriage. The singing and dancing of nymphs and spirits creates a festival mood, which is visible to the young couple and Prospero .

The supernatural interacts with humans physically and psychologically affecting each other. The audience interested in the interaction between humans and mythological figures would be fascinated by the festive aura the spirits create in *The Tempest*, and Oh’s *My Love DMZ* is quite Shakespearean in this sense. Oh is also a director who is very much interested in the ways in which our beliefs in the myths affect our lives. It makes sense that he would turn his attention to *The Tempest* for his third adaptation of Shakespeare in 2010 after numerous staging of the tragicomedy *My Love DMZ* since 2002. A lot of his own plays deal with Korean mythology and spirituality, but it is also important to note that the recurring themes in his plays have a lot to do with his personal life.

Tae-Sok Oh has always been writing his plays in terms of the Korean past: ghosts and spirits of the tragic history of Korea continually haunt him. Born in 1940, Oh is the generation of the Japanese Imperial Rule of Korea, who experienced the Korean War that followed it. This is why many of his plays are interspersed with his tragic recollections in Korean history. His family was torn apart because of the Korean War during which he lost his father. Just like many families during that time, they had to seek refuge abandoning their home and possessions to escape from the attack by the North. The clash between the North and the South became a painful collective memory; following the Korean War, political upheavals and the dictatorship continued to wreck people’s lives. Oh often deals with this theme in conjunction with mythology in his plays. As Jeong points out, “Oh’s plays reflect Korean history in combination with modern daily life and culture” (172). Jeong writes that he is much like Brian Friel in that the past is always in the present (172). He is a playwright director who makes full use of what he knows about his own country and heritage, and this is not limited to the themes.

What is noteworthy is that Tae-Sok Oh as a Korean playwright director makes full and effective use of the dramaturgy of traditional drama such as *kamyunkuk* (mask drama) and *pansori* (musical). These dramatic forms employ a great deal of traditional choreographic movements³ and the musical that involves traditional string instruments and drums. Kim claims that “Oh is often regarded as a playwright who can best express Korean sentiment through music and body language on the stage” (172). Oh’s plays are very Korean in that they often contain Korean heritage. However, as Ah-jeong Kim observes, “Oh breaks down traditions and reconstructs them in a new theatrical form that challenges both old and current conventions alike” (19). This can be seen in *My Love DMZ*. The Shaman sings in the form of *pansori* (musical), but it is in loose form to suit modern theater.⁴

My Love DMZ has all the qualities that can be defined as Korean. It touches on the sorrows of the Korean past; it uses traditional dramatic forms to draw the audience into the play; and it uses folk instruments and forms of traditional musical for Korean sentiments. However, it also deals with themes that concern the modern people such as environmental issues. One of them is the problem of pesticides: the bees are being killed off as a result, and the animals worry that the humans will have to pollinate but that they will never be able to recover the ecosystem that has once been destroyed. We encounter this problem at the beginning the play in which the D-Bee speaks of the mass destructions of bees affected by insecticide and of many bees fleeing over to the DMZ. During the discussion of the phenomena, the Daddy Cow-Dung Roller asks, “When bees are all gone, who will pollinate flowers?”:

D-Bee: Humans, of course!

Daddy Cow-Dung Roller: Are you crazy? How could humans be bees?

D-Bee: Climbing up a tree with a brush, they point the tip of brush with the pollen (gesturing the act of pointing the brush) from a stamen to a pistil. It is the artificial pollination. (One Night Before a Great Storm)

The dialogue gives us the frightening picture of the future from the perspective of the animals; but it raises the audience’s awareness of the current environmental issues. Over the course of the play, Oh continually brings our attention to such issue and to the fact that Korea is a divided nation through the setting and resurrected soldiers. However, these are consistently interrupted by occasional humor provoked by ridiculous behaviors of the animals and the comical Shaman.

My Love DMZ is a reflection of Korea’s past and present, and a culturally crafted play using Korean mysticism. This play points to one of the biggest issues we humans face today; though the theme is grave, the play entertains us in such a pleasant and

delightful way with the aid of a Shaman and her magic, with the supernatural power she borrows. Just as Shakespeare wraps up his serious themes of betrayal and revenge with the story of spirits and nymphs and Prospero's magic in *The Tempest*, so does Oh in a very successful way.

Notes

1. The playbook I used for this paper is one used for the 2010 performance. The translation is based on Oh, Tae-Sok's revised version of the play *My Love DMZ*. The first version of *My Love DMZ* had first been performed at Aroong Theatre from July 16 through August 31 in 2002. This play was radically revised in the later version, with additions of new characters, particularly the main characters, who are a family of cow dung-rollers, and the chorus.
2. Tae-Sok Oh does not divide *My Love DMZ* into Acts and Scenes; it is divided into titled sections and this section is entitled "Kiln." Such division of scenes is typical of his plays. In addition, there is no English translation in publication as of yet, so I have translated the original lines into English.
3. Yang mentions that the aesthetic characteristic of the language Oh uses on stage is "the emotionally comfortable rhythm and body language in accordance with it" (42). Another characteristic of Oh's stage is, according to Lee, that he often uses the elements of *madangnori* (yard play). One aspect of it is that "the audience is regarded as potential actors as the actors approach the audience in the yard and strike up a conversation with its members during the performance of the play" (523).
4. In his early career as a playwright director, Oh thought he should just try to learn the practice of Western theater before he realized Korea had its own dramatic archetypes and theatrical forms. This is because, as Oh says in an interview with So, "The form of Korea's modern theater came from the west. The theater itself, the concept of drama [came from the west] . . ." (95).

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