

## Returning to Dublin as an Imaginary Hometown: Lim Young-Woong's Voyage to *Waiting for Godot*

Hwang Yuh-Jhung

### Abstract

This article explores the history of staging *Waiting for Godot* in Korea by looking at the case of the Sanwoollim theatre company during the 1960s and 2000s. In particular, it focuses on how the premiere of the play was first performed on Korean stage in 1969 and how that has been linked to this Korean theatre company's visits to Dublin in 1990 and 2008: the first visit to Dublin was to the 1990 Dublin theatre festival, and the second was to perform at the Samuel Beckett Theatre in Trinity College Dublin during 2008. In doing so, this article highlights how a Korean director, Lim Young-Woong's perception of Dublin may be understood as revealing this city as an imaginary hometown for over forty years. This is a particular phenomenon especially when we consider that Irish theatre played a significant role in shaping modern Korean drama during the period of Japanese rule in the early twentieth century, when some Korean playwrights were inspired by their Irish counterparts. In this context, it could be stated that Irish theatre functions as a 'nostalgic institution'. Thus, this article should be read as a specific example of the imaginary link between Ireland and Korea in the theatre field via Beckett's play.

**Keywords:** Sanwoollim Theatre Company, *Waiting for Godot*, an Imaginary Hometown, Irish Theatre, Lim Young-Woong

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## Dublin as an Imaginary Hometown

It was in October 2008 that the *Sanwoollim* (산울림)<sup>1</sup> theatre company's *Waiting for Godot* was staged between the 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> in the Samuel Beckett Theatre at Trinity College Dublin. This event was staged to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of diplomatic relations between Ireland and the Republic of Korea. It was the second visit of this Korean theatre company to the home of Samuel Beckett, and was regarded as a symbolic event, the Korean version of *Waiting for Godot*—directed by Lim Young-Woong—having been performed for the first time in the history of Korean theatre in Beckett's 'alma mater'.<sup>2</sup> One Korean newspaper reporter who accompanied the Sanwoollim's touring production to Dublin from Seoul, watched and described the performance as "a piece of oriental ink-painting"<sup>3</sup> on the Dublin stage. After returning to Seoul, the Korean director staged his production again over the course of a month to celebrate the successful Dublin tour.<sup>4</sup>

Lim (born in 1934) was the first Korean theatre director to stage *Waiting for Godot* in Seoul, in 1969, the year in which the play was first translated into Korean. Since then Lim and his Sanwoollim theatre company have produced the play almost every year, except for a long break during an intense period of military dictatorship, lasting between 1974 and 1984.<sup>5</sup> [By 2009, it had been performed "more than 1,100 times"<sup>6</sup> and the production recreated "more than 20 times".<sup>7</sup>] Lim's wife, Oh Jeung-Ja, a former professor of French Literature at Seoul Women's University, was the first Korean translator of the play<sup>8</sup>; their son, Lim Soo-Hyun, a professor of French Literature at the same university, received a PhD degree in Beckett's drama from the University of Paris IV. This family is known as the Korean family of "*Godot* experts"<sup>9</sup> among the Korean theatrical community. When the Sanwoollim marked its fortieth anniversary in 2009, one of the Korean journalists expressed his homage to this Korean director, stating "Oh Jeung-Ja is Lim Young-Woong; He is Sanwoollim; Sanwoollim is *Godot*; so that the Sanwoollim's *Waiting for Godot* has become a living theatre history, art history and modern history in Korea."<sup>10</sup> Such praise indicates that it would be impossible to discuss *Waiting for Godot* on the Korean stage without serious consideration of Lim Young-Woong and his Sanwoollim theatre company in the context of Korean theatre history. To put another way, if you majored in theatre studies in Korea, watching the Sanwoollim theatre company's *Waiting for Godot* would be an unmissable element of studying contemporary Korean theatre. It is

<sup>1</sup> The website for the Sanwoollim theatre can be accessed at: <http://www.sanwoollim.kr>

<sup>2</sup> "Korean *Godot* was Successful in the Author's Home Country, too". *Munhwa Ilbo* (October 22, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> "*Waiting for Godot* Returns Home". *Chosun Ilbo* (October 23, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Kim Seung-Hyun, "Favourite Responses by Local Dublin People, Return to Korea in Glory, Give the Korean Audiences a New Impression". *Munhwa Ilbo* (November 19, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Kim Ill-Song, "As if it would be My Last Performance in My Life: Lim Young-Woong". *Webzine Arko* (2008).

<sup>6</sup> "*Waiting for Godot* Marks 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in Korea". *Korea Times* (September 2, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Yae Jin-Soo, "Power Interview: 'Every Human Waits for *Godot* as to Whether it is a God or Himself': A Director of the Sanwoollim Theatre Company Lim Young-Woong". *Etimes News* (August 10, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> For this reason, the Korean translation work of *Waiting for Godot* had been found in the French literature collections in local Korean bookstores until the 2000s. It was in 1991 that the collection of Beckett's plays was translated by Lee Won-Gi and published in Korean ("The Collection of Beckett's Absurd Plays published in Korean". *Hangyurae*, (December 7, 1991, p.9).

<sup>9</sup> Jang Byung-Wook, "Lim Young-Woong's Family". *Hanguk Ilbo* (September 23, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Choi Jae-Chun, "'*Godot*' 40 years, 'Sanwoollim' 40 years, and 'Lim Young-Woong' 40 years". *Sisa Cubism* (November 1, 2009).

therefore no exaggeration to say that speaking about the Korean reception of *Waiting for Godot* is, for the most part, all about Lim and his Sanwoollim theatre company.

However, although Lim's production has over the years been viewed as part of the Korean theatrical cannon—namely, representative of *Waiting for Godot* on the Korean stage—it has led local theatre critics to consider his work as a “world-famous *Godot*”.<sup>11</sup> A major concern here is what compelled Lim to keep staging *Godot* over forty years, it being quite rare for the same director to stage the same play for such a long period of time.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, it might be useful to notice that some Korean newspapers emphasised the Sanwoollim's staging of *Godot* in the Beckett Centre of Trinity College Dublin with a markedly excited tone, as if that were the final destination for this theatre company. In particular, the *Chosun Ilbo* (daily newspaper) ran the headline “[Lim Young-Woong's] *Waiting for Godot* returns home”.<sup>13</sup> This highlights what my article focuses on, in terms of how Lim perceived Dublin and Irish theatre during his lifelong contribution to *Godot*. This headline may suggest how Dublin was framed and perceived by Lim. He said that “it is an honour for the Sanwoollim to stage *Godot* at the author's alma mater as well as in the author's hometown”.<sup>14</sup> He also claimed that “I am just a messenger to deliver Beckett's text to the audience”.<sup>15</sup> To mark the author's hundredth birthday Lim wrote in an open ‘imaginary’ letter to Beckett that “[w]hen I first encountered your play, you were so far away from me, but now I feel very close to you” though he never had the chance to meet the author in person.<sup>16</sup>

Yet this does not fully explain whether Lim has been producing the play only as a means of respecting the author, and thus considered his visit to Dublin as a great ‘honour’. It requires particular attention when we think of the context of Korean theatre history. Indeed, Irish theatre played a pivotal role in shaping modern Korean drama during the period of Japanese rule in the early twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> Because of political similarities between Ireland and Korea at that time, Korean intellectuals who had studied in Japan found an example by which they might forge a modern Korean theatre from the Irish dramatic movement and Irish theatre. In this respect, as Lim recalled, his former generation's preference for Irish theatre affected his attitude toward *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>18</sup> This is coupled with the fact that his mentor, Yu Chi-jin, was an advocate of Sean O'Casey's plays as a key example of what Korean theatre should be like during the Japanese colonial period.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, it was natural for Lim to choose Beckett's play, because for him *Godot* was another name for Irish theatre. As Patrice Pavis writes, “[a] foreign culture, an *other* culture, is one that fascinates by what one recognises and what one fails to recognise in it”.<sup>20</sup> In the context of Korean theatre, Lim's fascination with

<sup>11</sup> Lee Se-Gi, “Human Being's Flavour, Lim's Theatre”. *Culture Art* (February 2002), 97.

<sup>12</sup> Yae, “Power Interview”.

<sup>13</sup> “*Waiting for Godot* Returns Home”. *Chosun Ilbo*, 23 October 2008.

<sup>14</sup> “Lim's *Godot* is invited to the Beckett Centre in Dublin”, *Asia Today*, 5 June 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Lim Young-Woong, “My *Godot* and Theatre Life”, *Chosun Ilbo*, 3 November 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Lim Young-Woong, “A Letter to Samuel Beckett”, *Chosun Ilbo*, 7 April 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Hwang Yuh-Jhung, “A Mad Mother and Her Dead Son: The Impact of the Irish Theatre on Modern Korean Theatre”. *Literature Compass* 9:8 (2012), 560-569.

<sup>18</sup> “Lim Young-Woong, the Sanwoollim Theatre Director: ‘Godot is an Instinct of Contemporary Human Being Wandering’”, *Hanguk Ilbo*, 2 September 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Hwang, “A Mad Mother and Her Dead Son”, 564-565.

<sup>20</sup> Patrice Pavis, “Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?” in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, edited by Patrice Pavis (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 11-12 [Emphasis is in original].

Beckett's work indicates that there is an imaginary link between Korea and Ireland, just as the works of O'Casey and others had for the previous generation in Korea.

As Stuart Hall points out, "the moment of the rediscovery of a place [...], of one's roots, of one's contexts" would be "a necessary moment of enunciation".<sup>21</sup> In Lim's case, it could be stated that this "moment of the rediscovery" of his artistic roots was implicated through *Waiting for Godot*. Here, Dublin served as a place where the "enunciation" of his respect for Beckett is articulated. By positioning Dublin as his imaginary root of theatre, Lim could have made a voyage to Beckett's play to pursue the "search for a universal theatre language."<sup>22</sup> In this sense, we might call Dublin an imaginary hometown. The concept of the imaginary hometown is linked to Pierre Nora's *lieu de mémoire*, the place of memory. The *lieu de mémoire* serves "double" functions: "a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations".<sup>23</sup> For Lim, Dublin as an imaginary hometown is converged on Irish theatre, which he did not know that well and which chiefly signified Beckett's hometown. This approach enables us to explain how Lim perceived Dublin and what drove him to continue staging the play for decades.

This article shows how Lim's long voyage to *Waiting for Godot* started in the first place. It then deals with how the premiere of the play enabled two international tours to Dublin, and how these productions were received by local Irish critics. The first visit to Dublin took place during the 1990 Dublin Theatre Festival and the second was at the Samuel Beckett Theatre of Trinity College Dublin in 2008. These events show that Lim's perception of shaping Dublin as an imaginary hometown for such a long period is reflected in the history of his Sanwoollim theatre company in accordance with the development of contemporary Korean theatre. In doing so, this article can be read as an exemplary case of how a theatre director's perception of a particular play is intertwined with his pursuit of artistic credit and internalised within it. It will also reveal a specific example of the imaginary link between Ireland and Korea in the theatrical field.

### The Start of the Voyage to *Waiting for Godot*

Lim Young-Woong was born into a famous family of musicians: his father was a well-known jazz musician in Korea and Japan; his uncle established Seoul Arts High School and was a conductor with the Korean Broadcasting Company's orchestra.<sup>24</sup> At Yu Chi-Jin's suggestion, he started his career as a theatre director when he was a high school student in the mid 1950s.

Though Lim's *Godot* production has been known to Korean audiences as the Sanwoollim's theatrical signature, he has directed a wide range of theatre practices, ranging from realist plays to absurdist drama, since making his theatrical debut with a Korean musical entitled *Come Closer, Quietly* (살짜기 읊서예) in 1966.<sup>25</sup> Apart from his

<sup>21</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity", in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions of the Representation of Identity*, edited by Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 36.

<sup>22</sup> Pavis, "Introduction", 6.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire". *Representations*, no.26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989), 24.

<sup>24</sup> "Power Interview: 'I Wanted to Demolish My Small Theatre Where I Sold My Property and Built'", *Hangyung*, (March 25, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Kim Hyung-Ki and Lim Seon-Ok (eds), *Sketching in Contemporary Korean Theatre* (Seoul: Korean Association of Theatre Critics, 2006), 54.

lifelong contribution to *Godot*, Lim's reputation has been founded on being "a director of realism who, conservative in nature, respects the text foremost".<sup>26</sup>

In the history of Korean theatre, Lim's *Waiting for Godot* is viewed as revealing the "traditional and original moves and rhythm of Korea".<sup>27</sup> However, it would seem to him that it is more significant to produce *Godot* "without cutting off and reducing the length of the original text",<sup>28</sup> rather than highlighting the characteristics of local Korean theatre. This is clearly demonstrated by his emphasis on 'the' feature of the Samwoollim's production: "I would try to reveal the universality of the human condition, each time I stage *Godot*".<sup>29</sup>

For Lim, staging the play without cutting a word is a way of expressing his respect for Beckett. Indeed, such a profound respect for the author is quite distinguishable from other contemporary Korean theatre directors, such as Oh Tae-Suk, whose theatrical works relied entirely on the "cultural heritage of Korea as one of its primary sources of [his] inspiration".<sup>30</sup> As the Korean theatre critic Kim Yun-Cheol argues, Lim's conservative attitude with regards to respecting the play's text is to be considered desirable, due to the fact that contemporary Korean theatre has had a negative tendency to neglect the importance of the original text of the play without any artistic justification.<sup>31</sup>

Lim reflected on his long voyage to *Godot* that "it is quite at odds with my (indirect) relationship to Beckett".<sup>32</sup> Indeed, this statement is supported by the following anecdotes: in December 1969, just one week before Lim first produced the play on the Korean stage, he got news that Beckett had won the Nobel Prize; while touring Dublin with his production for the first time, he wished that he could meet Beckett in person and show him the production. But, as Beckett had died that same year, Lim's wish didn't come true. These episodes are frequently mentioned by Lim himself when recalling his productions, to place an emphasis on "the inevitability of the link"<sup>33</sup> between himself and the author.

The reason Lim decided to stage Beckett's play before the author's Nobel Prize was due to his profession as a journalist for *Chosun Ilbo*, where he was in charge of the cultural section in the late 1950s.<sup>34</sup> He had first read Beckett's play as a piece of contemporary dramatic literature through a translated work in Japanese. As he recalled, it was a "huge shock"<sup>35</sup> to him, due to the play's innovative form.

When Beckett received the Nobel Prize just one week before the Korean premiere of *Godot*, the news was sufficient to attract Korean audiences, who had no experience of absurdist drama. This public curiosity led to tickets selling out even before the opening night. As a result, Lim's premiere of *Godot* was a resounding success and Korean theatre critics regard this production as a "remarkable theatrical event of the 1960s".<sup>36</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>27</sup> Park Young-Jae, *An Overview of Korean Performing Arts: Theatre in Korea* (Seoul: Korean Arts Management Service, 2010), 48.

<sup>28</sup> Kim Ill-Song, "As if it would be my last performance in my life": Lim Young-Woong". *Webzine Arko* (2008).

<sup>29</sup> "Waiting Becomes a Time of History: *Waiting for Godot*". *Pressian* (October 25, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Kim & Lim, *Sketching*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Kim Yun-Cheol's comments on Lim's *Godot* in KBS [the Korean Broadcasting System] TV: *31 Year-Long Wait: Lim Young-Woong* (March 13, 2000, 60 min).

<sup>32</sup> Lim, "A Letter to Samuel Beckett".

<sup>33</sup> "A Theatre Director Lim Young-Woong Whose Sanwoolim Theatre Marks Its 20th Anniversary", *Hangyurae* (March 1, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Kim Jung-Hyung, "Kim Jung-Hyung's History Column: Lim Young-Woong and *Waiting for Godot*". *News Maker* (September 3, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> Lim, "A Letter to Samuel Beckett".

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 20.

However, the rehearsal process was far from simple. Although Lim knew Beckett's contemporary work, he had no experience of watching a performance of *Waiting for Godot* and so had no reference point by which he could understand Beckett's play in a Korean context. Thus, he had to struggle to figure out the context of the text on his own for its premiere. As he recalled, in an attempt to perform the play, "the actors practiced for about 18 hours, from 1 pm to 7 am, the next day. They rehearsed so much that they couldn't even walk as their soles were discharging pus".<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this reveals what the contemporary situation of Korean theatre looked like at that time, particularly when we think that "[i]n the 1960s in Korea, the focus [of the theatre] was on translating, and sometimes imitating, Western theatre".<sup>38</sup> To put it another way, once a new Western play was introduced and staged, or once a new attempt to stage was made by local theatre practitioners, such a production necessarily became the first on the Korean stage, thereby establishing a new theatrical tradition in the context of Korean theatre history—no matter what the quality, or the theatre director's intention. Lim's first production of *Godot* took place in this same context.

Furthermore, at the time *Godot* was first produced on the Korean stage in 1969,<sup>39</sup> the nation was undergoing a period of military dictatorship. The atmosphere of Korean society was notably suppressed by Park Chung-Hee's military government (1961-1979) which oppressed people and limited their freedom (of expression), fearing any sort of gatherings would be used to organise political resistance.

Such a social atmosphere necessitated the development of an anti-realistic theatrical practice, which predominated in the 1960s and 1970s, in an attempt to avoid state censorship. Korean theatre practitioners performed plays in a stylised manner that was deeply based on an allegory of contemporary Korean society or the combination of theatre with local traditional folk culture. This trend ironically resulted in Korean theatre's renaissance concomitant with a "little theatre movement"<sup>40</sup> (소극장 운동, *sogŭkchang undong*). It is in this sense, through theatre companies attempting to pursue artistic theatre practices that Western plays were introduced, or translated Western plays were fused with Korean traditional folk theatre in the 1960s and 1970s. Given that modern Korean realist drama was established only after the 1930s during the Japanese colonial period, Lim's premiere of the play came out of the dire political situation that saw the Korean theatre striving to forge a link to anti-realist drama.

Lim recalled that he tried to grasp Beckett's text as a new style of comedy, combining elements of humour and despair.<sup>41</sup> In this production, the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon were represented as "comedians of vaudeville"<sup>42</sup> and at the same time Lim endeavoured to reveal that there was no glimpse of hope under the oppressive atmosphere of a military regime.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> "In-Depth Interview: Theatre Maestro Finds *Godot* Once More", *Joong Ang Daily* (September 5, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scène: Staging Theatre Today*, trans. Joel Anderson (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 122.

<sup>39</sup> The Play was premiered between 17th and 23th of December 1969 at the Hankuk Ilbo Theatre in Seoul. Cast: Vladimir (Kim Sung-Ok); Estragon (Ham Hyun-Jin); Pozzo (Kim Moo-Saeng); Lucky (Kim In-Tae); Boy (Lee Jae-In); Kim Ga-Hee, "A Study of the Performance History of Lim Young-Woong's *Waiting for Godot*" (MA Thesis, Chung-Ang University, 2003), 60.

<sup>40</sup> The 'Little Theatre Movement' took place in early twentieth century America and featured alternatives to main stream commercial theatre. In the Korean context, it occurred in the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>41</sup> Kim Kyung-Joo, "An Interview with Lim Young-Woong: 'Theatre is to Speak about Our Lives'." *Channel Yes*, 2013: <http://ch.yes24.com/Article/View/23597> [accessed on 12.06.2015].

<sup>42</sup> Kim, "A Study of the Performance", 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Ilgan Sports* (March 22, 1985), quoted in *Ibid.*, 17.

What makes the premiere of *Godot* on the Korean stage so significant is that it is not only a contemporary European drama being introduced and performed, but also that it had such an overarching potential for developing contemporary Korean theatre. As Lim said, he endeavoured to perform theatre practices as if he were a “fighting spirit for the nation’s independence from Japanese colonial rule”.<sup>44</sup> This attitude towards the theatre would be characteristic of his generation, who had lived through a complicated period of Korean political history, which had seen liberation from Japanese colonial rule, civil war, and three administrative periods of military dictatorships, before eventual democratisation. For such a generation, working as a theatre director in Korea meant creating something out of almost nothing, particularly in terms of developing Korean theatre through Western plays.

After producing *Waiting for Godot*, Lim wrote of his resolution to the *Chosun Ilbo*: “I will keep staging *Godot* as long as I am alive”.<sup>45</sup> Lim has continued to prove the Korean theatre’s particular penchant for Irish drama—which had been shaped in the nation’s colonial period.

### The First Return to Dublin at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1990

It took twenty years for the Sanwoollim to ‘return’ to Dublin in order to stage *Waiting for Godot*, from the time of its Korean premiere in 1969. David Grant, a programme director of the Dublin Theatre festival, invited the company to participate in performing the play between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 1990.<sup>46</sup> Lim’s work was performed on the Irish stage at the Project Arts Centre located in the Temple Bar, Dublin. This was the first visit of the Sanwoollim to Dublin and the second participation of this theatre company in the international theatre festival. Considering that it was extremely rare for Korean theatre practitioners to attend the international festivals of the 1980s and the 1990s, this event served as a platform for developing *Godot* as the Sanwoollim’s primary repertoire from local to global theatre.

The opportunity to attend the Dublin theatre festival came to Lim by chance. In order to explain how it was possible for the Sanwoollim to make the first international tour to Dublin, it is necessary to rewind slightly to the establishment of the Sanwoollim playhouse in the 1980s. The year 1985 was a landmark one for Lim and his Sanwoollim theatre company: after selling all his properties, Lim built up a little playhouse named the Sanwoollim in the Sinchon district, in the western area of Seoul. Its opening performance was *Waiting for Godot*. ‘Sanwoollim’ is a Korean word which can be translated as ‘mountain echo’. The name was chosen to mark Lim’s intention to spread theatre to Korean audiences, just as a mountain echo is circulated.<sup>47</sup> The theatre was a two-storey building containing 200 seats, a fan-shaped auditorium and a café. In Korean theatre history, the Sanwoollim theatre company has been well-known for shaping two main trends of contemporary Korean theatre in the 1980s and the 1990s. One is the production of *Waiting for Godot* as the Sanwoollim’s permanent repertoire. The other is to promote middle-class female audiences to stage Western translated drama and Korean local drama, both of which explore themes related to middle-aged women’s daily lives, such as divorce

<sup>44</sup> “A Theatre Director Lim Young-Woong”. *Hangyurae* (March 1, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> *Chosun Ilbo* (October 7, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Cast: Vladimir (Jung Dong-Hwan); Estragon (Song Young-Chang); Pozzo (Park Yong-Soo); Lucky (Jung Jae-Jin); Boy (Jung Kuk-Jin); Kim, “A Study of the Performance”, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Kim, “As if it would be my last performance”.



and marital problems.<sup>48</sup> In order to develop the Sanwoollim's repertoire, Oh Jeung-ja—who was a professor of French literature—translated contemporary French plays, ranging from Denise Chalem's *A Cinquante ans Elle Decouvrait la mer* to Jean Cocteau's *La Voix Humaine*, and Lim staged these literary works at the theatre. In particular, the founding of the Sanwoollim theatre was concomitant with the changing atmosphere of Korean society in the 1980s. Chun Doo-Hwan's military administration, which invested in entertainment and sports, became more liberal in order to prepare for the 1986 Seoul Asian Games and the 1988 Seoul Olympics Games. Moreover, the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 allowed Korean theatre practitioners to introduce Western playwrights from formerly socialist regimes, such as Bertolt Brecht, whose works had been prohibited in Korea for political reasons. On an official level, a conversation about peace between North and South Korea was starting to take place in the late 1980s.

Under such social circumstances, at the Arts and Culture festival for celebrating the Seoul Olympics (서울올림픽문화대축전) the Sanwoollim's *Waiting for Godot* was invited to be performed. During this period, Martin Esslin, the author of *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1960) visited Seoul. Given that he was the most influential theatre scholar of absurdist drama, it is no wonder that he watched the Korean production of *Godot*. After that, he made the following comments on the performance in an account published in a Korean daily newspaper:

The present Korean production seems to me admirable in that it goes even further on this road, by making Vladimir and Estragon into real clowns, whose movements are so closely co-ordinated that they at times become almost balletic. This emphasises the generality of the piece even further and underlines its profound inner truth, which after all, makes this play one of the major myths of our time – a myth being a statement that may not be literally true, but is essentially truer than any other type of statement ever can be. [...] In the Korean production these gags have become, in my opinion, more gentle, more highly stylised [...].<sup>49</sup>

His comments suggest how the Sanwoollim's *Godot* production achieved its particular meaning in an Asian context. Such a response to the production was also revealed by Dublin audiences when the Sanwoollim's first tour to Dublin was made in 1990, as will be discussed in the following section. It is noticeable that, as Kim contends, by describing the two main characters as 'real clowns', which contributed to shaping an optimistic atmosphere despite underlying devastating circumstances, Lim's production reflects a particular Korean sentiment embracing an optimistic approach to life, no matter how harsh.<sup>50</sup> This is different from Western productions which highlight the two characters' despair and hopelessness.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, Esslin's comments gave Lim a glimpse of hope that he might be able to produce the piece on the international stage. Admittedly, Esslin's praise became a turning point at which the Sanwoollim company changed the course of this Korean *Godot*. Prior to this French scholar's review, Lim had never thought it possible to perform the play outside

<sup>48</sup> Kim, "A Study of the Performance", 12-13.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Esslin, "Waiting for Godot: Western and Korean" (September 7, 1988). Available at: <http://www.samuel-beckett.net/Eesslin.htm> [accessed on 12.06.2015].

<sup>50</sup> Kim Yun-Cheol's comments, *31 Year-Long Wait*.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



Korea because no Western audience could understand Korean.<sup>52</sup> For Lim, Esslin was the first to confirm the aesthetic value of his production from the perspective of the ‘other’.

In the summer of 1989, through Esslin’s suggestion, Lim and the Sanwoollim theatre company attended the Avignon theatre festival. This was the first time that a Korean theatre company had participated in the international theatre festival. While at Avignon, the Sanwoollim theatre company was invited to the Dublin theatre festival scheduled to be held the following year. It is argued that theatre festivals serve “to create supra-national alliances and to mark out clearly the main aesthetic and ideological trends that transcend national boundaries”.<sup>53</sup> For Lim, who had never thought of performing the play outside Korea, participating in the Dublin theatre festival underlines that his production could be placed in the contemporary trend of global theatre.

However, Lim went further to give a particular meaning to the Dublin tour. To borrow his words, participating in the Dublin theatre festival was an “unforgettable”<sup>54</sup> moment because he was finally able to stage his production in Dublin, the city which the former generation had admired as ideal in terms of establishing a modern Korean theatre, and because it was beyond expression for him to stage his Korean *Godot* in Beckett’s hometown. A photograph of the lead actors, Park Yong-Soo and Jung Dong-Hwan, appeared on the front page of the *Irish Times* the day the festival opened.<sup>55</sup> Irish theatre critic Derek West wrote a review of the production in the same newspaper:

At the Project the Sanwoollim (Seoul) production of “Waiting for Godot” serves to assert the universality of Beckett’s play (as if we needed reminding!) [...].The language, staccato and gutsy, soars wit surges of vitality, only to dwindle to a plaintive murmur as hopes are blighted. [...] Lim’s production is both bleak and humorous. Waiting is presented as an agitated, painful process. The flight and fall of hope is portrayed with a fine attention to detail and a deep sense of sadness - never more poignantly than in the closing moonlit moments.<sup>56</sup>

On the whole, Irish newspapers gave a positive response to Lim’s production. *The Evening Press* also reported that “[f]or people who always felt that they never could understand what Beckett’s plays were about, a visit to this production might convince them that there is much more to good theatre than the actors’ lines”.<sup>57</sup> What makes the Irish response to the Korean production interesting is that some of the Irish theatre critics who wrote reviews on Lim’s production highlighted the characteristic of this production as “one of the most endearing and comical interpretations seen on the Irish stage”.<sup>58</sup> One critic even stated that “I have never seen two tramps so wreathed in smiles, so brimful of laughter, so gracefully agile, so delightfully expressive”.<sup>59</sup> These comments by local Irish critics gave the Sanwoollim confidence in their production and signified a decisive shift of the theatre company from the local to the global stage.

<sup>52</sup> “An Interview with Lim Young-Woong”, quoted in Kim, “A Study of the Performance”, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Pavis, “Introduction”, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Lim Young-Woong, “Lim Young-Woong: A Travel Photo of Memory”. *Sky News* (August 28, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> *The Irish Times* (October 2, 1990: 1).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>57</sup> Barbara Clinton, “Much More to ‘Godot’ than the Lines”. *The Evening Press* (October 2, 1990: 6).

<sup>58</sup> Amy Garvey, “Korean Godot Worth the Wait”. *The Irish Press* (October 2, 1990: 7).

<sup>59</sup> Desmond Rushe, “Godot – a Collector’s Item”, *The Irish Independent* (2 October 1990).

It is a turning point that allowed them to embark on international tours to theatre festivals. By the time the Sanwoollim revisited Dublin in 2008, the company had performed *Godot* in Poland in 1994, and Japan in 1999, and so on. The experience of attending these festivals allowed Lim to consider how a local Korean identity is intertwined with the original text.<sup>60</sup> Stuart Hall contends that “the return to the local is [...] a response to globalisation”.<sup>61</sup> In this sense, Lim has sought to combine Korean elements with the production to appeal to the international theatre audience. For example, the tree on stage was based on a pine tree,<sup>62</sup> a traditional Korean tree symbolising an eternal sense of time and space.

Unlike other characters, the Boy was the only one to wear *hanbok* (한복), a white Korean traditional costume which symbolised the “spirit of Korean folk”.<sup>63</sup> These two elements point out the company’s own “intraculturality”,<sup>64</sup> which is to say “their search for performative idioms within their own traditions”.<sup>65</sup> In other words, the intraculturality of the production reveals Korean traditions visualised within the frame of the original text. It is important to note that this is quite the opposite to other contemporary theatre directors who recreate the original text of the Western play within the frame of the authentic Korean traditional theatre. And this characteristic of Lim’s production has continued over the years. Of course, this approach is founded on his respect for Beckett.

Although the Dublin tour was successful, Lim felt sorry that Beckett couldn’t see his production, having died the same year.<sup>66</sup> It was Lim’s dream that the author could watch his production. In his open ‘imaginary’ letter to Beckett, mentioned above, Lim highlighted how the author had inspired and directly influenced his theatre directorship of *Godot*.<sup>67</sup> Yet at that time he did not imagine that the Sanwoollim would make an international tour to Dublin again. However, at a local level, it seems to be due to the company’s second visit to Dublin that the Sanwoollim’s *Godot* seemed so particular and so representative of the ‘Korean *Godot*’ in the perception of the Korean media and theatre field.

### The Second Return to Dublin: Trinity College Dublin in 2008

After the first Dublin tour, the Sanwoollim’s *Waiting for Godot* exhibited a tendency towards a higher degree of playfulness and rhythm in the 1990s.<sup>68</sup> This is in stark contrast to this theatre company’s early productions in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasising more the philosophical dimension of the play.<sup>69</sup> This reflects the changing atmosphere of Korean society in the 1990s. The transition from military to civil government led to Korean society becoming more focused on the importance of individual life style. A new generation—the so called ‘X’ generation—emerged, whose life style was deeply rooted in a sense of

<sup>60</sup> Kim, “A Study of the Performance”, 40.

<sup>61</sup> Hall, “The Local and the Global”, 33.

<sup>62</sup> Kim, “A Study of the Performance”, 44.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>64</sup> Brian Singleton, “Intercultural Shakespeare from Intracultural Sources: Two Korean Performances”, in *Globalizing Shakespeare in Korea and Beyond*, edited by Lee Hyon-U (Seoul: Dongin Publishing, 2009), 196.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Kim, “As if it would be my last performance”.

<sup>67</sup> Lim, “A Letter to Samuel Beckett”.

<sup>68</sup> Kim, “A Study of the Performance”, 47-50.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 25.

individualism, represented by the novels of Murakami Haruki, which were quite popular among the young people at that time and which were characterised by youthful protagonists' excessive pursuit of freedom. Members of the X generation valued individual pleasure and urban modernity, and did not want to be burdened with the responsibilities of the traditional family system. Their hobbies and concerns were entirely influenced by Western music and films. As part of this social trend, Korean theatre culture became more commercialised, and there followed a boom in commercial theatrical productions, such as Western-style musicals and comedies.

However, it remains uncertain to what degree contemporary Korean society was reflected in this later production, as Lim followed the original text so closely, without making any alteration to it. It is quite true that Lim's *Godot* production does not fully adopt a contemporary approach to the representation of the play. Instead he revealed the universal dimension of the play which is represented by the two tramps as "universal clowns".<sup>70</sup> Hwang Hoon-Sung makes the point that given that the production's tendency to highlight the two characters as clowns has not changed since its premiere, it must consider how best to reflect "the structure of contemporary Korean sentiment" within that tendency.<sup>71</sup> Yet the fact that Lim has an extensive focus on the original text of the play itself could be understood as revealing an aspect of Korean theatre among contemporary performance in Korea. As discussed previously, the faithful respect for the text is also a means to prove one artistic credit. Given that for Lim the preservation of the text is a homage to Beckett, that attitude also enables him to transcend national boundaries through his production on the international stage. This is what he intended to demonstrate in his production to Dublin audiences during the two visits.

As mentioned previously, the Sanwoollim theatre company's second return to Dublin was held at Trinity College. Before the Sanwoollim theatre company went to Dublin, most Korean media dealt with this issue as an important event within Korean theatre history. In an interview with Korean media, Lim appeared determined. He says:

I think that going to the Beckett Centre to stage my production would be my final destination in my life. I am so delighted to finally go to Beckett's alma mater. 'Godot' is still anew to me. I didn't change the text over the past 40 years. I am still waiting for what 'Godot' means and still waiting for Godot. I hope that my grave will be on my stage.<sup>72</sup>

However, it has been difficult to find a published account of this production in the local Dublin press of that time, despite the Korean media having reported that Sanwoollim's second visit to Dublin was "well-received by the author's hometown".<sup>73</sup> The lack of coverage in the Irish media is somewhat at odds with this enthusiastic and seemingly exaggerated reaction in the Korean media to Lim's staging of *Godot* in Dublin. One of the audience members watching the production at that time wrote in a blog entitled *Script* that "He [Lim] obviously has a lot of respect for the author as it was as true to the original as

<sup>70</sup> Amy Garvey, "Korean Godot".

<sup>71</sup> Hwang Hoon-Sung, "Oriental Godot? Korean Godot?". *The Korean Theatre Journal*, vol.37 (2005), 93.

<sup>72</sup> Kim, "As If it would be my last performance".

<sup>73</sup> "Favourite Responses by Local Dublin People". *Munhwa Ilbo* (October, 2008).

could be, with the performers as passionate and engaged with the text as any other production I had seen”.<sup>74</sup>

What is interesting to note here is that this blogger sees “cultural differences [between East and West]”<sup>75</sup> when he noticed that some quoted comments, which the Sanwoollim accepted as revealing the significance of the performance, are hardly used in Western theatre reviews. According to the blogger, during the post show discussion “the Sanwoollim theatre company was “very proud of critics’ quotes claiming that the piece was ‘mellowing’ and ‘objective’, not words we usually associated with theatre (or indeed *Godot*)”.<sup>76</sup> This observation brings us to the point that the Sanwoollim’s second visit to Dublin demonstrates a particular way to respond to Irish theatre and integrate it within the theatrical history of Korea. For this reason, it allows us to recall the director’s perception of *Godot* in relation to a particular link that minimises the cultural differences between Ireland and Korea. It is often said that the similarity between Ireland and Korea lies in the fact that “[t]hey both have a long history of occupation, have experienced sudden economic booms which have changed values in both countries”.<sup>77</sup> This implies that these similarities could forge an imaginary link between the two cultures and transcend the cultural differences between them.

As discussed earlier, based on his perception of Dublin as an imaginary hometown, Lim’s production is in the first instance a work guided by the original text. His theatrical practice seeks to explore the universal dimension of the play that later combined local Korean elements. And it is premised on the belief that the two countries have in common the similarities cited above. This is where Lim’s voyage to *Godot* starts and ends. Again, it is important to note that such an attempt derives from the continuity of the imaginary link Lim pursues throughout all the elements of the production of *Godot*, and which becomes in a sense his artistic fidelity.

### Conclusion: Irish Theatre as a “nostalgic Institution”

This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Sanwoollim theatre’s foundation. In order to celebrate this occasion, there has been a related exhibition entitled “Lim’s *Waiting for Godot* and its archives”<sup>78</sup> in Seoul, which took place from last December to this May. In this exhibition, Korean visitors can see how the Korean history of *Waiting for Godot* has been developed and changed through the decades, by looking at primary materials such as posters, photos and news clippings. As the archival exhibition reveals, although Lim has staged a diverse range of plays, from contemporary Korean plays to Western canonical drama, it is an acknowledged fact that he is viewed as representative of the Korean reception of *Godot*. The archival exhibition condenses Lim’s voyage to Dublin for forty-five years in terms of his attitude towards Irish theatre.

Admittedly, it is an unusual phenomenon that a respect for one particular author brings about another artist’s lifelong contribution to that author’s work. If we think that Dublin serves as an imaginary hometown, enabling Lim to constantly perform the play, it could also possibly be considered a peculiar meaning of Irish theatre for Lim Young-

<sup>74</sup> <http://scriptonline.blogspot.ie/2008/10/more-mixed-salad-than-melting-potday-4.html> [accessed on 11.06.2015].

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> “When Movement is the Closest Translation”. *The Irish Times* (November 10, 2008, 16).

<sup>78</sup> “In Memory of a Hero in the Korean Theatre”. *Seoul Daily newspaper* (16 December 2014).

Woong. His long pursuit for *Godot* reminds us of a “nostalgic institution”,<sup>79</sup> a place where the realms of memory are ephemerally placed. For Lim, it could be said that Irish theatre represented by *Waiting for Godot*, functions as just such a nostalgic institution. In the context of Korean theatre history, it is impossible to find such a special enthusiasm for a specific Western nation, except for Ireland. If a part of the Korean theatre history summarises a struggle for establishing its tradition throughout internalising the other (Western theatre), Lim Young-Woong and his Sanwoollim theatre company could be situated in that context. Such an effort to create a concrete signature of *Waiting for Godot* has been possible only via an imaginary link between Korea and Ireland. I hope that this article will provide a platform for triggering further research on the cultural links between the two nations.

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<sup>79</sup> Nora, “Between Memory and History”, 20.

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