

Couple from South Korea take big step forward moving to join Tulsa Ballet

For dancing couple, move to Oklahoma was a big step forward

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When dancers Hyon-jun Rhee and Youhee Son made the decision to commit themselves to leaving South Korea for jobs in Tulsa, they also decided it was necessary to make another, even more personal commitment.

"Before we had signed the contract with Tulsa Ballet," Rhee said, "we got married. And that took place on the third anniversary of our being together, so it was a very special day in many ways."

But there was also a practical side to the decision.

"Actually, it was our parents who suggested it," Son said. "They thought it would make things easier (from a legal standpoint) if we were married when we came to the United States."

Rhee and Son joined Tulsa Ballet midway through last season, performing in the company's productions of "Lady of the Camellias," "Balanchine and Beyond" and "Off the Floor: Creations in Studio K."

Before coming to Tulsa, the couple were members of South Korea's Universal Ballet, one of that country's top ballet troupes, where Rhee was a principal dancer and Son a senior soloist.

However, the company's emphasis on the classical repertoire was beginning to seem like a limitation to what the couple wanted to do as dancers.

"We would do contemporary pieces, but there was always a very strong classical undercurrent to them," Son said. "That was the taste of the artistic director at the time - she preferred very feminine, beautiful works. We had good experiences with the company, but we were also wanting new challenges."

However, Son was not quite so enthusiastic about leaving Korea.

"I did a lot of studying in Paris and Russia, from the time I was 13, and I remember being so homesick," she said. "I really did not want to leave my home."

Rhee, on the other hand, had spent his entire professional life in Korea and was determined to find dance work elsewhere. He auditioned for several European

companies, but the only positions he was being offered were to be a member of the corps de ballet.

The couple became aware of Tulsa Ballet through their friendship with two former Tulsa Ballet dancers, Soo Youn Cho and Yi Wang. They also knew the choreographer Young Soon Hue, another South Korea native who has created several ballets for Tulsa Ballet, including "This is Your Life."

"She showed us a video of Tulsa Ballet performing 'This is Your Life,' " Rhee said, "and we were shocked. It was such an unusual and powerful ballet, and the Tulsa dancers were just amazing."

In 2008, Tulsa Ballet performed at South Korea's Ballet Expo, presenting a program that included "This is Your Life." Rhee and Son attended that performance, and the idea of continuing their careers in Oklahoma was formed.

"What I wanted all along was a company that did both classical and contemporary, so Tulsa Ballet is a good fit for me," Rhee said. "The repertoire is so broad."

Case in point: the company's season-opening production, a mixed-bill program that includes Adam Houglund's version of "The Rite of Spring," Paul Taylor's "Company B" and a new-to-Oklahoma ballet by Jorma Elo, "One/End/One."

Rhee has roles in "Company B" and "One/End/One," while Son performs in all three ballets, including taking on the major role of The Chosen One in "The Rite of Spring." "Adam's choreography is very musical, and I love that this is a very dramatic ballet, that it tells a powerful story," Son said.

For Rhee, "Company B" is the ballet he enjoys most on the program.

"I like that it is old-fashioned - the look and the music come from the time of World War II," he said. "It's a ballet I feel very happy to dance. The only problem is, the songs (all 1940s-era pop and jazz standards) are so catchy that you can't get them out of your head. They've been keeping me awake at nights."