

Anti-Socialist Realism Foreign Policy in Focus

It's the rare musical that addresses massive human rights violations. *Cabaret* chronicles the rise of Nazism, and *Les Miserables* presents a tableau of poverty and injustice in mid-19th century France. But since their subject matters are sufficiently remote in history and virtually all of the abuses take place off-stage, these musicals produce only mild frissons in the audience without edging over the line into the truly macabre.

In contrast, the horrors graphically described in the new and controversial musical *Yoduk Story* are occurring today in North Korea. Through song and dance, *Yoduk Story* depicts the conditions inside a prison camp that is, by all accounts, still functioning. The plot is, if not ripped from the headlines, drawn from stories buried in the unfortunately more obscure recesses of current newspapers. A high-ranking North Korean family suffers a political fall from grace and ends up in the gulag. There the family members are tortured, raped, and ultimately shot. It's certainly not feel-good entertainment. The musical caters more to Korea's tragic sensibility than to the happy endings that American audiences crave like sweets.

Having debuted in South Korea in spring 2006, *Yoduk Story* recently played three nights to a mostly Korean and Korean-American audience at the Strathmore, a theater outside Washington, DC. Though the venue was not sold out, the production attracted a respectable number of people, including 20 officials from the Bush administration on opening night, and the crowd gave a standing ovation at the end.

Despite the admirable efforts of its director and the enthusiastic response of crowds, however, *Yoduk Story* is not likely to be the next Broadway hit. Its topic is grim, the audience needs some background on Korean culture to understand the story, and, unfortunately, the aesthetic merits of the production are dubious. Indeed, the musical, written and directed by a North Korean defector, is little more than propaganda: a kind of anti-socialist realism.

Yoduk Story suffers from an improbable plot, kitschy songs, and heavy-handed symbolism. True, such failings have not prevented other musicals from hitting the big time. But the drawbacks of this particular musical are actually more interesting and significant. They testify to the risks of turning contemporary events into compelling drama (like *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, now playing in New York), and they graphically illustrate the challenges that face the two Koreas across their geopolitical and cultural divide.

High Melodrama

Yoduk Story begins with a song-and-dance sequence of praise to the North Korean system, a scene over which a statue of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il presides. The lead singer Kang Ryun-Hwa, a famous performer, gives her all in the precisely choreographed paeon. Although meant to serve as a contrast to all that follows, the accurate parody of the saccharine nationalism and aggressive simple-mindedness of North Korea's official culture in this opening sequence unintentionally echoes throughout the play. (For a glimpse of this official culture, check out the new book by Jane Portal, [Art Under Control in North Korea](#), which is loaded with pictures of posters, dances, and sculpture).

After the opening segment of North Korean kitsch, the plot quickly moves into familiar territory, that nightmarish reversal of political fortunes described by such chroniclers of state repression as Arthur Koestler, Danilo Kis, and Malika Oufkir. When her father is accused of being a spy, Ryun-Hwa and her entire family are dragged off to Yoduk. There, the captain of the prison guards rapes the former singer and she becomes pregnant. Her father is roped to a cross and whipped. Her entire family struggles to survive on meager rations.

Then suddenly the plot forks. Somehow the inmates manage to help Ryun-Hwa give birth and protect her infant child. Somehow a love affair springs up between Ryun-Hwa and her rapist. And somehow a prison break is thwarted in such a way that everyone dies in a ghastly shootout.

It is high melodrama, as if Andrew Lloyd Weber decided to put an Amnesty International report to music. The titles of the songs give some indication of the plot's trajectory: "Careful, Be Careful," "Hellish Prison Yoduk," "Kill Him!," "Until My Heart Bursts," "Don't Even Dare to Dream," "Prayer," "This Moment May Be Our Last," and "Save Yoduk." The characters are either angels or demons, with only a soupcon of moral complexity added to the mix. Though its designations are reversed, the North Korean system traffics in the same stark moral contrasts.

There is a flatness to both *Yoduk Story* and the propaganda it intends to strip away. The reductive dualism of North Korean ideology—you're either with us or against us—can be detected in the deep structure of the musical. In the same way that high-ranking defector Hwang Jang Yop went from architect of the North Korean system to its greatest detractor with his ideological inflexibility intact, the director of *Yoduk Story* has switched sides without fully escaping the sentimental education that has so shaped his worldview.

The Real Yoduk

There is no shortage of information about the conditions inside North Korea's gulag. The [famine of the mid-1990s](#) sent thousands of North Koreans across the border into China. A percentage of those ended up in South Korea. The accounts of a smaller but significant portion of these defectors—inmates and guards—provide much detail about the inner workings of the North Korean penal system.

As researcher David Hawk has [detailed](#), beatings, insufficient food, and extremely hard labor are routine. There have been credible accounts of executions and infanticide. Kang Chol-Hwan, who lived at Yoduk for 10 years from the age of nine, provides a chilling account in his book *Aquariums of Pyongyang*. "The newly arriving prisoners were usually the first to die," he writes. "If you made it through the adjustment period, though, you could expect to live for a good ten years more. The most important thing was fighting malnutrition, which was more punishing than even mistreatment by guards. Most of the camp's diseases were not very serious, but in our weakened state a simple cold could kill."

To the extent that *Yoduk Story* has introduced the general situation of North Korean human rights to new audiences, it has done an important service. There are no new revelations in *Yoduk Story*. Although the director was never imprisoned at Yoduk, he has relied on accounts of others who were there, so the details of children catching rats to eat or conflicts among the inmates have a ring of truth. For dramatic purposes perhaps, Jeong Song-san has portrayed Yoduk as the worst that North Korea has to offer. But as Kang Chol-Hwan points out, Yoduk was not the worst of the camps. Guards carried revolvers but rarely took them out of their holsters. "Harassing inmates for its own sake was rarely part of the program," he writes. And many detainees held on to the hope that they would one day return to society at large, as Kang and his family eventually did.

The dramatic decision to make Yoduk the exemplar of the gulag glosses over differences within the camp system and between the camps and society at large. Indeed, what makes *Aquariums of Pyongyang* fascinating—and what *Yoduk Story* so painfully lacks—is Kang's honest attempt to provide a nuanced picture of North Korea. *Yoduk Story* provides only the briefest glimpse of privilege before plunging into the unrelenting terrors of the camp. Life for most North Koreans, however, falls somewhere in the middle. By ignoring the average North Korean experience, the play is able to present a stark contrast between good and evil that permits only one possible solution.

Wipe the Slate Clean

For all its emphasis on Christian charity and forgiveness, *Yoduk Story* culminates in a shoot-'em-up scene that would not be out of place in a Hong Kong action thriller or Japanese gangster *manga*. There is even the ultimate standoff with the two principal antagonists pointing guns at each other's faces, an iconic scene in the Asian cinema of hyperviolence.

The improbable shootout is an odd combination of apocalyptic Christianity, hard-line politics, and dead-end scriptwriting. The best way to change North Korea, *Yoduk Story* suggests, is by wiping the slate clean. There can be no change from within. Even the virtuous are somehow tainted. Only a cleansing violence—like the Flood or the Rapture or a U.S. attack on Pyongyang—can do the trick.

But what about the rest of the country? The musical implies that all North Koreans are trapped in an equally horrifying hell and would welcome regime change and Christian evangelism even at great personal and communal risk. All grand attempts at social engineering, whether the Great Leap Forward or the Iraq War, are sustained by precisely such a lack of concern for their effects on the lives of ordinary people. Attempting to persuade victim and victimizer alike, agitprop provides a distorting lens and soothing words to ease moral qualms. For those who recommend doing away with North Korea altogether, and the sooner the better, *Yoduk Story* offers a stirring soundtrack.

By an overwhelming majority, however, South Koreans recoil from the prospect of war on the peninsula. They have also supported engaging the North economically and politically. The defector focus on human rights, showcased in *Yoduk Story*, sits uncomfortably with this engagement ethos. Indeed, the conservative daily *Chosun Ilbo* [reported](#) on allegations that the South Korean government tried to get director Jeong Song-san to tone down his script. Conservatives used these allegations to buttress their arguments that Seoul was trying to sweep the issue of North Korean human rights under the rug to preserve a cozy relationship with Pyongyang.

Given that defectors have published accounts of their travails and newspapers regularly cover the issue, Seoul's efforts at controlling information have been largely ineffectual. It is frequently noted that *Yoduk Story*'s creator had such difficulties raising the cash to produce the play that he used his kidney as collateral for a loan. A skeptical marketplace is, however, even less accommodating than a skeptical government. Investors may well have shied away from backing a musical about a prison labor camp less for fear of the government than fear of losing their money.

South Korea, unlike North Korea, is a market democracy where ideas and opinions proliferate. The ideological rigidity of North Korea and those who escape it contrast sharply with the more nuanced and heterogeneous political culture of the South. *Yoduk Story* is one of the first cultural opportunities for South Koreans to ponder the human rights of their northern brothers and sisters. Perhaps the next attempt, if it conveys the subtle complexities of the North captured neither by *Yoduk Story* nor North Korea's own agitprop, will help South Koreans bring together the worlds of human rights and engagement.