

Angels from Pyongyang

Julian Gray
Seoul, Korea

IN OUR busy lives we sometimes fail to appreciate the quiet gift of God when it is bestowed. So it was when I found myself the lucky recipient of a ticket to attend the final performance of the Pyongyang Children and Students Performing Arts Troupe in Seoul on May 28th.

The allocation for public sale for all the performances had been sold out in two hours, and there were very few complimentary ones even for the most senior among our members. It was a wonderful opportunity, this I knew, yet I hesitated to take up a seat that I felt should really be filled by a citizen from these shores. Yet a voice inside led me

to believe I was meant to go.

Inside the rather magnificent Seoul Arts Center Opera House, my seat was closer to the front than I had expected. I could see the Little Angels, dressed in their quaint red, white and blue costumes, filling up the front rows, as if to offer special encouragement to their northern guests. The kindly Korean grandmother sitting next to me asked me where I was from. Her country had been torn in half as if by two hungry wolves when she was about the same age as the girls and boys who were about to take the stage. The kindly sparkle in her eye gave me the feeling it had been right to come. Then the curtain went up and that was quickly confirmed.

Up to that point I had been somewhat melancholy, wondering if my ten years in Korea looking mostly out to the world mission field had left me isolated from the anguished history of my host country. Would I be able to connect with the inevitably emotional content of the evening, I wondered. As it turned out, we Unificationists are more Korean than we think.

As the first group of real, live North Korean children—they looked just the same as the ones that live here in the South!—ran out onto the stage to sing and dance, I felt a surge of emotion that seemed to come from somewhere beyond myself. It was as if something divinely inspired was about to happen.

From the point of view of the artistry alone, this was an uplifting, and touching demonstration of formidable talent. From the outset to the finale the virtuosity was unquestionable. There was mastery of the musical arts that had me wondering how people so tender in years could have had time to develop such mind-body synergy.

There are those that give the easy answer, which is that the North Korean training ethic is state-sponsored, militaristic and unrelenting. Yes, I am sure they had worked extremely hard. A few days later, at a function in Seoul attended by many diplomats and government officials, a young man from



the Ministry of Defense offered me the simplistic explanation that such performers are like trained circus animals. But this relic of the peninsula's decades old propaganda war (a war in which a ceasefire has now been called by both sides!) missed the point entirely, as he would have known had he been there. I told him so.

Excellence in any of the arts requires total commitment, self-discipline and sacrifice. I am sure that these North Korean children had embraced all three of the above to a level that might intimidate many of us. Ironically, such a way of life is not so dissimilar to the path of spiritual growth according to the Principle that True Parents have asked us to walk. "Direct dominion" in the arts is surely arrived at when the technical mastery has become second nature (always through grueling effort), and the artist becomes free to interpret, create and express personality and emotion through the art form. The Pyongyang Children and Students Performing Arts Troupe had a powerful effect on all of us because they achieved this so visibly. The love of their arts, their close relationship with their purpose to bring joy was manifest. They infused their singing, playing and dancing with their individual personalities and collective culture. And we in the audience were transfixed in our seats by their enthusiasm, joyfulness, and, without doubt, their eagerness to communicate with us, "We are warm-blooded boys and girls too!"

It is a little hard to describe the performance in a way that could bring it to life for the reader. The dance pieces were beautifully and imaginatively choreographed. The singing was fasci-



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SEIL STUDIO

Photos: facing page top, the reunion of two friends, one from the North and one from the South, who became friends in 1998 when the Little Angels visited North Korea; left, their arrival at Kimpo Airport, May 24; below, leaving the Little Angels school for the hotel at Lotte World following the welcoming ceremony; this page, the performance covered an array of traditional and modern music and dance styles



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE SEGYE TIMES

nating, partly also due to the youth of the singers (one as young as five years old) and the haunting, slightly nasal style of the North Korean vocalists.

There was a group of five accordion players who played a form of what I can only describe as modern jazz with perfect synchronization, the young musicians' fingers blurred with the speed at which they flew over the keys and stops. Three *kayagum*, usually heard rendering more ballad-like, slow paced traditional music, were played with what sounded more reminiscent of a rich-toned banjo roll than the music of the king's court! More recognizably traditional music there was too, and this was rendered with deep feeling.

At one point two dancers drew back a small curtain to reveal a mirror and then danced in front of it. I thought, "Aha, their 'reflections' are two other people!" After two or three minutes of dancing, however, I could not even minutely discern that the two mirror images were anything other than that. So when the reflections did suddenly jump out of the mirror onto the stage, the gasp from everyone in the audience confirmed that it was not my eyes that had deceived me.

A young drummer boy captured us with his mastery of the traditional Korean *janggu* hourglass drum. His face was adorned with an engaging smile, and he would cock his hip as he launched into his drum solos. Although a newspaper here described the little man as "swaggering" it mentioned the cheers and applause he received. Completely one with his art, he beamed out into the audience with his cheeky nine-year-old's grin, and gave everything of himself. It was so endearing, funny, full of life. Like all of those who performed, his talent was the vehicle to convey his heart, and that of his country.

Both traditional Korean instruments and modern western instruments were played with an equally native touch. I wondered if they had put an emphasis on a more international style knowing they were reaching out beyond their own walls, and even beyond the shores of the peninsula. If the succession of front page photographs in the Seoul major dailies was any indication, their visit was a landmark event in warming the heart of the South. The timing, just two weeks before the North-South Korean summit, filled one with the sense of the unfolding dispensation of Heaven.

Overall even there were visible differences in the North and South Korean approach to traditional music and dance, as if the cultures have slightly diverged over more than half a century of separation. It was evident in the colors of the costumes, and in the style of the traditional music and dance. But it was no less magnificent a cultural monument.

As I watched the children perform, I wondered if perhaps somewhere in the audience there might be a grandmother or great aunt of one of the performers, separated by decades of silence and unknown to each other. The feeling that these children were long lost relatives seemed to be taking hold of the audience collectively; I felt it too.

At one point a female singer in her early teens came down from the stage and walked down the aisle as she sang, holding hands with those seated within range and receiving hugs in return. An atmosphere charged with emotion descended upon the entire hall. It was as if a portal was opened up to a realm of intense longing in the spirit world, a realm that perhaps only in such circumstances as these could find expression. I had a sense of being swept up in feelings that belonged to a people and a history I had not been born part of. Yet at that moment it was as if we were all of the same blood and inheritance. Everyone seemed to be experiencing

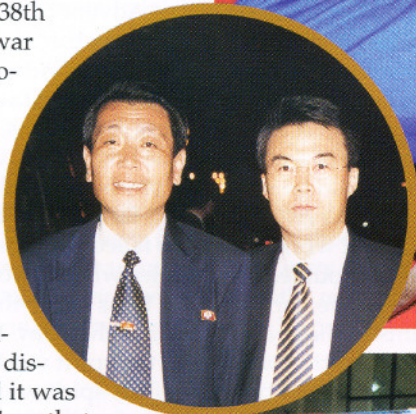
CONTINUED ON PAGE 19...

this together. Here and there, people in the audience were weeping quietly. If one needed further convincing of the closeness of the spirit world, one needed only to have been present at this occasion.

The young lady singer's presence among the audience was like North Korea extending its very heart into the South in a deeply personal, intimate way. One lady even stood up and, seemingly unable to restrain herself to being part of the audience, danced in the aisle with the young singer. She then followed her back up onto the stage (to the consternation of the security people!) where they did a little Korean traditional dance together for a few moments. No harm was done, and I dare say quite a bit of good: she was interviewed in the press and said, "I couldn't stop myself."

Following an unforgettable hour-and-a-half, we reached the finale of the evening—and of the performances as a whole. While all the performers gathered on the stage, we all stood and sang "Uri-e sowon-un tongil..." together. After a few lines we all joined hands, and it felt as if a circle was complete. After twenty years of singing this song it is hard to describe the feeling of singing it along with thousands of Koreans, from both sides of the 38th parallel. It was as if a war had just ended and people were re-experiencing emotions that had been frozen during hostilities. They were singing, crying, and celebrating peace.

The notion that the people of the North and South are ideological enemies seemed to dissipate like smoke. And it was a group of young children that had shown us grow-ups the truth.◆



Photos: Facing page top left, an elderly man dances with the young singer; right, one of the youngest performers; below, a performance finale; this page: saying goodbye is very hard for the children; bottom, a commemorative photo in front of the official farewell banner at Kimpo Airport; inset, Hui Choi, director of the Pyongyang performing arts troupe (at left), and Sang Sup Yoon, Pyeonghwa Motors deputy director, together at the conclusion of the final evening



When True Parents met with Kim Il Sung on December 6, 1991, an agreement was forged to work toward peace and cooperation between the South and North. To that end, in May 1998, the Little Angels visited and performed in North Korea. The Pyongyang Children and Students Performing Arts Troupe returned the visit in May this year, completing the first private cultural exchange since the country's division, and bringing hope for reunification of the Korean people.

Seventy-six members of the Little Angels Troupe came to the airport to greet their friends from Pyongyang. They gave garlands to each one. Some of the members from the Pyongyang Troupe and Little Angels Troupe recognized each other and hugged each other with the joy of reunion.

After the welcoming event, they traveled from the Little Angels Hall to Lotte Hotel in Chamshil, eastern Seoul. Citizens noticed the three buses full of the Pyongyang performers and stopped their cars to welcome them with applause. The children respond-

ed by waving their hands to say "Thank you." Despite the two hour airplane journey, they seemed very excited, looking out of the windows full of curiosity, observing the sights of Seoul...

Each performance started with a little girl greeting the audience: "I had no idea how close the South was: it was always a distant place in my mind. I hope the grandmothers, grandfathers, fathers, mothers, elder sisters and elder brothers in Seoul will enjoy our performance. If our performances are pleasing to you, please do not hesitate to applaud!..."

The performance seemed to transcend the differences between the two Koreas' political constitutions and ideologies. The ninety-minute performance ended with the song of 'Our Hope Is Unity.' The performers and the audience sang it together many times with tears in their eyes. At that moment they were all united. An elderly man whose hometown was in North Korea tried to grasp the hands of the performers as if it would mean touching the hands of his own grandchildren in the North...

At the end of the final performance, the curtain opened and closed six more times responding to the audience's cries of "Let's meet again." ♦

Excerpted from a report in Tongil Segye, the monthly magazine of FFWPU in Korea

"We have promoted this event to create a mood of celebration for the summit between South and North Korea, and to prepare a new basis for economic and cultural exchange. This will be a signal announcing a new beginning between South and North, through the pure and clear image of children."

Sang Kwon Park, President of Pyeonghwa Motors, at a press conference on May 23

