

# STUFF YOURSELF BEHIND A MASK

Happenings from the 46th Annual Andong Maskdance Festival

She stayed hidden, not bothering to remove the cartoonish mask with its big nose and oversized eyes—the symbols of idealized beauty in Korea.

“How long until that thing becomes a part of you?” I asked.

She tilted her head to the side, confused by the question.

“It is part of me—it’s part of the dance and the dance is part of me.”

“Can’t you dance without the mask?” I said.

She laughed, “It’s not the same.”

Maybe she was right. Maybe masks were important; after all, this was the Andong Maskdance Festival and “mask” was part of the name. But dancing had never been a prowess of mine—and for that matter neither had mask-wearing.

“My advisor and I are in need of some entertainment—something to show us the grit that lies beneath this place,” I said.

She turned around and pointed to an amphitheater with a dome roof and stone walls.

“Okay then.” I nodded a thank you and we set off.

We’d been at the festival for less than an hour, but already the morning had been slimy. My advisor Binx and I departed from Seoul during the early hours of that October morning. It had taken the better part of the three-hour train ride for any sign of chaos to appear, but eventually it reared its ugly head. Two men leapt from the seats in front of us and stood face-to-face in confrontation. The man with jagged teeth kept saying, “Yeah, yeah, yeah...” and pointing his index finger towards the other man—a camo arm-warmer enthusiast with a face redder than the devil himself.

“G—ddamnit, this isn’t good.” I remember saying. “If things get out of hand, there’s no telling who’ll lose their hands.”

As usual, Binx was measured in his response, “This is grade-A entertainment. Beats the noribang any day.”

The other passengers in the car seemed unwilling to smooth the waters of this exchange (as was I, for that matter). Even if I really had wanted to, my advisor and I



66

**BUT DANCING HAD NEVER BEEN A PROWESS OF MINE - AND FOR THAT MATTER NEITHER HAD MASK - WEARING**

hadn’t been given proper clearance from immigration to deal with such conflicts. One wrong move and we’d find ourselves on the run as fugitives, having to board a freighter and ship off to Japan. Aside from that, this level of conflict management was far outside our pay grade, not to mention it would bias the sociological study we had undertaken in our ongoing research of Korean culture. All we could do was watch and observe. What they were arguing about was anyone’s guess, but with a shoddy understanding of the Korean language, I hadn’t a clue. And this was the quandary of our continuing expedition to uncover the essence of this society. The squabble passed without further incident, but it was an ominous start to a potentially unpredictable day.

We arrived at the 46th Annual Andong Maskdance Festival, entering through

the west gate where tents had been set up. They called this section the “Village Booths.” Cloth tarps were stretched across the road connecting the tents. Vendors stood inside selling various knick-knacks. A vendor swatted flies from his basket of dried shrimp; another roasted chestnuts. Some sold beans or spices. I picked up a wooden mask from a booth and studied myself in the mirror. Why anybody would need one of these was beyond me—collectors, perhaps.

Down the street a tall, fat salesman stood, demonstrating a hand-cranked dicing machine.

“Pepper, onions, garlic, carrots. Put them in,” he said to the audience of ajummas. He covered the top and pulled the string. It was like a miniature salad spinner with blades.

“Impressive, but have you heard of electricity?” Binx said aloud.

Two ajummas scuttled away while the others frowned, visibly unimpressed.

Ducking past a tent with fortune tellers, the tarp overhead ended, and we found ourselves in a green concrete field, standing near the Main Stage. Binx stared at the map.

“‘Home of the missing children.’ What the hell kind of festival is this?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Could be some kind of asylum for runaways. ‘Mom sending you to too

many hagwons? Come to the Maskdance Festival and we’ll turn you into a star.”

It was a valid question. I had seen the words “gut exorcism ground” on the map before our departure, but hadn’t given it a second thought, instead simply chalking it up to a late night translation error. Either way, the oddities seemed to align with the circus-world we had slipped into in Korea.

A demon head hung from the Main Stage - its mouth turned up into a wicked grin, bearing all its teeth. Its hands were outstretched, reaching towards the audience.

“There’s a g—ddamn demon up there, man.” I said, causing people to look in my direction.

Binx leaned over, “They might already be possessed. Best if we get away from this thing.”

“You’re right. We can’t stay here.” I said.

We headed towards the east gate, zig-zagging past totem poles of native Korean tribal characters and masked performers. This was when we met the masked girl who had suggested everything was better if viewed from behind a mask. After the conversation, we took her advice and bumbled over to the amphitheater.

The weeklong performances on this stage were dedicated to the preservation of historical Korean dance and the showcasing of traditional and contemporary dance from around Asia. The show began with a dance troupe from Vietnam. The Korean audience gazed at the Vietnamese girls as they whisked about the stage like swans. They moved their hats up, down, and around in circles to traditional Vietnamese music that had been remixed and given a contemporary flair. As the music crescendoed, the ladies slipped a cardboard piece with the Korean and Vietnamese flags onto their hats in a show of solidarity. The audience erupted in applause. A foreign show was one thing, but indulging the locals in their nationalistic pride, that took the kimchi (or cake, or whatever your preferred food of consumption).

After the Vietnamese dancers, a man arrived center stage wearing a golden headpiece and a red robe with golden trimming. His arms and legs were outstretched forming something that looked like the forewings and hindwings of a butterfly. His face had turned white with deep black circles for the eyes. It was like a face from the movie *The Purge*. Even this face couldn’t compare to the twisted act that was happening onstage. From beneath the man’s red robes came a skeleton-woman. Her eyes darted back and forth rapidly—a mischievous deviant on the hunt for trouble. There was no escaping the dread that had come over me.

“They let the demon out of the bag,” I said aloud.

But the people around me didn’t seem to understand.

“We’ve got to get out of this place, man, before it’s too late.”

Upon their exit, a shirtless boy frolicked onto the stage. He could have been one of Peter Pan’s Lost Boys, with the same pre-pubescent look and flamboyant expression. Some members of the audience smiled and whispered to one another.

It was around mid-day when we stepped back outside. An announcer’s voice boomed from the direction where we had entered. Almost immediately, I recognized the voice—it belonged to the Hite Beer MC. The same Hite Beer MC we had seen while reporting at the Hwaechon Sancheoneo Ice Festival last February. He and his team of cheerleaders had been on a foldout truck-stage, braving the freezing temperatures.

The MC’s game of choice was still “Rock, Paper, Scissors,” and after displaying the potential prizes for each round, the crowd was hooked-locked in the throngs of consumption. They played until two men managed to win all five rounds and grab the ultimate prize of what appeared to be a Tupperware set.

As in February, it struck me that at a family event—in a country still largely “in the closet” about discussing sexuality, and where illicit substances like marijuana are gasped at, children have been indoctrinated with alcoholic symbolism and half-naked dancers. But then again, on a whole, modernization mirrored these illogical contradictions anywhere in the “developed” world. Rules had been established by a micro-community and imposed on the masses: “If it works for us, it’ll work for everyone!” Misinformation, propaganda, skewed reasoning, spread through the media, through friends of friends, through the sweet little

grandma at your local church, it all drove an often illogical narrative. And as long as one person felt like he or she knew what was better for you than you knew for yourself, the world would continue to turn the way it always had.

“Is that yodeling?” Binx said aloud, snapping me from the knot of brainworms.

We turned to the Main Stage. A group of elementary school students, no older than 12 years of age, stood dressed from head to toe like versions of the Swiss Miss girl. Two girls swayed from side-to-side yodeling in a duet. Behind them sat guitarists, a couple accordion players, and a double bass musician.

Binx was the first to speak, “Looks like we found the runaways.”

“Or the products of helicopter parents. Who knows, maybe they’re having a swell time. They’re putting some meaning into their lives,” I said.

Even with my imagination, a Korean child (or any child for that matter) coming home from school one day and asking ol’ umma for yodeling lessons seemed a bit farfetched. Were these kids even having fun?

The leader of the group was a middle-aged man with a comb-over. He sat near the yodeling girls, strumming his guitar and smiling. But the smile seemed insincere - almost mechanical.



It was as if he were trying to mask his greater interest—an interest I took to be the unwavering need to achieve perfection. Beyond the facade, he seemed much more intent on monitoring the kids' performances, ready to pounce at even the slightest mistake. But nobody in the audience seemed to mind. They sat happily clapping offbeat.

The afternoon slid quickly into the early evening as it does in the autumn. Now everyone seemed to be wearing one mask or another. A group of college kids standing outside a white, nondescript tent, eyed us as Binx and I walked past.

"Hey. You. Come here," said the girl in a blue hoodie—the leader I presumed. "Do you have time?"

I looked around. "Time, huh? Seems to have gotten away from me, that slippery bastard."

Whatever she was selling she stood unswayed, determined to close the deal.

"Wait here for five minutes," she continued.

"Forget it, we're not interested," Binx snapped.

"I'll do it. Nothing to lose anyway. Could be some pathway to another dimension in there."

"You go in there and they're going to sell something to you. She's a salesperson in training. I can smell it from here," Binx said.

He was right. Less than five minutes into the blacklight painting demonstration, I was given a translator—a suited man in his mid-thirties with glasses. He introduced himself as the owner, but I couldn't tell for sure.

"Do you have American money?" he said, shortly after asking my nationality.

"I'm broke, lost it all on the races. You know how it goes," I said.

Ignoring me, he took out 10,000 KRW. "This is real money," he said, showing me the watermark illuminated under the blacklight. "American money isn't real money."

I wasn't sure if this was meant to be a slight toward American culture or a benign joke, but it didn't matter. With the current turmoil in the United States, the mask had already been ripped from the American dream and the world's most powerful nation (and perhaps, the most destructive) was stumbling head first into a canyon of its own corruption, paranoia, and greed—it was pure ugliness. For months, the Trump administration had even been teetering on the brink of war with North Korea, thanks to the divisive rhetoric from a walking orange Fanta bottle with a wig. If the owner had attempted to mildly besmirch the image of America, he'd been too late—we'd already done that ourselves.

An explosion cracked from outside the tent.

66

**ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS I HAD LEARNED ABOUT NAVIGATING THROUGH KOREA WAS A RULE I HAD COINED AS, "FOLLOW THE AJUMMA." ANYTIME THE URGE TO RESORT BACK TO A WESTERN STYLE OF COURTESY AROSE IN A CROWDED AREA, IT WAS EASIEST JUST TO FOLLOW THE RUTHLESS NAVIGATING SKILLS OF THESE FINE LADIES**



99

"The North! They've gone off the deep end! We're under attack!" I said to the man.

"You go?" he said, clearly surprised.

"Did you not hear that, man? Reporting calls."

Without waiting for his reply, I hurried from the tent and into the chaos outside. Night had fallen and now people were rushing around the festival grounds. But oddly enough, they were all moving in the same direction. A pair of ajummas in pink windbreakers pushed past me, toward the middle of the green concrete field.

One of the most important lessons I had learned about navigating through Korea was a rule I had coined as, "Follow the ajumma." Anytime the urge to resort back to a Western style of courtesy arose in a crowded area, it was easiest just to follow the ruthless navigating skills of these fine ladies. They were like human bulldozers at your disposal.

"Follow that ajumma!" I yelled.

When we reached the center of the action, they stopped. Another crackling sound exploded and the sky lit up. This time I could see the cause—fireworks. A handful of people dressed in black clothes outfitted with strings of LED lights danced in a futuristic rhythm on the stage. Gigantic masked creatures towered above the crowd, stalking towards me. A flash of fire

shot up around the perimeter of the field, and from some unseen realm came a demonic cackling. I looked towards the Main Stage and saw the demon's outstretched arms reaching towards us. Its face leering—eyes filled with a yellow glow.

Binx had reappeared, dancing in some sort of possessed trance—throwing his hands up and bringing them back down—his long black hair now matted with sweat. The giants continued walking around. More fire, more explosions, and the demon looking over the whole festival with the same twisted, toothy grin.

I had yet again overstayed my welcome at another Korean festival. It was time to leave.

By the time I maneuvered away from the crowd it was nearly 8 p.m. I turned into an alleyway where the only light came from a rundown convenience store. When I reached the downtown, everything had gone quiet. I stood on the corner below the orange streetlight that spilled over the intersection. Was this quiet backdrop the true essence of Andong? Had the festival been masking the soul of the city the entire time? Perhaps what lay at the core was something different than the mask of bottomless attractions and entertainment that brought so many tourists to the city. Or maybe, the mask itself had become part of the city's essence. 🇰🇷



## From Nursery to IB Diploma Programme

We want graduates from Dulwich College to continue on not just to the world's leading universities, but as confident, imaginative, resourceful young people capable of truly making their mark in an ever-changing world. Our academic curriculum, excellent teachers, range of specialist opportunities, personal care, and connections to top universities around the globe can make this happen.

We are currently taking applications for students from Nursery to Year 13 to join Dulwich College Seoul. If you would like to learn more about how Dulwich can make a difference for your child, we'd be delighted to meet you at the College. For an appointment please call our Admissions Officer on (02) 3015-8517, email [admissions@dulwich-seoul.kr](mailto:admissions@dulwich-seoul.kr) or visit [www.dulwich-seoul.kr](http://www.dulwich-seoul.kr).

**DULWICH COLLEGE | SEOUL |**

