Diversity's First Dance

If you just happened to wander through the Bella hallway on a Monday afternoon, you were probably ambushed by an explosive sonic experience on par in decibel with a rock concert.

Bella 120; here we congregated weekly to hover over a PC and dishes of instant Tteok-bokki and Japchae. Just rooms away, those in the Salsa club would, hands on shoulders, begin to strut this way and that in rhythmic acuity. Those in China club would, batons in hand, start to twirl fans and ribbons in colorful homage to those that have mastered the traditional dance before them. And those in German club would, arm in arm, perhaps be entranced in a merry round of the ever-riotous Schuhplattler. But no club could ever be so boisterous as the infamous South Korean Pop Culture Club.

If it wasn’t the music that was infringing on the tranquil afternoon, it was our unignorable physical presence. One eventful day, nuclear fire noodles sent each and every member sprinting for the water fountains. All of us, lungs on fire, were momentarily unsure if our collective wheezing was a result of the running we just did or the spice we so heedlessly ingested. So overwhelmed by the chili extract like dynamite in my mouth, I contemplated either licking the wall or dowsing my tongue in hand sanitizer from the dispenser to my right.

Simply put, we had trouble confining our passion to one room.

So unsurprisingly, when one of us inevitably proposed performing at Diversity Week, there wasn’t a hesitant soul in the room. It sounded perfect; we’d be doing something we loved, together, while opening the door to an undiscovered Narnia for the student body.

From then on, when we weren’t jestering around like monkeys on a hotplate, we were practicing, debating (which girl group should’ve won Inkigayo last week for example), then practicing some more. We’d collapse from exhaustion, a result of an untamed determination to outlast all others on the Bella dance floor, and then refuel ourselves with rice crackers – the ultimate form of sustenance.

And just like that, what started as a group that appreciated the appeal of experimental sound, and the overarching genre influenced by a hybrid of African-American R&B and Western pop, spilled into the rest of the school.

What we hadn’t considered was that performing for a crowd that has never heard such an eccentric medley of songs meant that we would become guinea pigs of modern Diversity. Guinea pigs, dressed in color-block outfits over fishnets.

*Intrigue*

is what I’d use to describe the atmosphere. Like moths to light, the crowd surrounded us that morning in wondrous curiosity, teeming denser and tighter around the four peculiar girls who had just taken center stage. When they ran out of room, they filed up the spiral staircases and climbed up tables and chairs.

In the previous year, South Korean girl group ‘Red Velvet’ performed in North Korea, in front of a crowd that sat Kim Jong-Un himself. Unfortunately, the pop anthem that could traverse one of the most heavily fortified zones on Earth could not penetrate past the flimsy partition that was a velvet rope lining the student center. Indifference lingered on the outer fringes of the crowd, ingenuine commiseration diffused through to gradate into derision at the very, very front where all of the repulsed facial expressions and spiteful comments polluted the air in front of us.

*Merciless*

Is how I’d describe the aftermath.

Skirt tight around my waist and silver headband clenched into my roots, I scurried from class to class, with my tail in between my legs. I had been hoping that no one would recognize me as the “K-Pop girl”.

In confronting the upperclassmen in my classes (who, in all their years in high school, had never seen something quite like us), I bit my tongue, on the brink of a last-resort advocacy for the genre I shamefully loved, and powered off my phone when the social media lambaste of our performance took flight like missiles of aggressive, intolerable hate.

What did I expect?

You’re freshmen, you’re allotted your share of mistakes and embarrassing blunders, said a friend in attempted consolation.

Still deflated from the last performance, I was hesitant when the Diversity performance talk ramped up the following year. But, I couldn’t resist the Siren call of K-Pop, so, I made the “mistake” again. I decided to perform that year, with no real objective; I decided to perform, because I felt at home.

With my comrades in tow, we stepped through the same velvet rope and onto the same student center floor with suppressed expectations. But that year, armed with a Billboard 100 hit choreographed by top Korean dancers, we took few chances. At times, diversity must be introduced like bitter cough medicine–spoon-fed with vanilla pudding on the side.

It was... successful. Unimaginably so. The appeal was palpable in the chants of the crowd and overwhelming in the faces that no longer looked down on a foreign genre. We made it nine miles past intrigue… and, we had revolutionized the meaning of mistake.

On that February day in 2020, these girls hailing from different cultures and backgrounds proudly walked off the student center floor united by the threads of music foreign to the tongue but uniquely conversant to the body.

Because diversity, though initially strange to the ear and out of place to the eye, must be experienced.

*Dedication*

I must thank my three other team members: Esther Sha, Sophia Huaman, and Phebe Fabacher, for performing so courageously beside me, the other performance team who had undoubtedly knocked it out of the park with their own dance, my friends who encouraged me to pursue what I loved in spite of discouraging circumstances. And thank you, finally, to the South Korean Pop Culture Club for making family of each and every person and culture who has crossed through the doorway of room 120.