pzazz



Haribo Kimchi

JAHA KOO

An Anticatharctic Storyteller



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RECENSIEWORKSHOP
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In 'Haribo Kimchi', Jaha Koo cooks for two audience members in his Korean street-food stall stage as he recounts his migration story. The screens beside him let him drift through dream and memory, accompanied by non-human creatures who narrate and sing with whimsy. It is sometimes sad, always funny, and in the absence of an emotional climax, we are left to reflect on its menacing irony.

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I saw ‘Haribo Kimchi’ on May 25 alongside my Playwatch peers at Le Rideau as part of our two-day collective immersion in Brussels’ 2025 Kunstenfestivaldesarts. One of the more agreeable pieces that left the group feeling content after the performance –which is among the better things to be, rather than, say, angry– was ‘Haribo Kimchi’.

As I spoke to my fellow Playwatchers, on the way down the stairs of the hall, out of the door, into the waiting area and then to the street, I tried to piece together what they thought and what I thought of the show. “Of course I liked it. Saying I didn’t would be like bullying a kid!” said one. This was the general sentiment. It seemed clear that it made us happy, but questionable if it challenged us. It was “cute” and “clear”, without any “climax” or “conflict.” It felt “relaxing,” “easy,” “digestible,” “simple,” and not really “educative”.

As the adjectives continued a stable digression further from what I had in mind, I realized we may have been watching entirely different plays. Herein lies the joy of elusive art: it can be many things at once.

Handpicked situations

‘Haribo Kimchi’ begins after a pyramid-style 3D screen on stage takes us to the streets of South Korea in an animated setting and opens up to reveal a kitchen and two screens on each corner. It’s a typical South-Korean street stall. Jaha Koo asks two members of the audience to join as he cooks for them and tells them the story of his migration. Depending on the crowd, I’m assuming this can create a spectrum of quite awkward to extremely wholesome interactions. A dialogue is already initiated with the audience, even if Koo is the sole performer of the show, and what he will recite will appear in the form of an autobiographical monologue.

It is our contemplation Koo asks for, not our empathy.

Koo complicates this autobiographical form with each scene. His memories appear less as narrative “events” than as carefully chosen “situations”: the tiny snail he discovers in a cabbage and reluctantly releases, or the sharp smell of kimchi, a traditional Korean side dish made of fermented vegetables, that follows him from the Berlin airport taxi into his new apartment. We hear of the history of this kimchi, and even of the suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations in 1980 Korea, but ever so lightly, in passing.

The personal and the political, reality and fiction blur as Koo recounts dreams of his own and of others. If a moment begs to be taken seriously, songs promise to interrupt the scene. Doodles and animations appear on the screens accompanied by solemnly (un)serious lyrics sung by a set of characters we get to know throughout: the (aforementioned) snail, a Haribo gummy bear, and an eel. Autobiographical or fictional, it is the emblematic art of the storyteller that Koo brings on stage. Here you will not find a cathartic story grounded in reality with a determined plot and agenda to communicate clearly. Here, there is no clear-cut lesson to be learned.

At one climax Koo recounts falling asleep while eating Haribo gummies on the train, on his way from Ghent to Brussels. “In this foreign land”, he says, “it felt like I could release all my tension and find tranquility while silently chewing on gummy bears.” In his dream, water turns “crimson with blood”. He wakes up to his bag being stolen. As he hurries to the information desk, the worker asks him to turn his face away because “I’m so disgusted by the garlic smell”.

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The crowd is clearly intrigued now: disappointed murmurs of “Aw!” and “Wow!” can be heard; they are ready to find an opposing figure, an archnemesis for the protagonist. However, Koo doesn't permit such easy answers. He turns the circumstance on its head: “What I couldn't stand was the fact that I said “sorry” to him”, he says. Before we get to experience the surge of emotion and contempt, a Haribo gummy bear surrounded by ecstatic colors begins to sing: “When I’m lost I look for the bliss point / dull point / null point / numb point / dumb point / down point / drown point / dope point”. Koo refuses us easy emotions. Before we fully dip our foot in the water, we are blasted out of the situations he so carefully carves out at first. It is our contemplation Koo asks for,

not our empathy.

Two plays at once

Many of my peers and I come from a background of migration. A couple of them noted they were surprised that, despite the relatability of the plot, their emotions were never really evoked during 'Haribo Kimchi', even though they enjoyed watching it. I think, as good a criticism as that can be for a work of art, it is also a grand achievement on the part of Koo.

My smile is wide, but my mind is wandering.

Intentional or not, 'Haribo Kimchi' is at once two plays: on the one hand, a sweet story about someone moving abroad with songs to smile to and a feel-good atmosphere that can be enjoyed with children and adults alike. On the other hand, however, it is a masterclass in the use of medium and form to tell a story that reflects reality with no ideology, or direction, choosing instead to cut deep into our subconscious, wherever that may take us.

"My routes are more significant than my roots - Home is a home is a home is a home." The ending words of 'Haribo Kimchi' are sung not by Koo but by an animated eel on a screen, while a robotic eel crawls across the stage. The mood is celebratory. The smell of fresh food still lingers in the air and people realize it's possible to step onto the stage to take a sip of the drink or a bite of the kimchi. Children in particular are thrilled, intrigued by the new world they have encountered. My smile is wide, but my mind is wandering. Can I trust that a home is a home, based on the words of a whimsical robotic eel?