

Subway Line 1

Just Entertainment

Subway Line 1 is a Korean adaptation of the German musical *Linie 1* by the Berliner Grips-Theater in which the action takes place in and around subway line 1 and the main Seoul train station. The story is fairly simple. A young Chinese woman meets a Korean man named Swallow on a trip to Mount Paekdu, where she happens to be a tour guide. Swallow, a playboy and conman, takes advantage of this young woman, and the young Chinese woman then comes to Seoul in order to seek out Swallow in order to marry him and redeem her honour.

The musical brings to mind James Joyce's *Ulysses* in that all the action takes place in just one day, a day mostly spent on underground travel, coming to a close with the image of a drunken salary man, who has fallen asleep at the entrance of the Seoul station subway station, the place where the musical also began. The real adventure of the young Chinese woman, however, begins in the subway, where she encounters the strangeness and indifference of Seoulites. The depiction of a variety of events, which to people who spend a certain amount of their lives on the tube, seem quotidian and inconsequential are like a kind of humorous madness to this total stranger, with the tone of the piece being even satiric.

¹ Sogang graduate student

Those of us who ride the tube are sure to recognize the various characters that draw readily from the real life figures that so often haunt the subway cars at different hours of the day: the salesman who sells products you cannot believe will ever come in handy; the crippled beggars who snail their way through the train exploiting their physical deformities; the religious fanatics and freaks who walk from car to car annoying us with their singing, shouting or preaching; the drunken family man, hallucinating and reprimanding his daughter, son, wife, employer and co-workers left and right. The difference here is simply that in real life these things only occasionally amuse and at other times simply dismay.

Two stories in particular caught my attention. The first is the miserable story of the blind daughter with her physically disabled father. This works on two levels. If the story the daughter tells us is true, the man's life is truly without fortune: he has managed to lose the ability to use his arms and legs as a consequence of four separate accidents. If the story is a complete fabrication, the lie is so transparent it becomes funny. Either way, the depiction of our two dear subway beggars hit the bull's eye. In this respect, I could not resist associating the poor father with the mentally or physically retarded beggars; this was not due to their retardedness alone but when viewed as a whole, the mixture of beggary, a subway freak show, and the sheer accuracy of the display reminded me of my own subway experiences. The second story was that of the drunken family man. One is not required to be a first-class actor in order to play this role. However, the performance I found to be mockingly precise, exaggerated to the point where reality greets the ludicrous, and laughter is the only possible response.

The musical is a genre that is meant to be pure entertainment. I cannot consider any

musical to be a serious work of social critique, even when built with bricks of social satire; the form does not lend itself to such seriousness. That is not to say that we cannot extract serious and valid critical opinion from a musical; but it is to say that a musical just does not bite as hard as a work of realism. *Line 1* offers carefully observed views of reality; it abstracts from the quotidian without being itself realistic. Take, for instance, the portrayal of people's indifference and anonymity. These are indeed very real facts of life, but real people do not always dress in the same manner, and they certainly do not express themselves through dancing and singing. Although when the music is great and performed by good musicians, it is still the enemy of realism.

What I disliked most about the performance was not so much its anti-realism as its use of the cliché of the good prostitute: a girl who has grown up under harsh circumstances and who was forced into her present mode of employment but who deep down inside is good, virtuous and misunderstood. The tiresome old speech about purity is unbearably medieval and clichéd; we live in a time where such moral preaching is both futile and scientifically invalid. I do not think of the death of the prostitute as repulsive or tragic; her reason for committing suicide is a conventional melodramatic trick used by the director to wring out emotion from his audience; it is old, cheap, and inexcusable.

In spite of these shortcomings, however, the musical *Subway Line 1* is not boring but entertaining, and the plot is easy to follow. Bear in mind, though, that one cannot contemplate the contents too deeply. To do so would be to spoil the whole experience; for the ending, with its slightly forced happy compromise, does not lend itself to deeper social criticism.