

Tribeca Film Fest Review: 'Yodok Stories'

Documentary Merges Musical Theater with True Accounts of Oppression in North Korea

By Joe Bendel

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HELL IN NORTH KOREA: A prison guard at a concentration camp depicted in the musical documentary 'Yodok Stories.' (Torstein Grude/Piraya Film)

For many South Koreans, it is difficult to believe the reports of horrific human rights abuses committed in the North. That is probably why Polish director Andrzej Fidyk became the prime mover behind *Yodok Stories*, a stage musical about the inhuman atrocities regularly happening in North Korean concentration camps.

Fidyk also documented the controversial theatrical production, undertaken at great risk by defectors who survived the Yodok camp, in his eye-opening Norwegian-produced film, likewise titled *Yodok Stories*, now playing as part of the Tribeca Film Festival.

One thing the North Koreans certainly know is how to stage huge spectacles of tens of

thousands of tightly choreographed participants, like the grand pageant celebrating the 40 year anniversary of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) that Fidyk recorded in his 1988 documentary *Parade*.

Impressed by the technical skill required to mount such a production, Fidyk wanted to collaborate with a former North Korean director to document the rest of the North Korean experiment in Communist collectivism. After many inquiries, he eventually found Jung Sung San.

While resistant at first, the defector ultimately agreed to work on Fidyk's proposed theater piece. Obviously, *Yodok Stories* could not match the scope of North Korean presentations, which have the full compulsory force of the police state at their disposal. As a result, *Yodok* evolved into a production much akin to western book musicals, based on the harrowing experiences of camp survivors.

Evidently, most South Koreans are in a state of denial regarding the scope and conditions of the DPRK's Kyo-hwa-so concentration camps. An estimated 200,000 to 300,000 North Koreans are condemned to such camps, which is essentially tantamount to a death sentence. *Yodok* is unique among such death camps, being the only facility which allows for the remote possibility of prisoners leaving alive—that is if they survive the torture, starvation, rape, forced abortions, and random executions.

Fidyk and Jung Sung San chillingly dramatize these outrages in the stage version of *Yodok*. However, the biggest surprise is that the show sounds pretty good as a musical. Granted, the film never shows a complete, unedited number from start to finish (which is probably Fidyk's only misstep). However, from the extensive clips we do see and hear, *Yodok* frankly seems just as good, if not better than most melodramatic Andrew Lloyd Weber extravaganzas.

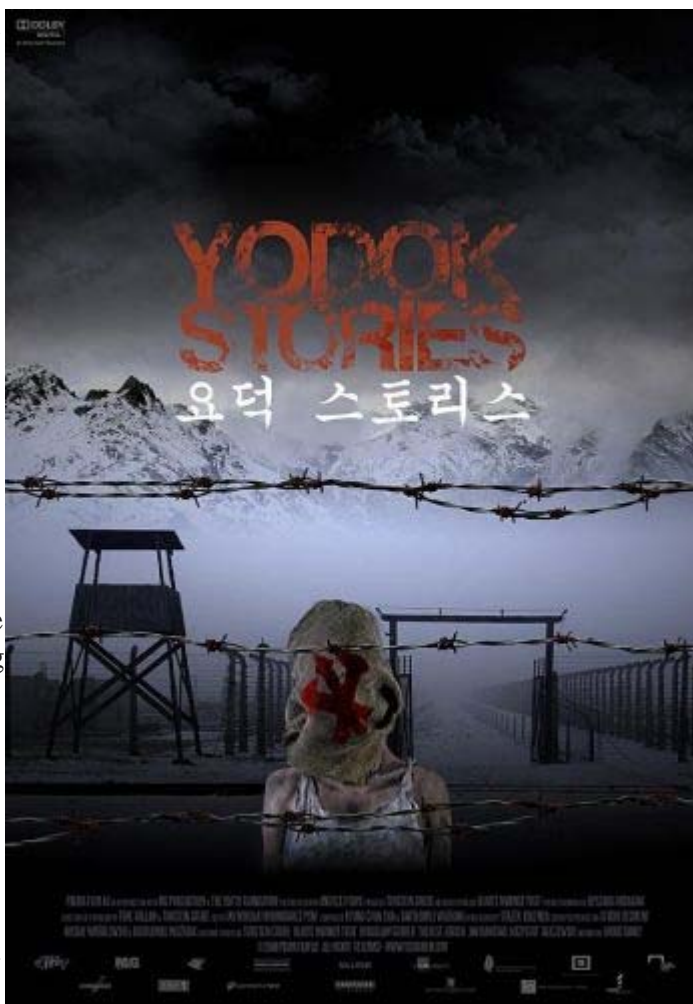
At the heart of *Yodok* though, are the survivor stories on which it is based. Fidyk records some critically important testimony regarding the true nature of the Communist regime. As the director explains, even suicide is not an option for escape, because surviving family members are culpable for the alleged crimes of the so-called "traitors," down to the third generation.

Clearly, it took a lot of courage for the defectors involved in the *Yodok* production to speak out. In addition to concern for their families' safety, they also had to worry about their own physical well-being. In fact, Jung Sung San regularly received death threats via text messages during the production. Yet, despite his initial reluctance, the director was so committed to the production he reportedly even offered one of his kidneys as collateral when funding sources started drying up.

Yodok is an incredibly valuable documentary. It is a well constructed, thoroughly shocking film that forces audiences to confront the nature of the North Korean Communist regime. It is impossible to minimize the absolutely hellish nature of the DPRK after viewing it—it simply brooks no denial.

As the best documentary screening this year at Tribeca, *Yodok* should not be missed. Its remaining screening is on Thursday (4/30), and Jung Sung San's *Yodok: the Musical*, his cinematic record of the actual show, also debuts at Tribeca on the same day.

Joe Bendel blogs on jazz and cultural issues at <http://jbspin.blogspot.com> and coordinated the Jazz Foundation of America's instrument-donation campaign for musicians displaced by Hurricane Katrina.



(Piraya Film)

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