



Why Kim Loves Disney



By Marty Kaplan

Until I saw sixteen hot North Korean chicks singing “Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo” to Kim Jong-un, the strangest video that I’d ever seen of a head of state enjoying a performance was Pope Benedict XVI watching four ripped acrobats strip off their shirts and put on a show worthy of Channing Tatum and the *Magic Mike* boys.

It’s unlikely that the Vatican video caused the CIA and the State Department to scramble teams of analysts to decode shifts in the Holy See’s hierarchy, but that’s doubtless the kind of scrutiny now being given to the tape of a 100-minute extravaganza in Pyongyang staged earlier this month. A hall packed with military brass and government officials, with North Korea’s 20-something leader and his mysterious lady companion in the front row, applauded and cheered a girl band in sexy dresses and stiletto heels for performing covers of “My Way,” the *Rocky* theme, and a Disney medley including “Heigh-Ho,” the *Mickey Mouse Club* anthem and the title song from *Beauty and the Beast*. What’s up with that?

The show wasn’t entirely Hollywood. The American pop segments were interleaved with local songs sung in traditional costume with a typical backdrop of communist iconography. So was Kim signaling an opening to the West by coupling nationalistic propaganda to “It’s a Small World”? Were the Stallone and Sinatra tributes a warning to Kim’s rivals? Was “Some Day My Prince Will Come” a message to the North Korean people about their new leader? This has got to be way more fun for our intelligence pros than sussing out which apparachiks were cropped from *Pravda*’s May Day photos of the Red Square reviewing stand.

Disney, needless to say, was not flattered by the unlicensed appropriation of its intellectual property - not just its songs, but also sequences from Disney movies like *Dumbo* and *Fantasia* projected behind the band, as well as onstage appearances by Mickey, Minnie, Winnie the Pooh, Tigger and one of the Snow White dwarfs (Doc, I think). If I were Disney, I’d be especially ticked off by a sixth costumed character who danced around with them, a cheesy dinosaur who looked vaguely like Yoshi from Super Mario Brothers. All I can figure is that the dino dude stars in some Barney ripoff on North Korean daytime TV, and they were just piggybacking on the Disney brand to do some old-fashioned cross-promotion.

The challenge facing our analysts in Langley and Foggy Bottom is that the Disney brand means more than one thing. To little kids, Disney is happiness. To older kids, Disney is dorkey. To hipsters, Disney is ironic, retro, kitsch. To some people around the world, Disney epitomizes the American dream. To others, it symbolizes American cultural imperialism: Coca-Colonization, McWorld, capitalism with a cartoon face. When I went to work at Disney — I was there for 12 years, as a studio executive and a screenwriter — a literature professor I’d revered in graduate school despaired at my going over to the dark side; “consummate vulgarity” is the phrase I recall. On the other hand, most of my Washington friends whom I told I was headed to Burbank wanted to know if I could get them discounts on Disney merchandise.

So what message was Kim sending when he made the video available on YouTube? The easiest interpretation is belligerence, a thumb in the eye of corporate copyrights and international trade agreements. Also plausible is that he’s doing some brand marketing of his own — promoting a funner image for North Korea than mass starvation, labor camps and nuclear-armed crazy men. But I’d be surprised if this is Kim’s way of declaring that a Chinese-style economy is the direction he’s taking his country; to me it’s more likely that it’s his way of sticking it to his late father, Kim Jong-il, and writing a fairy tale ending to his affair with the woman sitting next to him.

Who is she? Britain’s *Daily Mail* reports that she’s Hyon Song-wol, who once fronted the Bochonbo Electronic Music Band, whose hits, as you may recall, included “Excellent Horse-Like Lady” and “We are Troops of the Party.” The *Mail* cites a South Korean

intelligence official saying that Kim Jong-un and Hyon Soong-wol met when they were teenagers. Ten years ago, when Kim returned from boarding school in Switzerland, they became romantically involved, but his father — as jealous as Snow White's stepmother? — banned his son from seeing her. She is said to have married an officer in the North Korean Army and had a baby with him, but it's not clear where they are or whether they're still married.

Couple that with another episode in the Kim dynasty's saga and you have the makings of a classic family psychodrama. In 2001, Kim Jong-un's eldest half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, was arrested while trying to enter Japan on a fake Dominican Republic passport in order to make a secret visit to Tokyo Disneyland. Until then, Kim Jong-nam was his father's heir apparent, but his being caught with his hands in the Great Satan's honey pot put an end to that.

And now Kim Jong-un is dancing on Kim Jong-il's grave — flaunting his once-forbidden pop star lover, and publicly indulging with impunity the same taste for American shmaltz that pissed off his father, got his half-brother exiled to Macau and cleared the way for his own ascent to power. Of course there are other, more geopolitically nuanced explanations for the North Korean girl band's Disney repertoire. But sometimes foreign policy turns out to be not much more complicated than a lovesick young man with a mean father wishing upon a star.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.

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