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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Eun-Me Ahn North Korea Dance

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Some choreographers respond to a divided country with lament; Eun-Me Ahn responds with a rainbow, a gayageum, and a techno beat. At the Volkstheater, Korea's most exuberant living choreographer gave North Korea Dance its Austrian premiere as the anchor of ImPulsTanz 2026's Fokus Korea strand, and the seventy-five minutes that followed were as generous and politically clear-eyed a piece of contemporary dance.

Ahn made the work in 2018, when the Panmunjom summit and the Pyeongchang Olympics briefly seemed to open a spring of rapprochement. Cut off from the North itself, she built her research from YouTube clips and conversations with defector-dancers — a method that could easily have curdled into voyeurism, but in her hands becomes an act of imaginative solidarity. The evening opens in near-silence: virtuoso gayageum player Soon-A Park coaxes the twelve strings of the Korean zither into shivering, water-clear lines while the ten dancers of the Ahn Eun-Me Company enter as if crossing a border only their feet can see.

Then the transformation begins. Saccharine fan dances flare into slow-motion runway; the springing steps of Pyongyang's military parades are stripped of menace and re-choreographed as pop mechanics; folk lines from the North's officially sanctioned repertoire are wound through acrobatic tumbling and torsos that quiver on the border between propaganda and rave. Ahn — often described, not lazily, as "Asia's Pina Bausch" — never mocks her source material; she treats every gesture as a sibling separated at birth.

By the final third, the gayageum has fused with a pulsing techno score, and the stage is one continuous body of colour: neon jumpsuits, embroidered silks, unisex haircuts, a chorus of bodies that refuses to choose between grandmother's hanbok and Seoul's dance-floor future. Since its 2018 premiere at Théâtre de la Ville Paris, where Ahn became the house's first Asian associate artist, North Korea Dance has toured widely, and its political charge has only grown as reunification has slipped further out of reach. In Vienna it lands as something rarer than protest and rarer than nostalgia: an offering — meticulous and joyful — from one Korea to the other.

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
Email: contact@european-news-agency.com
Internet: european-news-agency.com

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
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