



A jewel of power and brilliance
Korean Drama: *Dae Jang Geum/Jewel in the Palace*

Review by Bo Brown (Spring 2006 issue)

Dae Jang-geum is the fictionalized story of the first (and apparently only) female doctor in Korean history to become a personal physician to the king. Placed against a backdrop of the early Choson period and having the gorgeous Korean countryside as its main setting, the story is exciting, absorbing and very well written. The music is beautiful and stirring. Events unfold at an astonishing pace; everything ties together in a tapestry of cause and effect.

Screenwriter Young-hyun Kim took advantage of known history to illuminate the culture and lives of women in this era. The main character, Jang-geum Suh (played by the luminous and wildly popular model/actress Young-ae Lee) ---- court lady, herbalist, cook, slave, doctor, researcher, detective and conspirator-lives a full and fascinating life, and the dramatic depiction of that life is laid before us with fine ingenuity and craft. The story is epic, the characterization is brilliant and the acting is excellent.

That is the short review. But let us begin at the beginning.

Cheon-su Suh (played by Chan-hwan Park) is a man with an unlucky fate, and it comes upon him one hot August day in 1482, the 13th year of King Seong-jong's rule, in a rush of bad omens and horrifying events. A king's guard, he injures himself in an archery competition ---- his arrow breaks, his bowstring snaps. Then he is forced to participate in the "suicide" (murder by poison) of an inconvenient queen, the crown prince's mother, who curses the hapless men sent by her presumably cowardly husband to do the deed. So Suh does what anyone might do in this situation ---- he drinks himself into a stupor and then stumbles home through a bamboo forest, which shrieks with the dead queen's curses. He then falls and is knocked out.

When he comes to, Suh finds himself in a hermit's cave. The hermit reads his future: "Three women hold your fate. Even though you killed the first woman, you will not die. The second will die because of you, even though you save her. The third woman will kill you, but she will save many lives." Refusing to explain, the hermit says, "Since you've met the first woman [the queen], the only way to avoid the third is never to meet the second." The hermit tosses off three hanja (Chinese scholarly symbols used by Korean literati) toward Suh and disappears.

Twelve years pass. Captain Suh, after taking the symbols to a monk and learning their deeper meaning, has assiduously avoided all women. But the crown prince has grown up and come to power, and he is a wicked, profligate, sadistic and vengeful king. Time to get out of Dodge, Suh thinks. So he packs up his bags and goes off to his fate. Which, of course, has only been waiting in the wings, as fate always does. For he finds, fallen head first in the river, the nearly-lifeless body of Myeong Park, court lady (Hye-seon Kim), cruelly poisoned for reasons you will have to watch the drama to learn. He takes her to a monk; he helps the monk to save her life. Cheon-su Suh has met the second woman of his fate.

This is the set-up, the first 30 minutes of a 54-hour drama, but the story of this ill-fated pair is the foundation of everything that happens thereafter. The events of their lives, together and apart, echo and turn around in a pattern of overlapping blooming kismet, sounding through the life of their daughter, Jang-geum Suh. Who is, of course, the third woman of the hermit's prediction. Her life story falls roughly into three sections: The court kitchens, Jeju Island, and court life as a doctor.

Screenwriter Kim, who spent a year researching and writing the drama, has been quoted as saying "90 percent of the story is fiction." The "real" Jang-geum is mentioned several times in the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty (official court records), but there is no description of her history. The murdered queen was actually a well-known troublemaker, and her husband (King Seong-jong) was probably a pawn to court politics in the matter of her death, although he was an effective, enlightened leader. The portrait here of his son (the murderous crown prince) is fairly close to what was known about his behavior and court life during his lifetime. The facts have been well used in the service of fiction.

Little Jang-geum is played in childhood by Jeong-eun Cho, whose performance sparkles. This child actor doesn't merely make faces approximating emotion, she gives a realistic and charming foundation to a character who resourcefully and remorselessly sets out on the mission her mother gave her with her dying breath ---- to become the head kitchen lady of the king's court. Jeong-eun Cho, as the girl Jang-geum, establishes a believable relationship to her future mentor, Lady Baek-yeong Han (Mi-gyeong Yang). In this relationship, we see the genesis of the older Jang-geum ---- smart, curious, headstrong and not always wise.

But this is the story of one woman and of many women. Though she is the very definition of a plucky heroine, Jang-geum is surrounded by mere humans. Even the monstrous, malevolent women of the Choi family, most memorably that artist of the eyebrow, Mi-ri Gyeon, are more shaped by their family's ambitions than their own. Court life, as the first Lady Choi (we see three) explains to her young successor, is not for crybabies.

And court life, for these women, consists of the preparation of endless rounds of decorative, intricate and painstakingly-constructed food. From early morning until well into the night, they skillfully cut vegetables and all manner of game, seafood, fowl and domestic meats into precise pieces, chop, boil, sauté, grill, stew, stuff and pickle. (The

hands shown doing this precise and rapid work were “stunt hands” ---- a chef of royal cuisine was brought in to do the actual, dangerous chopping after one of the actresses nearly injured herself.) Once these delectable feasts are prepared, the ladies carry overladen trays into the king and his guests. When not cooking or serving, they compete to find new preparation methods.

The overwhelming impression is twofold ---- first of tremendous waste (who could eat all the food they carry in and out, usually to one person?), and second of precise beauty and delicacy. When the series was initially shown in Korea in 2003, it prompted an interest in royal cuisine, and restaurants were opened featuring this arcane style of cooking.

But what truly makes Dae Jang-geum special is the meticulous care given to the writing of the roster of characters living in this fictional world. For instance, Jang-geum’s adoptive parents, avaricious rice vintner Joo-daek Na (Bo-ra Geum) and her husband, con artist, court cook and village clown Dook-Goo Kang (Hyeon-sik Im), could easily have dissolved into simple comic foils, with no inner life and no purpose except to make us laugh. And yet, this avaricious, ignorant, suspicious and unlucky couple pursue their many dreams with imagination and nerve. Even while looking for the next coin to fall from some unlucky traveler’s purse, they are kind and clever enough to protect a persecuted orphan from their betters.

And let us not forget the fabulous Sir Jeong-ho Min (Jin-hee Ji), the romantic lead. A sort of Choson secret agent man, he is a member of the king’s guard when not digging out corruption, spies and conspirators from the fabric of the kingdom or teaching the occasional illiterate child how to paint and write characters. His relationship with Lady Suh (Jang-geum), while platonic, is pretty steamy. Sir Min is probably the only character more saintly than our heroine. But we forgive him, for he is debonair, brave and, well, deliciously handsome. From the palace eunuchs to Jang-geum’s many teachers and mentors, these people have motivations for what they do, and they develop and grow. As shaped by their flaws as they are by their virtues, any of them could at least be the subject of their own one-hour drama.

The character Lady Han was so popular in Korea that extra episodes had to be written to satisfy the public cries for “more Lady Han.” In fact, this is the source of one of the drama’s few weaknesses. The palace kitchen years simply run too long. Problems are resolved; then the resolution devolves for no apparent reason. At some point, Young-ae Lee, exhausted by the unforeseen extension on her grueling role, rebelled and said she would only do 50 episodes, as originally contracted. Because of this situation, Jang-geum’s medical training and life as a doctor do not receive the attention one would expect in the biography of a court doctor. However, eventually Ms. Lee was persuaded to do 54 episodes, and a satisfactory conclusion could be written to the series. Jang-geum finds her calling on Jeju Island where she is sent after a successful conspiracy against her. She attends medical school and eventually makes her way to the court, still buzzing with intrigue as she left it, but now she is better equipped to negotiate it.

The soundtrack seamlessly caresses the action. Composed by Se-Hyeon Im using traditional-sounding themes, the music is employed skillfully by the director, Byoung-hoon Lee. Im chose three young Korean girls to sing the main theme song, Onara. Several remixes of Onara were made, as well as some versions with older Korean singers, and they are used as mood pieces throughout the series. The lyrics to Onara were written in Im's version of "old Korean," and there was some heated debate about their correct meaning until she released her own translation into modern Korean. It was written as a lament of the court ladies, who entered the palace when they were as young as five years old, whose only possible lover could be the King himself (hence, the use of young female performers). The love theme, Hamangyeon, performed by Italian tenor Alessandro Safina, fits hauntingly into the story of Lady Suh and Sir Min and has resonated with viewers long after their final scenes played across our collective consciousness.

Dae Jang-geum was and continues to be wildly popular in Japan, China, Taiwan, Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and the United States, securing a well-deserved position as a tent peg in the Korean cultural phenomenon known as hallyu ---- the Korean wave. Give it a try. You'll not regret it. 1

*Dae Jang-geum (a/k/a
The Great Jang Geum, or Jewel in the Palace) is available at www.yesasia.com and
amazon.com*