

A crucial time

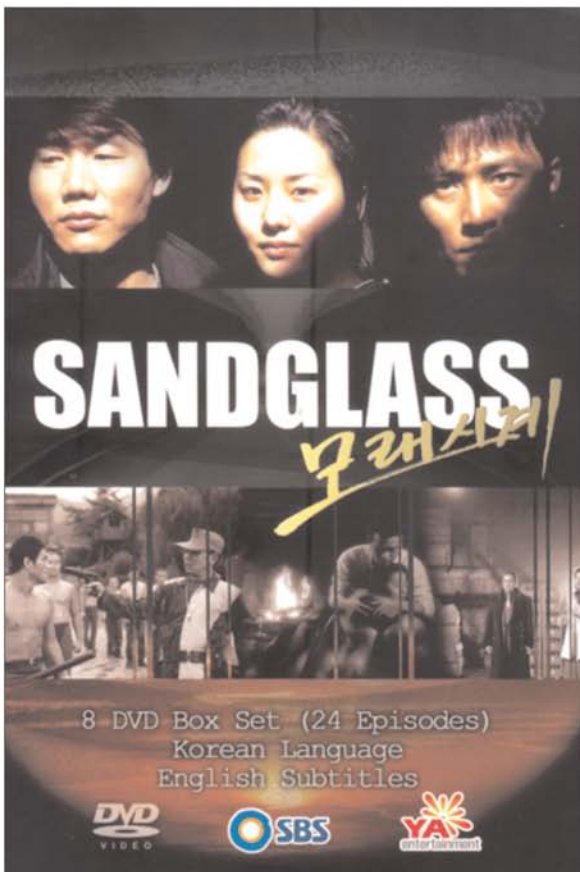
Morae Shigae/Sandglass: Classic award-winning drama

I could tell you a lot about the historical significance of *Sandglass*: It became famous for its daring depiction of Korean life under the Park and Chun dictatorships in South Korea during the '70s and '80s.

Or I could dwell on its personal significance as an early part of my introduction to Korean popular culture, along with the movie *A Single Spark* and the music of Seunghwan Lee. A Korean friend brought over some of the early episodes on VHS, with subtitles; it was years before I was able to watch the whole series.

But I would rather talk about its entertainment value. I watched *Sandglass* on DVD over a four-week period, one episode each night, and I was hooked before I knew it. I haven't gotten so caught up in a TV series since I was a kid.

Sandglass follows its three main characters from early adolescence to adulthood, from the 1960s to the 1980s. The character Tae-soo Park (played by Min-su Choi) is a charismatic gangster, adored by the men with whom he breaks up opposition-party meetings. Flashbacks tell us that in high school Tae-soo was a fighter and leader, already wooed by local toughs and politicians. He briefly resisted his destiny under the influence of his close friend Woo-suk Kang. Woo-suk tutored Tae-soo and encouraged him to think about college, much to the delight of Tae-soo's widowed mother. We learn in flashbacks that when Tae-soo is rejected by military college because his late father had been a Communist guerilla, he abandons himself to a gangster's life.



The classic *Morae Shigae* — *Sandglass*.

Woo-suk (Sang-won Park) goes on to law school, his goal since childhood. As he prepares for the bar exam, Woo-suk keeps aloof from student activism or anything else that might distract him from his goal. But he is impressed by a bold young woman, Hye-rin Yoon (Hyun-jung Ko) who edits the student association's newspaper. They become friends.

Flashbacks show us that Hye-rin is the daughter of a rich and pow-

erful casino owner with ties to the highest levels of the Chung-hee Park regime. A devoted bodyguard, Jae Hee Baek (Jung-jae Lee) watches over her in her student lodgings and her increasingly dangerous activism. By chance, Woo-suk once again meets Tae-soo, who is also impressed by Hye-rin. Woo-suk is disappointed to learn that his old friend is still on the wrong side of the law, and has given up his academic dreams. "When I

become a prosecutor," Woo-suk warns him, "I might have to prosecute you..."

The most spectacular segment of the series is its recreation of the Gwangju uprising of 1980, which takes up most of two episodes. Tae-soo visits a former subordinate who has moved back to Gwangju, and gets caught up in the resistance when government troops are sent in to crush the democratic protests there. He doesn't know that Woo-suk joined the army just in time to be deployed at Gwangju. Hye-rin has escaped arrest and has fled Seoul for the countryside.

Archival video footage adds power and authenticity to the program's restaging of the rebellion.

Two-thirds of the series still lies ahead after Gwangju, but *Sandglass* (or Hourglass), as its title implies, is really about time, and about Koreans' struggle to come to terms with their history. Tae-soo, Woo-suk, and Hye-rin must overcome their suffering and pursue their aims and destinies, which they do with great energy.

At times I did get tired of Hye-rin's Poor Little Rich Girl routine, especially since her impulsive decisions tend to blow up in other people's faces, not hers. And Woo-suk is such a Boy Scout — clean, thrifty, brave, reverent, blind to the feelings of the people nearest to him, and prone to give up when at first he doesn't succeed. Only Tae-soo, perhaps because he knows he's damned, seems to know who he is from the beginning, doggedly pursuing what he wants over all obstacles.

To their credit, the stars make their characters credible as people, not just as symbols. I fell in love with all three of them, especially Sang-won Park, who I think had the hardest job. Woo-suk could have been an intolerable prig. His best scene is near series end, when he returns to his office after having been interrogated for days at KCIA headquarters. His wife finds him dozing in a stairwell, unhurt physically but exhausted, and too proud to let his colleagues see him in that state. Park really looks as if he hasn't slept in days; it's the only time he looks anything but buttoned-up and alert.

Twenty-four episodes allow space to develop minor characters as well. The inexperienced Jung-jae Lee, for example, who plays Hye-rin's lovelorn bodyguard Jae-hee, is at first given little to do but look pretty. But over time he becomes credible as a man who watches and waits, saying little, while keeping his feelings bottled up.

The Korean friend who introduced me to *Sandglass* tells me he's watched the whole series three times. I can understand why: As soon as I finished it, I wanted to go back to the beginning and watch it again. I'm lucky most television isn't this good.

Sandglass ("Morae shigae"). Alternate title: "The Hourglass." 24 episodes. Written by Song Ji-na. Produced by Kim Jong-hak. Starring Choi Min-su, Ko Hyun-jung, Park Sang-won, Lee Jung-jae. First aired on SBS in Korea from Jan 10 to Feb 16, 1995. Available on DVD from YA Entertainment with English subtitles. ●