



**Sweetness and laughs
Korean Drama:
My Lovely Sam-Soon ---- Light comedy becomes
best-loved drama of 2005**

Review by Sarah Lee (Spring 2006 issue)

The Korean drama commonly translated as *My Lovely Sam-Soon* or *My Name is Sam-Soon*, was the most successful and popular Korean drama of 2005, ending the year with the highest ratings of any drama, with 50 percent of the audience share.

The resulting phenomenon was coined “The Sam-Soon Syndrome,” characterized by a desire of women ranging from 10 to 50 years of age to be just like Sam-Soon, the precocious protagonist. The drama also spawned several copycat dramas portraying independent women, and even started a national trend of older Korean women dating younger men, a breaking of long-standing traditional taboos.

Most of my friends who are avid watchers of Korean dramas have watched or were in the process of watching this series by the time I heard about it. Naturally, I was intrigued and had high expectations. I am happy to say that *My Lovely Sam-Soon* had moments of true comic genius, due to the great physicality and timing of Sun-Ah Kim, as Sam-Soon, a pastry chef with a sweet tooth on a quest for true love.

My Lovely Sam-Soon is a light comedy, with touches of Bridget Jones-like self-reflection and fantasy sequences, ranging from ridiculous to uncomfortable to poignant, especially when she dreams of conversing with her deceased father. The later episodes take on a more serious tone in true Korean drama-esque fashion. Like Renee Zellweger in the role of Bridget Jones, Sun-Ah Kim gained 15 pounds to play this role, and her extra bulk is a continuing source of jokes and slapstick.

In one scene when they show a pre-production photo of her, the drama is tongue-in-cheek by joking that it was adjusted through Photoshop. In addition to struggling with her weight, the character of Sam-Soon Kim, is also struggling with her age, since she is considered an old maid in Korean society at 30 years old (which translates to 28 or 29 in American years).

She hits an all-time low during the drama; she loses her job and is humiliated by being publicly dumped by her cheating boyfriend of three years. Females everywhere can wholeheartedly embrace her flawed character, as she is bluntly outspoken and self-aware of her unconventional style. We can’t help but cheer her on as she grows out of self-loathing, portrayed by her resistance to the unsophisticated name “Sam-Soon.”

Through serendipity and fate, Sam Soon encounters Jin-Heon Hyeon, played by Hyeon Bin, a young, handsome rich restaurateur and heir-apparent of the most prestigious hotel chain in Korea. Jin-heon hires Sam-Soon as a pastry chef when his chef suddenly leaves the country due to family circumstances. He is quickly charmed by the quirky Sam-Soon, and expresses his interest through obnoxious comments and gestures, in typical Korean male-drama-character style. He is, however, dealing with strange family dynamics of his own, with an overbearing mother, a mute niece, and his mother's expressionless personal assistant.

And it wouldn't be a Korean drama without a love triangle! Jin-Heon's first love Hee-jin Yoo, a beautiful, smart medical student, had broken Jin-Heon's heart by leaving abruptly to America for three years without explanation. She fights with Sam-Soon for Jin-Heon, and in the process, becomes a very sympathetic anti-protagonist with her cheery demeanor and tragic secret of gastric cancer.

The love triangle gets more complicated with the entry of Dr. Henry Kim, played by the dreamy Korean American model/actor Daniel Henney. This breakout celebrity alone may be the reason for the significant draw of girls and women to watch this drama, not necessarily for the acting, but for his formidable and scene-stealing smile. The writers of the drama maximize his character's allure by making him a great basketball player, a caring doctor, and hopeless romantic, as he follows Hee-Jin across the globe to Korea to win her love.

The producers may have done too good of a job in promoting him, as I found myself wondering (alongside Sam-Soon), why doesn't she go for Henry instead of Jin-Heon? The writers also draw from his real life, as it subtly discloses his mother is a Korean adoptee sent to the U.S. at the age of one. In fact, rumor has it that as a result of this drama, a television studio is working on producing a special where his real-life mother searches for her birth family.

The real villain in the story is supposed to be Jin-Heon's mother, the president of a prosperous hotel chain, who goes to unbelievable lengths to control her son's life and keep him and Sam-Soon apart, because she disapproves of Sam-Soon's appearance, socioeconomic status, education, and family background. However, it unfolds that she was instrumental in the break-up of Hee-Jin and Jin-Heon's first relationship. The mother seems to represent Korean society in that it calls for impossible standards, especially on women, without self-reflection and allowances for each family's problems. There is also the absence of a resolution of a traumatic past, a condition that can be seen in Korean society, and in the characters in the Sam-Soon drama.

At its best moments, My Lovely Sam-Soon presents social commentary interspersed with riotous fun. Unfortunately, it also digresses into formulaic cheesy B-side stories, such as Sam-Soon's exasperating ex-boyfriend who seems to keep popping up to the chagrin of Sam-Soon and the viewing audience. Another side story is of Sam-Soon's sister, a recent divorcee, who is the voice of reason on the surface, and underneath, is cynical and

more hapless than her sister in matters on love. She gets entangled in an affair with the main chef (played by Hae Hyo Kwon, of Winter Sonata fame) at Jin-Heon's restaurant.

Despite some obvious weaknesses, this drama breaks convention by challenging the popular and romantic notion of an enduring "first love" or chut-sarang. Instead, the drama depicts love more realistically, as awkward, bittersweet, and a thing that requires some careful cultivation to develop and grow.

One scene is emblematic of this message; a naïve pastry chef's assistant involuntarily receives her first kiss from an ugly bus-boy. With this and other scenes, this drama is telling the audience to let go of overly-romantic ideals of instant love, as such a notion will surely disappoint. Instead, it promotes the idea that a love that takes effort and time is more worthy of pursuit.

Overall, there is much to like about this drama and is evident in the way it strongly resonated with the Korean people. I found it to be refreshing and laugh-out-loud funny, and also enjoyed its lighthearted questioning of certain Korean values concerning women, family and marriage. This drama attempts to stretch society's acceptance, to persuade its audience that women may be strong-willed, independent, overweight, and older, and still be desirable.

Random Fact: Sun-ah Kim was raised primarily in Japan and the U.S., which resulted in an unusual accent. Her pronunciation is now considered an asset rather than a flaw as it added to the charm of her character. I'm not sure if the drama's inclusion of Korean American actors resulted in the impressive English subtitles, but there were no awkward translations and comedic subtleties were successfully conveyed. This is a six-DVD box set of 16 episodes, which equates to approximately 16 hours of viewing. 1

For more info on Korean Dramas:

Read an article on-line about the drama's impact on society and an interview with Sun-ah Kim : <http://times.hankooki.com/lpage/200507/kt2005072519282510220.htm>

Read article in Chosun Ilbo on the drama: <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200506/200506240014.html>

Visit Daniel Henney's personal blog www.cyworld.com/danhenney and article in the Chosun Ilbo <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200506/200506300022.html>