

Cinderella with attitude

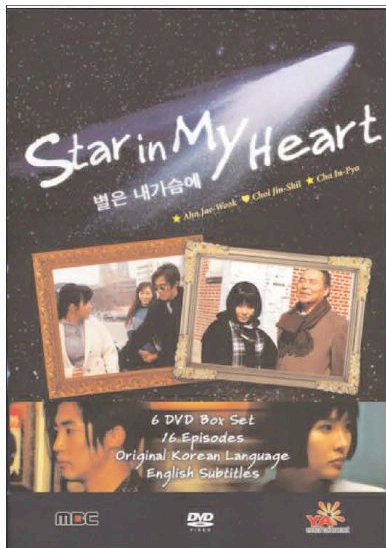
Complexity and characters save this classic '90s TV drama

STAR IN MY HEART (MBC, 1997)

A rich gentleman, Mr. Ahn, takes teenager Yeon-i Lee (spelled Yun-le in the subtitles, played by Jin-shil Choi) from the Catholic orphanage where she has been raised and brings her to live in the city with his resentful family. Clearly, his wife, a successful fashion designer, looks down on her because she is poor and thinks that whatever Yeon-i receives is at the expense of her already dreadfully spoiled son and daughter. In fact, everyone but Mr. Ahn hates Yeon-i and finds every way possible to make her miserable. He seems to be hiding the reason why he has brought her to live with his family, even though he says her father was a friend of his, leading his wife privately to conclude that he is Yeon-i's father, to her understandable anger.

This would seem to be the setting for a Cinderella story. And, as it happens, when *Star in My Heart* (sometimes known as *Wish Upon a Star*) aired on MBC in 1997, it was one of many dramas of the era (and beyond) classified informally as "Cinderella dramas," melodramas about poor, hardworking girls who make good and win the love of well-to-do boys. However, in light of the later development of that genre, SIMH seems notably downplayed. Drama it has in spades, along with Yeon-i's success story. But unlike many other such stories, the screenplay never oversells or oversimplifies the main story at the expense of subplots, supporting characters, or indeed the world the characters inhabit.

Yeon-i meets her Prince Charming (Min Kang, played by Jae-wook Ahn) and his friend Joon-hee Lee (In-pyo Cha) by accident at a club where her life-long friend from the orphanage, Soon-ae, is working as a cocktail waitress. Min, or Min-hee as the subtitles call him, is an aspiring rock singer. Like most young characters in dramas, it seems, Min has a dysfunctional relation-



Star in My Heart, released by YA Entertainment.

ship with his father, who appears to be some kind of well-to-do gangster, though other reviews call him an army general. At any rate, Min's father is thuggish in the extreme, not above having his son beaten up and his recording studio smashed by the father's henchman in an attempt to convince his son (unsuccessfully) to abandon his singing career.

Jae-wook Ahn is today an established singing/acting star in Korea and elsewhere in Asia, and SIMH did much to make this happen. Although Ahn is not the most polished singer in the world — at least, he wasn't at the time this drama was filmed — he has good acting skills, a great deal of charisma, and a pleasantly off-key singing voice that fits the slightly sad, romantic quality of the character he plays. Because Min's singing career is traced through the series, we hear a lot of his songs. Some of them are rather forgettable love ballads, but one in particular, the song played over the closing credits of each episode, has a hypnotic quality; once heard, it's hard to forget. Its melancholy and somewhat jaded sound — giving a feeling of distance and lassitude — make it the perfect accompaniment to the overall aesthetic of SIMH.

Filed in the mid-1990s, SIMH reveals that the stylistic influence of the 1980s lasted perhaps longer in Korea than it did in the United States and the rest of the West. The hairstyles of the leading men, for instance, show a hard-edged post-punk quality, each in its own way. Joon-hee's is close-clipped and sculptural, reflecting his overall cool, sharp look. Min's hair — in a

style that became a phenomenon in itself among Korean youths, much as the "Rachel" did among American women in the same period — is shorter in back and hangs in long spikes over his face, partially hiding his eyes. The female characters, even the ingénue Yeon-i, wear thick makeup. The look of the drama itself is dark and murky. The corners of rooms tend to be cloaked in shadow, and flashes of light shine out like shards: Teeth, sequins, the whites of eyes.

Similarly, the early part of this drama is told in hints and fragments; while Yeon-i's status in the family and her obvious talent as a designer are clear enough, signaling some of the basic elements, only small clues are given as to the story being set up. The length of time it takes for the pieces to fall into place creates intrigue. Episodes begin and end with montages of previous scenes, in either flashbacks or future events.

In particular, a group of scenes whose chronological order is a mystery takes place in Italy, featuring a long-haired and glamorous dead ringer for Yeon-i. She is seen as Joon-hee's lover, then leaving him, and then with another, possibly Italian, man as she passes Joon-hee in the street.

Has this happened? Is it yet to happen? Is this woman Yeon-i or a doppelgänger?

Throughout the series, the whole family seems bent on victimizing Yeon-i for one reason and another, and they succeed in wronging her for a time. But this is not just another typical case of a bright, hardworking drama heroine who smiles in the face of adversity and ongoing exploitation. For every person who wants to hurt her, Yeon-i, unlike Cinderella, has someone who's standing up for her. Eventually she joins the staff of JS Fashion, where Joon-hee is the president and Yeon-i's "wicked stepsister," I-hwa (Mi-ryung Jo), is already in place, having cheated her way into a design position.

Yeon-i is a nuanced character, not a cardboard cutout, which seems due both to the director and to the abilities of Jin-shil Choi, by now a very accomplished actress recently seen in the heart-wrenching KBS drama *My Rosy Life* (War of the Roses).

The Yeon-i character grows in various ways throughout the series. Although she is polite, humble, and grateful for the opportunities given her, Yeon-i is a fighter when aroused sufficiently; when slapped by a peer, she will slap back. She has several outright brawls with I-hwa, who is mortally jealous of Yeon-i's superior design ability and of Min's love for her. Mi-ryung Jo (seen this year as the almost equally unlikable Pal-ja in KBS's daily drama *Pure 19*) is a bit too annoying as I-hwa, by turns evil to Yeon-i and wheedling in her efforts to win Min. In a sense, however, she is perfect as the daughter of Won-suk Park (who plays the designer Ms. Song, Mr. Ahn's wife), being a junior version of that masterful harriidan.

Won-suk Park deserves special mention among the secondary players. She played what was possibly the world's meanest mother-in-law two years ago in the KBS

daily drama *My Sweetheart, My Darling* (her unintentional master-stroke was stressing her daughter-in-law into infertility). This shrewish performance earned her the animosity of international drama fans, who dubbed her character "Screach Mom," and television volume controls were reportedly dialed down whenever she appeared onscreen.

Here Park plays a similar character: Vain, shallow, loud, greedy, and without a single charitable impulse. Such characters can be very hard to take, and for a long time it is hard to stomach her scenes in SIMH. Her vulpine teeth, sneering mouth, and chronically overdressed and overly made-up countenance are not endearing. But over the course of the drama the genius of Park emerges.

This actress ends up making the viewer enjoy her, because she is clearly enjoying herself. She is not afraid to be ugly, to let the viewer hate her, and to have a sense of humor about it. The surprisingly hilarious moment — no more than a throwaway — when Ms. Song, having just unleashed the latest of her high-volume tirades, fails to see a closed plate-glass door in front of her and smashes into it face-first, directly in front of the camera, is the moment when all is forgiven.

After episode 10 (of a total of 16), when the identity of Yeon-i's lookalike is revealed, SIMH settles down more into essentially ordinary melodrama, but it continues to be engaging and different. The good thing about SIMH in this capacity is that, rather than sacrificing the surrounding details for the benefit of the main plot, it keeps all the balls in the air. No one element overwhelms the others. The sweet love story between Yeon-i and Min remains at its core, but everything in the periphery stays in view: Business problems, the objections of Min's heavy-handed father, threats from the Song family, the development of Soon-ae's singing career, intrusions by the tabloids, and Joon-hee's love affair (which is

essentially one ongoing loose end) — all of these continue to have screen time.

This makes a nice change from more recent dramas, which tend to be reduced to an overly simple will-true-love-win plot.

Another bonus is the supporting presence of the tailors on Yeon-i's development team, Mr. Heo and Mr. Han; like magical fairy-tale tailors, they can whip up the

beautiful clothes of Yeon-i's designs in the blink of an eye. Rescued from self-imposed career obscurity by Joon-hee, these two cheerful and loyal middle-aged men join not only the JS Fashion team but the team of Yeon-i's admirers.

A well-known Korean television actor, himself a onetime heart-throb, recently criticized modern dramas for, among other things,

frequently showing big companies that have CEOs who are in their 20s, when this almost never happens in real life. It is true that Korean dramas ask us to accept many unrealistic things that have become conventions. Wealthy people making themselves ridiculous with jealousy toward the poorer and less fortunate; handsome male lovers who are uniformly constant, tender, and romantic; beautiful and pure-hearted women rejecting their

lovers as a matter of principle in the face of parental opposition (and the men continuing steadfast regardless of rejection); and, of course, those glamorous international firms, usually fashion or telecommunications companies, run and staffed by gorgeous 28-year-olds.

After watching many such dramas, we learn to accept these things, probably as an act of will-

ful escapism. Sometimes we end up feeling ridiculous for swallowing such things in the name of entertainment, but dramas occasionally come along that reward our suspension of disbelief. Stylishly, and with those distancing touches from the screenwriter and director, *Star in My Heart* inspires us to invest ourselves in the story and still gives us enough reason to respect ourselves later. ●