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 (played Yun-je 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 overfed 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 this 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 has in spades, along with Yeon-i’s success story. But unlike many other such stories, the screenplays never overemphasize or oversimplify 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 Cho) by accident at a club where her lifelong friend from the orphanage, Soon-ae, is working as a cocktail waitress. Min, or Minky as he is called, is an aspiring rock singer. Like most young characters in dramas, it seems, Min has a dysfunctional relationship 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 thugs in the extreme, not above having his son beaten up and his recording studio smashed by the father’s bodyguard in an attempt to convince him (unsuccessfully) to abandon his singing career.

Jae-wook Ahn is today an established singing/songwriting star in Korea and elsewhere in Asia, and SIMH did much to make this happens. 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 material 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 while the closing credits of each episode, has a hypnotic quality; once heard, it’s hard to forget. Its melancholy and somberly awkward sound — giving a feeling of distance and loneliness — make it the perfect accompaniment to the overall aesthetic of SIMH.

Filmed in the mid-1990s, SIMH reveals that the stylistic influence of the 1980s lasted perhaps longer in Korea than 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-cropped and sculpted, 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是指(短) 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, some of the basics elements, only small clues being 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 thematic 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 drives Joon-hee in the streets.

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

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 another typical case of a bright, hardworking drama heroine who smiles in the face of adversity and ongoing exploitation. For every person who evilly victimizes 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 step-sister,” T-hee (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 Roomy 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 battles with J-hee, who is morally 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 unlikely Pal-ja in KBS’s daily drama Pure 19) is a bit too charming in parts, by turns evil to Yeon-i and wounding 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 motherly harridan.

Won-suk Park deserves special mention among the secondary players. She played what was possibly the world’s nearest mother-in-law two years ago in the KBS daily drama My Sweetheart, My Darling (her unintentional masterstroke was stressing her daughter-in-law into infarct). This show’s performance earned her the animosity of international drama fans, who dubbed her character “Scroogeho,” and television volume controls were reportedly dialed down whenever she appeared on screen.

Here Park plays a similar character: Vain, shallow, loud, greedy, and with a Scaffoldable impulse. Such characters can be very hard to make, and for a long time it is hard to stomach her scenes in SIMH. Her vampire 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 surounding drama 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. Thanks to the cleverness of Min’s heavy-hand ed 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. Hoo and Mr. Han, like magical fairytale 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 foon-hee, these two cheerful and loyal middle-aged men join not only the 18 Fashion team, but the team of Yeon-i's admirers.

A well-known Korean television actor, himself a once-time heartthrob, 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 willful 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.