

# Winter Sonata: Passion in the dark months

Korean drama has fans singing its praises in Asia and the U.S.

It is impossible to discuss the success of *Gyeoul Yeonga* (most commonly translated as *Winter Sonata* in English) without talking about Yong-jun Bae. Looking like nothing so much as one's sorta-geeky-but-cute cousin, through some chemical magic — perhaps his slow, seductive smile — this 30-something young man inspires middle-aged, respectable Japanese women to throng him at airports, shouting “*Yon-sama*” over and over (“*sama*” being an appellation usually reserved for royalty).



Gyeoul Yeonga/Winter Sonata

Fan parties are thrown in his honor anywhere he goes on his publicity trips — Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Philippines. Women young and old swoon at the mention of his name. They call him *Yon-sama*, or simply Bae, or even *Joon-oppa* (“my boyfriend Joon”). They sing his praises on their fan (web)sites and provide a built-in audience for any director who chooses to use him in a movie.

A recent minor electrical fire at his (empty) Seoul apartment prompted reassuring newspaper articles in Japan. At least one famous Japanese director felt threatened enough to insult every elderly woman in Japan with his assessment of Bae’s non-worth. His acting ability is very good, but he’s no Pacino; some might say (as people say these things) his acting range is limited to looking pensive. With all the fuss made over this man, one might think *Winter Sonata* was merely his star vehicle, but this is not true. There is a symbiotic relationship — *Winter Sonata* “made” Bae and Bae has, in turn, “made” *Winter Sonata*.

*Winter Sonata*, with its own slew of mad-eyed fans and detractors, is credited by some with sparking the entire *hallyu* phenomenon (the rapid spread of and appreciation for Korean popular culture, principally in Asia, but also other parts of the world). Part two of a four-part “seasons” series by director Suk-ho Yoon, it is not really connected to the other three — *Fairy Tale* (2000), *Summer Scents* (2003), and *Spring Waltz* (2006) — except by themes of lost or impossible love and a certain amount of magical realism. A difficult drama to discuss without giving away the entire plot (which will

not happen here), it is a construct standing outside the bounds of reality. The impossible stands next to the improbable and dares to be repudiated. Standard soap opera pathos jostles comfortably into place beside Grecian-style tragedy.

We live in a marvelously random world. Coincidence is a construct of drama, not “real life.” Still, humans yearn for order, and if it cannot be found, we have an instinctive drive to divine the pattern beneath, arranging it from whatever information is available. We can provide connection from one point to any other random point, explaining anything from which “group” controls all the money to how the neighbor’s cat makes his sixth degree of separation to that actor fellow.

Mostly, we like to be entertained by these connections. But what if a stupendous coincidence occurred in one’s life, one that could not be ignored? Would not we try to explain it away, all the while, hoping-fearing-that it was true? This is what happens to the two main characters of *Winter Sonata*, Yu-jin Jung (played by Ji-woo Choi) and Min-hyung Lee (Yong-jun Bae).

Our story starts with Yu-jin, in 1992. Child of a widowed mother (played quietly and firmly by Hae-sook Kim), she attends a typical high school in Korea, along with other children she’s known her entire life. These include Sang-hyuk Kim (Yong-ha Park), who has a crush on her and who has always watched out for her. A pairing of the two young people seems inevitable. Then a rebel comes to town, a boy named Joon-sang Kang (also played by Yong-jun Bae).

Prickly and rude, he is neverthe-

less embraced by Yu-jin and Sang-hyuk’s “crowd,” consisting of catty Che-lin Oh (Sol-mi Park), staunch Yong-kuk Kwon (Seung-soo Ryu) and sweet, shy Jin-suk Kong (Hye-eun Lee). Che-lin is particularly interested in the new boy, but he snubs her. He smokes. He does not respect his elders — nor, clearly, his peers.

In fact, his only purpose seems to be causing aggravation to Sang-hyuk — but even this he does with simple disdain and little overt interest. Then, almost against his will, he begins to fall for Yu-jin. Their love story, a difficult painful streak of joy, is brought to an abrupt halt when Joon-sang is killed under the wheels of a truck. The teenagers hear that Joon-sang has died. They mourn, deeply and with disconcerting rapidity. Then they get on with their lives and forget about the boy.

Years pass. Yu-jin has become a talented interior designer in Seoul, living in virginal camaraderie with loyal little Jin-suk. Sang-hyuk, who has spent ten years fruitlessly pursuing her, finally convinces Yu-jin to marry him. And this is when Yu-jin begins having waking visions of her lost love, the long-dead Joon-sang, in the streets. She misses appointments, she becomes distraught; Sang-hyuk must try to understand and explain her behavior to his family. Several days later, the fireworks begin — for Che-lin has found Joon-sang’s doppelganger, Min-hyung Lee, and brought him to Seoul to use as firepower against her old rival, Yu-jin.

Here is the central question of the drama. Who is Min-hyung? He clearly cannot be Joon-sang, as he was raised “in the States” by his lovely, internationally famous pianist mother, Mi-hee Kang (Wok-suk Song). His personality is as far from Joon-sang’s as it could possibly be. But as the drama proceeds, connections fall into place. Choices made by parents come back to haunt their children. Secrets are concealed and broken open; bald lies are carelessly spread; desperate plans are laid to ground yet fail to bear fruit.

The past is the cooker for all of the characters, young and old. The students are friends because they have

known each other all their lives. Their encounter with Joon-sang has shaped all of them inexorably; now Min-hyung is causing similar disturbances. Their childhood characteristics remain the same in adulthood. Nobody changed. For some, this is a strength.

For others, it is a fatal flaw. Che-lin, easily the most successful member of her crowd, is a well-known designer. She stumbles upon Min-hyung in Paris and, after determining that he is not simply Joon-sang who escaped death, she begins what appears to be a very satisfactory relationship with him. He is personable, generous, faithful and wealthy. Yet, her first thought is to use this man to torture Yu-jin. Her reaction to the inevitable fallout from this campaign takes her, unaccountably, by surprise. She can only make decisions based upon what happened in her ten years, and she reaps appropriately. This is a pattern displayed by nearly every character in the drama.

As usual with good Korean drama, the cast is multigenerational. The three mothers of Yu-jin, Min-hyung and Sang-hyuk (the last charmingly played with quiet waspish hysteria by Lee Hyo-chun) desperately try to right the constantly tossing ship.

Dong-hwan Jung lends gravitas and a certain controlled passion in his pivotal role in the lives of these young men and women. Support is also given by the excellent performances of Jong-ho Park as the students’ terrifying homeroom teacher, Kwon Hae-hyo (a Korean Gary Cooper) as Min-hyung’s right-hand man and best friend, and Hyeon-suk Park as Yu-jin’s mentor and boss. Without these characters and fine actors, *Winter Sonata* would be just another story of lost love. We find such stories entertaining, but this drama is far more than that. It is a story of cosmic order in the universe, human hubris and redemption, duty versus joy.

Both Sol-mi Park (Che-lin) and Yong-hap Park (Sang-hyuk) are actors well able to carry the role of jilted lover with desperation and increasing fury. All six of the “school chums” play teenagers for two episodes, and the women do a more believable job of this than the men, for some reason. The school

costuming helps immediately establish their characters by the use of the same car coat, in different colors: Yu-jin, the sweetheart of the piece, in yellow, virginal Jin-suk in white, fiery spoiled Che-lin in red on the girls’ side, and, for the boys, the often ignored Yong-kuk in grey, steady conventional Sang-hyuk in black and enigmatic Joon-sang in camel. As adults, they wear very good, simple clothes, something like those worn in 1980s Hollywood flicks about jaded young traders, large turtleneck sweaters and scarves and cashmere coats, swinging seductively in the wind. This costuming lends a certain timelessness to *Winter Sonata*.

*Gyeoul Yeonga* further carries this whiff of staleness through a sedate pace that gives the series a period aura. Japanese women cite the old-fashioned, traditional values displayed in the drama, but this is a hallmark of most KBS productions. What’s more, the premise and most of the plot is really rather shocking. The characters are driven by passion. Their attempts to adhere to traditional duties to family and society fail disastrously.

The timeless quality has as much to do with finely paced direction as Bae’s undeniably courtly style of acting, but perhaps the greatest influence on the atmospherics is the music. *Winter Sonata*’s soundtrack is drafted in spirit from a mid-20th Century Hollywood movie. One expects Gary Grant to drive by in a blue convertible, Audrey Hepburn lazily waving her attenuated hand from the passenger seat, taken a wrong turn into modern Korea, with Min-hyung, Yu-jin, Sang-hyuk, Che-lin and a ghostly Joon-sang staring in distracted astonishment by the roadside.

Even leaving aside the question of whether *Winter Sonata* inspired a cultural phenomenon, it is vastly entertaining. To use a slightly heavy-handed conceit that runs through the drama, the pieces of the puzzle all fall into place. The delight lies in the patterns that result. ●

*Gyeoul Yeonga* (Winter Ballad/Winter Love Song/Winter Sonata) 2002 — KBS Korea (20 episodes) Eun-hee Kim and Eun-kyung Yoon, screenwriters Produced by Suk-ho Yoon