

Building a life

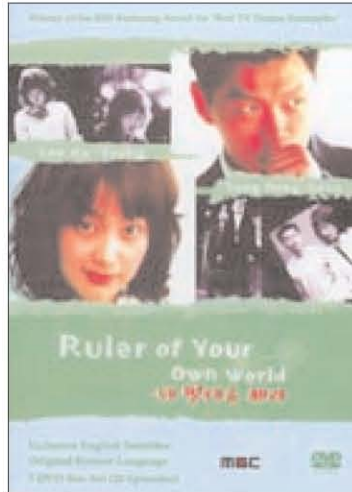
Korean drama Ruler of Your Own World tells of the joy within tragedy

They're called "mania" dramas. The terminology denotes a TV series that, for many reasons — including competition with top rated shows, or lack of major stars — fails to capture the masses, but manages to slowly build a faithful audience which supports the show until the end. *Ruler of Your Own World* might be one of the best examples yet of this enviable moniker.

This is a different show, far away from the diabolical convolutions and contrivances of the prototypical TV melodrama — like, say *Winter Sonata* — far away from the usual weepy, over-the-top atmosphere. Similarly, its characters are also a far cry from the stereotypical characters that usually people the drama universe.

There are no major stars here, but everyone, down to the smallest supporting character, does an excellent job. If Koo Shin's superb performance as Bok-su's father is no surprise, the real find is Dong-geun Yang and his partner Na-young Lee. After a career as a child actor, Yang slowly built his acting skills, thanks to important roles in films like Ki-duk Kim's *Address Unknown*, and started to become popular after appearing in the hit TV sitcom *New Nonstop*.

Following his successful turn in the nostalgic dork comedy *Bet on My Disco*, he started to get recognition from both the public and



Ruler of Your Own World.

critics. In his portrayal of Bok-su Ko, Yang swings between the character's innocent naivete and guilt about his past with ease. The viewer can really relate to his problems, whether it is a simple task like showing his parole officer that he's a changed man, or a big one like accepting Kyung Jeon's (Lee Na-young) affection. Yang shows impressive range here and seems the perfect leading man for the series' ever-changing mood.

The other surprise is relative newcomer Na-young Lee. Compared with the super-pretty plastic beauties of the screen who overreact at every opportunity, here is finally an actor who can convey different emotions without making a fool of herself. Kyung's charming personality comes across impressively thanks to Lee. When she smiles, she does it with her whole face

and it feels sincere, as much as the opposite evokes the same reaction.

Her character is difficult to portray: Kyung is a simple young woman. She's not particularly attractive — at least compared to the conventional canons of beauty in this kind of set-up — is rather shy, and has a hard time opening herself to other people. As the series begins, the viewer will likely have a hard time connecting with her. Little by little, as she begins her relationship with Bok-su, she reveals her considerable personality.

It would be almost criminal leaving Hyo-jin Kong out of the picture. Despite her charming personality and great raw talent, she's been underused for the past three to four years in both TV dramas and movies. In 2002, she had a breakthrough with her first leading roles in *Emergency Act 19*, *Conduct Zero* and *A Bizarre Love Triangle*. She is also a lot more active than usual on TV, lately starring in MBC's *Snowman*, with Jae-hyun Cho and Rae-won Kim. Her portrayal of Mi-rae is interesting, because it mixes a lot of elements from her supporting roles (lots of cutesy and quirky moments) with a more grown-up personality. This is the best performance of her young career, and it finally gives a new spin to the bad-girl character often found in series like this.

The scriptwriting of *Ruler* also bears notice. Fans of TV dramas often put up with a lot more bad

writing than film-watchers can tolerate. After all, we suckers for melodrama can sometime forgive sappy music, manipulative plot developments, and stereotypical characters. I think most of the people who enjoy these dramas do so for their emotional content (the major target demographics here are mature women — although the producers may be underestimating their audience); unfortunately, drama producers do not usually look too diligently for great writing.

However, *Ruler of Your Own World* features some of the best writing I have seen on a TV drama. Characters seem stereotypical at first glance; this series seems to trick the audience with the usual set-up of the genre (boy 1 likes girl 2, girl 1 is pissed at girl 2 because she loves boy 1, dysfunctional families galore, and so on). Delightfully, the characters emerge from that set-up as multidimensional and realistic. Bok-su Ko is neither a simple thief nor a perfect man. Kyung's emotional state often gets the better of her and she avoids problems instead of facing them. Mi-rae can be pretty egotistical and short-minded, and that's just scraping the surface.

There is never the feeling that things are rushing to the usual mega-convoluted cliffhanger, or that a mysterious sickness or death will come out of nowhere to further the plot. Events progress for a reason. There is not the sense of urgency felt in

other melodramas. This series shows a good mix of lighthearted, even silly moments with more serious and touching ones. And, most importantly, it is successful in hitting the right notes. Even when things get a little manipulative, it's the kind the viewer can happily live with, because the characters develop as people we care about.

With a fantastic ending and lots of questions left to the viewer after the conclusion of the story, *Ruler of Your Own World* does something I have not seen for far too long in a Korean TV series; it takes the most overused plot device (a fatal disease) and actually uses it to convey something. It's not just a facade to bring tears to your eyes, no matter how successful TV dramas are at doing that. Until the last episode, the atmosphere never degrades; there's no tragedy here. Instead, Bok-su builds a beautiful life out of his last days on earth. He tries to make life better for himself and the people he knows. He makes new friends, makes his parents' lives meaningful again, and (why not?) he lets people who love him enter his life. The only flaw of *Ruler of Your Own World* is that, sadly, it eventually has to end. It is, hands down, the best TV drama of 2002. ●

Ruler of Your Own World, 20 episodes (seven DVDs), is distributed by YA Entertainment and available from www.yesasia.com