

# Not heart warming

*Most recent vampire drama leaves you cold*

After the death of her mother, Ji Woo (Han Byul Park) quits school and goes to Seoul, to make a life for herself and to escape her alcoholic father. She gets off to a good start, wheedling her way into a job in a tattoo parlor, and throwing herself on the mercy — and into the apartment — of a vampire who runs a wine bar.

I do love vampire lore. I'm generally leery of the quality of television dramas from any country, and never became a *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* fan, much to the disappointment of friends who loved it and thought my standards were getting too high. *Freeze* — a five-episode miniseries produced by Korea's CGV Cable Channel — was directed by Jae Hoon Jung, and was his first television drama in a career of mostly commercials and music videos.

As the 350-year-old vampire Joong Won Baek, Seo Jin Lee is certainly easy on the eyes, most so when he's hiding his smirky yet blossoming appreciation for the young woman who has attached herself to him like a shrill, manipulative barnacle. Joong Won's aesthetic "refinement" (the hallmark of many a vampire) is demonstrated by his listening to lite



Korean vampires in *Freeze*.

jazz on giant puffy Sony headphones, and living in an apartment designed with so many disparate and expensive materials that it looks like the dream home created by a 14-year-old playing *The Sims*.

The blood he drinks is decanted regularly into, and then out of, the many wine bottles in his home, or at his place of business. This blood comes purchased via the black market by Joong Won's female vampire friend and business partner E-

Hwa, a character so flat and catty that her displays of wanton bad-girlness require the dated and hokey device of crimped hair, rather than performance, to express her altered state. (Remember all those bad '80s movies where when a girl went "bad" or was possessed by the Devil, the first thing that happened was that she got a serious crimping-iron treatment?)

But nothing in *Freeze* is quite as irritating as the character of Ji Woo, she of the relentless "warming" that apparently takes the chill out of Joong Won's freezerburned heart. She is anime—"perfect," and achieves her goals by a combination of eye rolling, pouting, bossiness, and fake fainting. It's enough to make Betty Boop want to read Betty Friedan.

True to formula, Ji Woo has a

childhood friend who carries a torch for her. She also has a kooky, noodle-slurping, tartan-trousered and roly-poly boss at the tattoo parlor, who is among my favorite characters in the series. My other favorite character is the fiberglass and somewhat Koreanized Colonel Sanders statue that stands outside of a chicken joint in Episode Two. Ji Woo's behavior towards the Colonel is pretty much the same as it is for all others who cross her path; simpering, quasi-sexual, and apparently irresistible. Much of *Freeze* is "inspired," transparently, by Anne Rice's *Interview With the Vampire*; *Freeze's* vampires are flummoxed by their inability to die, and by their emotional attachments, both to one another and to the mortals who seem to disappear from the vampires' endless lives in what seems to be a split second. But *Freeze's* vampires are also "evolved," daylight-impervious, and there is not — and this may be the most telling statement about the series — a single fang in evidence. The "love" between Joong Won and Ji Woo is, at its strongest point, muddled and uncomfortable; for me, it bordered on the icky. The pacing of the five episodes is incredibly slow; when characters are talking, whether in dialogue or drawn out expository mono-

logue or flashback, the action on the screen stops entirely. I fast-forwarded through scenes at times, still able to read the subtitles, and feeling, still, that it was moving too slowly.

But around Episode Four, the series had started to grow on me. Maybe I felt lighter just knowing that I was almost through with it (my husband had abandoned watching along with me by the middle of Episode Two), but I watched the Special Features on the disc with real fondness (and again, I'll admit, some fast-forwarding). Interviews with cast, crew and director colored *Freeze* as a labor of love — a process unsure, rather egalitarian, and with much mutual respect amongst its participants. Boy, that Seo Jin Lee is really, really cute.

Korean mythology's *kumiho* is the closest the country's folklore seems to come to a vampire; it is a fox with nine tails that can transform into a beautiful woman or bride, only to wreak havoc (and possibly draw blood) when it's too late to escape.

While I do plan to check out Si-myung Lee's 2006 *Vampire Cop Ricky*, to see another modern take, I've got to hope that, for the Korean vampire, the best is yet to come. ●