

Delectable dessert fare

The Palace brings court life to modern Seoul

Palace

(*Goong*)

MBC 2006 — 24 episodes

Director: In-roi Hwang

Producer: Ji-yeon Kim

(*Eight Peaks*)

Screenwriter: Eun-ah In

Goong (“Palace” in English), begins where Korean historicals often do, in sumptuous palace quarters. A blue-robed royal physician in his telltale *Joseun* era horsehair hat takes the pulse of the King. It is *Inhwa* 14. (Inhwa 14? When is that?) But wait, there’s a modern electric lamp! And the King... he wears a *plaid bathrobe*. A reassuring change of scene, another palace room: The doctor relays the terrible news to Queen Mother and Queen, regal in their splendid *hanbok* (Korean traditional dress); “central vertigo,” declares the costume-drama royal doctor. “I don’t know what to say,” the Queen murmurs shamefacedly to the Queen Mother, who favors her with a stricken, silent glance.

This is the Korean historical drama we know and love — familiar ground. But, no, wait... the camera pans across photographs of these women and their husbands and children, *color* photographs, and another of those unsuitable electric lamps. And the queen mother, in voiceover, speaks of her desire to bring the royal family into the 21st Century. What is this thing?

What it is, is the prologue to the quintessential chick flick, served up in 24 delectable episodes (one is tempted to say “confections”). Every fairy tale ever told — *Cinderella*, *The Ugly Duckling*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Red Shoes*, the myth of Princess Diana — you name it, they’ve all contributed in some way to *Palace*. Originally a *manhwa* (comic book) by Soh-hee Park, it presents an alternate reality wherein the Korean monarchy was restored after the World War II and the royals’ every move is followed by their subjects with equal parts adoration, suspicion, obsession and exasperation. Suddenly, a commoner enters the palace and is made royal. How delish.



Palace, now available from YA Entertainment

Much has been written about the high production costs, beautiful sets, costuming, food styling and previously unknown cast, similar to the tremendously popular historical drama *Dae Jang-geum*. And like *Dae Jang-geum* before, *Palace* has been credited (by the show-biz rag *Variety* no less) with changing the face of the Korean TV industry. There is a clone war over who has the right to make a sequel, with two in the works — one is more of a spin-off, about a commoner restaurant worker/long-lost prince who enters the palace (the alternative reality to the alternative reality).

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Episode 1 (after the prologue) begins in a high school for art students. “It’s a fairy tale,” we are told. “Relax! Go with it!” And so one should do. The main character, an ordinary commoner, Chae-kyung Shin (Eun-hye Yoon), is a happy-go-lucky girl, in spite of her family’s dire situation. Father (Nam-gil Kang), househusband extraordinaire, co-signed on a loan for a friend who ran out, leaving his business in ruins. Mother (Ye-jin Im) unsuccessfully supports the family selling insurance. Little brother (Suk Kim), who, in the infuriating manner of all little brothers, refers to Chae-kyung as *twae-ji* (pig or fatso), lives in the attic.

They’re a normal family, teetering on the brink of financial (if not

social) disaster and doing their best to ignore it, like so many middle-class families in America.

Attending Chae-kyung’s school is a prince. Shin Lee (Ji-hoon Joo) is not just a really cute boy, but an actual crown prince who has the unattainable dream of being a film director. Chae-kyung’s contacts with him are merely disastrous. She ruins his shoes, she overhears his private conversations, she generally annoys him. They truly dislike each other and could not have more different personalities. Of course, from the moment they meet, it is clear they are destined to be together.

When the two were very much younger, Chae-kyung’s commoner grandfather and Shin’s royal grandfather, close friends, made a pact that Chae-kyung would marry the crown prince. Now, due to the present King’s ill health, the future crown princess is traced to her heavily mortgaged lair. Even though Shin is not exactly her idea of a prince in shining armor, Chae-kyung agrees to leave home and become the future queen of her country.

This involves a great deal of adjustment on both sides. Chae-kyung begins an endless round of lessons about history, both royal and Korean, deportment, etiquette and even language. In the palace, the language spoken is classical, formal Korean. (Here lies an opportunity for comedy, and it is played well. The elder royals and Chae-kyung technically speak the same language --- there’s only a linguistic gap of a century between.)

Chae-kyung’s new family consists of a mix of persons seemingly modeled on England’s royal clan. (A timeline for this fictional monarchy, shown under the end

credits of some episodes, helps clarify who is who and make them seem authentic.)

The tiny, charming Queen Mother, Shin’s grandmother, played by Hye-ja Kim, sounds like the Good Witch in *Wizard of Oz* and invests the character with a quirky, young-at-heart temperament. There’s a Princess Anne, Shin’s older sister, played by the delicately lovely Yoon-ji Lee, who is as wise as she is beautiful. Shin’s father, the King (Chan-hwan Park), is a befuddled, gentle, erudite man clearly modeled on Prince Charles. Finally, the King’s wife, Queen Min (Yoo-sun Yoon), is Chae-kyung’s stern taskmaster and the gatekeeper to the palace hierarchy, insisting everyone adhere to the strict code of conduct that sets those in the palace apart from the common folk.

The tasks set by the monarchy to keep themselves relevant consist of doing good works and also recovering the many national treasures of Korea, disbursed to museums and private collections over the centuries. They are staid, they are polite, they are bogged down in their own tragic history. Chae-kyung proceeds to set these people on their ears. She is a pinwheel flying free in the wind and she sets them whistling.

But the rules of a fairy tale demand that into every situation there must come an evil. One is provided: The bad witch Lady Hwa-young (Hye-jin Shim), widow of the King’s older brother (who would have been king but for dying before his father). Her sinister goal is revealed the moment she shows up: Her son must be king. The hapless subject of this chicanery, Prince Yool, is played by Jung-hoon Kim as a true Prince Charming, accessible in ways undiscovered by his acerbic cousin Shin.

We cannot forget Hyo-rin Min (Ji-hyo Song), dancer and self-styled Camilla. She turns down the prince’s marriage proposal to pursue her dream of being a dancer, then decides she might have been

mistaken. A member of the “in” crowd, this confused girl has her own secrets. Her journey is a lonely one, with hobgoblins to fight and herself to conquer.

The thing is, *Palace* never forgets it’s a fairy tale. The royal family are beautiful and talented. The evil Lady Hwa-young might as well have an entourage singing “Off With Her Head” traipsing in her wake as she stalks around the palace. The good Queen Mother is a perfect and good queen mother indeed. Dragons leap into the paths of the two young princes and are slain. Ladies’ favors are sought and won. Hearts break, mend, and break again. Palace courtiers, bodyguards and servants display selfless loyalty or secretly engage in revolution.

But the real world exists, and here, it is cheeky and fun. When the palace comes a-calling, Chae-kyung’s family’s mad scramble to locate the “promise ring” exchanged by the old men sounds a comic note of middle-class life, as do her brother’s insistence on continuing to call her “fatso” and her mother’s suddenly booming insurance business. (“For some reason, everyone wants to buy insurance from the Crown Princess’s mother,” she notes with no discernible insight.) At school, Chae-kyung’s endearing clan of misfit friends (Ji-ae Jeon, Eun Lee and Ji Dan) shuffle after her like the three little maids of *The Mikado*. Who knows, they might burst into song or scold their princess or even hug her. And even Shin’s posse of feckless, rude, rich boys (Sung-joon Choi, Yong-joo Lee and Sung-mo Eom) are eventually revealed to be less obnoxious and to have more depth than might first seem apparent.

The acting is very good, the story is familiar and comforting but well told, and the thing is pretty to look at. In *Palace*, everyone has a quest. Everyone returns home, but not necessarily the home they started from — or maybe even thought they wanted. Like a delectable dessert, you won’t remember much about it in four months, but you’ll have a wonderful time while it is in front of you. ●