Stranger gets a stranger sequel

Complex police investigation drama returns with a satisfying second series | BY ROBIN NYSTROM

For fans of the drama series Stranger (aka ***Secret Forest***), it's been a long three-year wait to continue exploring the intricate mind of Prosecutor Si-mok Hwang, but 2020 has rewarded their devotion with season two in the series. Just what changes have occurred in the interim, and what has changed in his life, and that of his unlikely friend, police detective Yeo-jin Hwang? And one might also ask, can the second series live up to the incredible achievements of the first?



Stranger 2

It's worth mentioning that while it is not essential to watch season one of Stranger to understand Stranger 2, since the characters are sketched out within the first episode or two. However, to get a fuller portrait of key players and/or understand some secondary plots carried forward from season one, it is best to start at the beginning before continuing to the second season.

Stranger 2 begins approximately two years after the first series, which saw Prosecutor Si-mok Hwang (played brilliantly by Seung-woo Cho) exiled to a remote prosecutorial district, nominally following a relocation policy schedule to prevent prosecutors getting too close to cases (avoiding corruption or collusion risks). He is on his way to a new assignment when he inadvertently becomes involved in investigating the apparent accidental drowning of two young men. The drowning seems to be linked to heavy drinking, but may also have occurred because protective barriers were negligently removed by another couple.

He had traveled the coastal road the same evening, and the circumstances of the case raise questions in the prosecutor's mind. He decides to look into it further to resolve the discrepancies he intuits. The drowning happened in the district he is leaving; he cannot leave the puzzle behind as he sets off for his new district.

Coincidentally, the case comes before Police Detective Yeo-jin Hwang (Doona Bae reprising her role), who is in a high-level task force looking into how to improve the visibility of the police, and get greater investigative control in cases (the prosecutorial services are in control of investigations as the story begins). She embarrassed police higher-ups with her successful teamwork with Hwang in the first series, so while this assignment appears to be a plum reward, there's a feeling that it's a bit of "window dressing."

Her new task force leader, Bit Choi (played by Hye-jin Jeon), is the first woman intelligence Chief of the National Police Agency and bringing in a woman detective adds to the gender balance on the team. Yeo-jin Hwang is asked to review cases where prosecutorial investigations could be criticized, supporting the police argument. She is troubled by the dismissal of charges against the negligent couple, in light of the fact that two people have died, and begins her own examinations.

Little do Si-mok Hwang and Yeo-jin Hwang know, but their mutual concerns will lead them to cross paths once again, and as potential adversaries!

The investigations by each of them alarm their respective leaders. Bit Choi, prior to her new position as Intelligence Chief, was police chief for the district in which the drowning occurred. In questioning aspects of that case, another even more curious case comes to light; the apparent suicide of a police detective, which may have been a police-on-police murder. This is not the kind of investigation likely to improve the public's opinion of the police in general.

Si-mok Hwang's questions lead him to the prosecution team that quickly dropped charges against a negligent, but very well connected, suspect. Former judge Joo-sun Oh (played by Hak-seon Kim) now established as a lawyer, in trying to capitalize on his reputation, has cut some deals to make the charges go away. The prosecution does not want to look bad, so higher powers decide to reallocate Si-mok Hwang to the prosecutorial side of the joint task force, reporting to Tae-ha Woo (Moo-sung Choi). They assume him to be dogmatic, rule-oriented, not connected, unimportant, and a perfect fall-guy if they need a political sacrifice.

New boss Woo needs to figure out how to get Si-mok Hwang focused on things he wants him to do. This is not as easy as it looks because Si-mok Hwang's is unemotional (due to a medical condition explained in the first season) as well as single-minded and very intelligent. But Woo goes ahead with a plan that seems a perfect distraction; it is prompted by a visit from someone from the past (of the series).

Season one viewers will rejoice to see the smarmy and borderline corrupt (is he or isn't he) Prosecutor Dong-jae Seo (played by Joon-hyuk Lee), looking to escape his reassignment to juvenile cases in a district outside Seoul. He has three cases that are suspected police corruption; if true, these would be perfect ammunition to quash the argument by police for investigative rights.

Seo is disappointed in his quest; Woo judges him shrewdly. He is an ambitious, side-stepping, on-the-make, politically-motivated type who is of little interest, but Woo takes on two of the cases as a token gesture. He hands one over to Si-mok Hwang to investigate; it is the case of the police detective killed under questionable circumstances and the bribery case behind it that Yeo-jin Hwang has uncovered.

The first meeting of the joint task force is an unexpected reunion for Si-mok Hwang and Yeo-jin Hwang. It is also an awkward one; each must defend their side's arguments for why the standards should change. The awkwardness soon evaporates as they begin working together again to investigate the same case, and subsequent parallel cases.

The story concentrates on three cases that may or may not be linked, with tightly interwoven plot threads. There are liberal sprinklings of red herrings to keep the viewers on their toes. In addition to the initial drowning deaths, their investigations explore suicide or murder, another questionable death, conspiracies, and the kidnapping of a favorite character.

In another plot wrinkle, there is another link between Si-mok Hwang, the judge, and his recent past. Joo-sun Oh comes to the attention of the new majority owner of Hanjo Group, the widow Yeon-jae Lee (played by Se-ah Yoon) as someone who may be an effective liaison (and a weapon to use against) the Prosecutor's Office. It is a continuation of the plot line in season one to pursue Hanjo for tax evasion and other misdeeds.

This season is a success due to some of the same characteristics of the first season, namely the excellent chemistry of Seung-woo Cho and Doona Bae (Hwang and Hwang) as the unlikeliest of friends and collaborators. Their onscreen rapport is key, and they work equally well with the veteran actors of ***Stranger*** as well the new cast members in ***Stranger 2***.

Though screen time for returning characters is brief, such as Sung-gun Park as the head of the Third Prosecutors Division, and former homicide squad chief Yoon-soo Choi (Bae-soo Jeon), detectives Geon Jang (Jae-woong Choi) and Soon Chang Park (Ji-ho Song). However, they provide a link to the past story and help to ground the story in its setting. The script manages once again to create a tension-filled plot that has strong ties to actual, recent events in South Korea, making for a plausible and emotional story.

There is a different director for this second season, Hyun-suk Park, so fans will notice a different tone because of the change. In portions of the first few episodes, there is a slightly choppier narrative to aspects of the early investigation processes in particular. The addition of more backstory, particularly about Si-mok Hwang, would make for easier entry into the story for new viewers. More context would also make certain actions in the story more compelling and logical. This omission is one of the few faults of this generally very satisfying second season.

The new characters of Tae-ha Woo and Bit Choi allow the story to explore power roles and the potential corruption, as well as decency and righteousness, within the two agencies; this was crucial to the first story.

Woo is a canny, political animal, who seems to act on an instinctual level; although he is smart, he is also impulsive, and not above being a manipulative bully when it suits him. Choi is a more subtle character, succeeding in a traditionally man's world by being low-key and decisive. By glimpses of her home life (she appears to be a single mother) the viewer sees that she has sacrificed to get to where she is now. She rose to her position when a predecessor fell, and the question becomes "what will she do to hold on to her position?"

Se-ah Yoon also has an expanded role as the widow and Hanjo Group power figure; her father and brother (primarily off-screen in this series) are her challengers, and so is the Prosecution Service. Her appearance in this new role is also a welcome addition to the ***Stranger*** world.

These complicated stories show how the misuse of authority is universal, as is the level of politics in these agencies. There are familiar South Korean news events disguised within the plot, as well as themes common to bureaucracies of many places. The actors have been cleverly cast; each brings something different to the existing cast and is a contrast to prior characters.

For fans of the series, the writer left her characters in a similar situation as at the end of the first season — their world continues to be complicated, there are threads still to pick up, and new positions and roles to be explored. Best of all, there is a possible third season, or more, ahead to delight and confound us! ●