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).

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 Scent*** (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.



Gyeoul Yeonga/Winter Sonata

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 nevertheless 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, as only young people can 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 teen 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 stateliness 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 Cary 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*

A crucial time

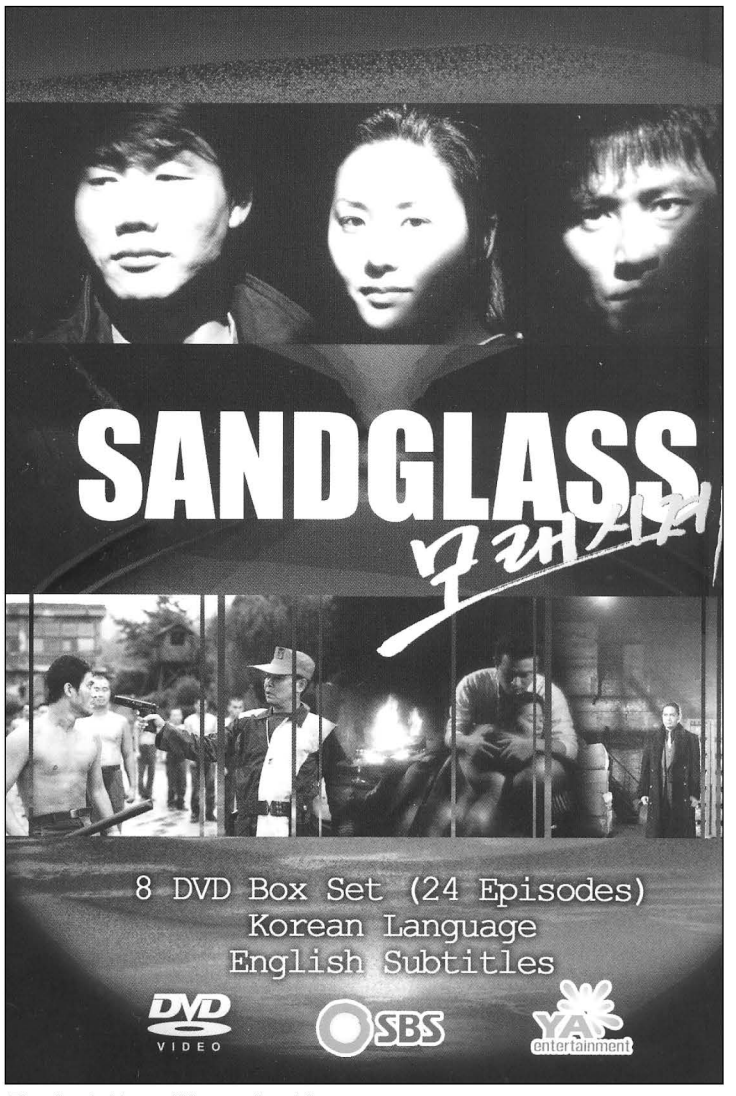
Morae Shigae/Sandglass: Classic award-winning drama

I could tell you a lot about the historical significance of ***Sandglass***: It became famous for its daring depiction of Korean life under the Park and Chun dictatorships in South Korea during the '70s and '80s.

Or I could dwell on its personal significance as an early part of my introduction to Korean popular culture, along with the movie ***A Single Spark*** and the music of Seunghwan Lee. A Korean friend brought over some of the early episodes on VHS, with subtitles; it was years before I was able to watch the whole series.

But I would rather talk about its entertainment value. I watched Sandglass on DVD over a four-week period, one episode each night, and I was hooked before I knew it. I haven't gotten so caught up in a TV series since I was a kid.

Sandglass follows its three main characters from early adolescence to adulthood, from the 1960s to the 1980s. The character Tae-soo Park (played by Min-su Choi) is a charismatic gangster, adored by the men with whom he breaks up opposition-party meetings. Flashbacks tell us that in high school Tae-soo was a fighter and leader, already wooed by local toughs and politicians. He briefly resisted his destiny under the influence of his close friend Woo-suk Kang. Woo-suk tutored Tae-soo and encouraged him to think about college, much to the delight of Tae-soo's widowed mother. We learn in flashbacks that when Tae-soo is rejected by military college because his late father had been a Communist guerilla, he abandons himself to a gangster's life.



The classic Morae Shigae — Sandglass.

Woo-suk (Sang-won Park) goes on to law school, his goal since childhood. As he prepares for the bar exam, Woo-suk keeps aloof from student activism or anything else that might distract him from his goal. But he is impressed by a bold young woman, Hye-rin Yoon (Hyun-jung Ko) who edits the student association's newspaper. They become friends.

Flashbacks show us that Hye-rin is the daughter of a rich and powerful casino owner with ties to the highest levels of the Chung-hee Park regime. A devoted bodyguard, Jae Hee Baek (Jung-jae Lee) watches over her in her student lodgings and her increasingly dangerous activism. By chance, Woo-suk once again meets Tae-soo, who is also impressed by Hye-rin. Woo-suk is disappointed to learn that his old friend is still on the wrong side of the law, and has given up his academic dreams. "When I become a prosecutor," Woo-suk warns him, "I might have to prosecute you..."

The most spectacular segment of the series is its recreation of the Gwangju uprising of 1980, which takes up most of two episodes. Tae-soo visits a former subordinate who has moved back to Gwangju, and gets caught up in the resistance when government troops are sent in to crush the democratic protests there. He doesn't know that Woo-suk joined the army just in time to be deployed at Gwangju. Hye-rin has escaped arrest and has fled Seoul for the countryside.

Archival video footage adds power and authenticity to the program's restaging of the rebellion.

Two-thirds of the series still lies ahead after Gwangju, but ***Sandglass*** (or Hourglass), as its title implies, is really about time, and about Koreans' struggle to come to terms with their history. Tae-soo, Woo-suk, and Hye-rin must overcome their suffering and pursue their aims and destinies, which they do with great energy.

At times I did get tired of Hye-rin's Poor Little Rich Girl routine, especially since her impulsive decisions tend to blow up in other people's faces, not hers. And Woo-suk is such a Boy Scout — clean, thrifty, brave, reverent, blind to the feelings of the people nearest to him, and prone to give up when at first he doesn't succeed. Only Tae-soo, perhaps because he knows he's damned, seems to know who he is from the beginning, doggedly pursuing what he wants over all obstacles. To their credit, the stars make their characters credible as people, not just as symbols. I fell in love with all three of them, especially Sang-won Park, who I think had the hardest job. Woo-suk could have been an intolerable prig. His best scene is near series end, when he returns to his office after having been interrogated for days at KCIA headquarters. His wife finds him dozing in a stairwell, unhurt physically but exhausted, and too proud to let his colleagues see him in that state. Park really looks as if he hasn't slept in days; it's the only time he looks anything but buttoned-up and alert.

Twenty-four episodes allow space to develop minor characters as well. The inexperienced Jung-jae Lee, for example, who plays Hye-rin's lovelorn bodyguard Jae-hee, is at first given little to do but look pretty. But over time he becomes credible as a man who watches and waits, saying little, while keeping his feelings bottled up.

The Korean friend who introduced me to ***Sandglass*** tells me he's watched the whole series three times. I can understand why: As soon as I finished it, I wanted to go back to the beginning and watch it again. I'm lucky most television isn't this good.

Sandglass ("Morae shigae"). Alternate title: "The Hourglass." 24 episodes. Written by Song Ji-na. Produced by Kim Jong-hak. Starring Choi Min-su, Ko Hyun-jung, Park Sang-won, Lee Jung-jae. First aired on SBS in Korea from Jan 10 to Feb 16, 1995. Available on DVD from YA Entertainment with English subtitles. ●