

# 55<sup>th</sup> Forum

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04

## BOMBAM

### Spring Night

Director Kang Mi-ja

South Korea | 2024

67 min. | Korean with English subtitles

**Screenplay** Lee Ji-sang, Kang Mi-ja. **Cinematography** Lee Ji-sang, Seo Tae-beom. **Editing** Kang Mi-ja. **Sound** So-yeong Jeon. **Production Design** Si-ha Park. **Producer** Hong In-pyo. **Executive Producer** Lee Ji-sang. **Production company** Wolwon Film (Seoul, South Korea). **With** Han Ye-ri, Kim Seol-jin.

World sales Cinema DAL

### Synopsis

Middle-aged Yeong-gyeong and Su-hwan meet at the wedding party of a common friend. She passes out drunk, and he carries her home on his back. Soon this becomes a daily ritual, as the two broken beings – one's spirit consumed by alcohol and the other's body sapped by arthritis – begin to find strength and solace in each other. Their gentle, platonic bond – outside society, outside history – offers a chance at salvation, but is severely stressed by Yeong-gyeong's repeated relapses. Adapted from Kwon Yeo-sun's novel of the same name, **SPRING NIGHT**, Kang Mi-ja's long-awaited second feature starring the great Han Ye-ri, paints a spare, unrelenting portrait of a doomed romance between two forlorn souls cast adrift by a painful past. While borrowing elements from melodrama and fairy tale, Kang refuses to soften the blow, making us agonisingly intimate with both Yeong-gyeong's terminal self-destruction and Su-hwan's longing helplessness – a surprising reversal of traditional gender dynamics. Despite its raw and unremitting quality, there is great tenderness in Kang's lyrically structured film, its nights gripped by inchoate yearning and its days suffused with the promise of renewal. (Srikanth Srinivasan)

Kang Mi-ja was born in 1966. She is working as an editor for films and series, and teaches film editing at Korea National University of Arts.

Films: 1998: Hyeonbin / Deep or Quiet (short film). 2008: Pureun Gangeun Heulleora / Let the Blue River Run. 2024: Bombam / Spring Night.

### Director's Statement

#### Alive but Abandoned

Will this record of wounded people living in the ruins be seen as art?

The wounded live upon the ruins. Yeong-gyeong and Su-hwan. They walk the streets, take the subway, and return home, with

the fatal daggers hidden in their pockets. They are the people of the Sewol Ferry disaster [the controversial sinking of a ferry in South Korea in 2014, which cost the lives of 304 people, around 250 among them high school students, ed.] and the Itaewon tragedy [a crowd crush during Halloween festivities in the Itaewon district of Seoul, leaving 159 people dead, ed.]. Will the film, a record of such wounded people living in the ruins, be seen as art?

Yeong-gyeong and Su-hwan in **SPRING NIGHT** are Homo Saceres, sacred and cursed outsiders. Alive but worthless and abandoned, unfit even for sacrifice to God, a non-existence that must not be permitted into the community. Two such outcasts love each other, but it is a 'miserable love' that cannot be called pure or noble. This film attempts to depict such a 'miserable love.'

Kang Mi-ja

### Interview

**'SPRING NIGHT is a film that is far away from conventional dramatic narratives.'**

Kang Mi-ja talks to Charlotte Hafner and Barbara Wurm about sorrow, those abandoned by society and creating a poetic film language

*Barbara Wurm: Welcome, Kang Mi-ja! We are extremely happy to have your film, BOMBAM (SPRING NIGHT), in our selection. It's a very quiet and sad film with very strong direction. We are looking forward to presenting it as an international premiere after its world premiere at the Busan International Film Festival. Since the film is called SPRING NIGHT, what does spring mean to you in the context of the film?*

Kang Mi-ja: The title card cut shows a snowy road. It carries the hope that at the end of that snowy road, there will be spring, that spring will come.

*Charlotte Hafner: There's a poem that Yeong-gyeong repeats twice in the film, which I think is by the poet Kim Su-yeong. Could you tell us more about your use of poetry in the film?*

KM: This film is based on the short story Spring Night by Kwon Yeo-seon. In the story, a drunk Yeong-gyeong recites a poem, also titled Bombam (Spring Night), which was indeed written by Kim Su-yeong. My film integrates this poem into the narrative more actively than the short story did, using it to express the essence of the sorrow felt by the characters, while also trying to convey the spirit of the poem, its underlying pain and depth, through cinema.

*BW: There aren't many spoken lines in the film, but there is the repetition of the poem, which is at the core and it unfolds into the form of the film with its repetitions and its rhythm. What were your principal ideas about repetition and montage?*

KM: The repetition and blackouts are the key formal elements of the film. In the short story, Yeong-gyeong and Su-hwan meet when they are 43 years old and are together for the next

twelve years until Su-hwan passes away at 55. They are mostly inseparable except for two months when Su-hwan enters a nursing home. My objective when making the film wasn't simply to reproduce the story, and so I tried to reinterpret the twelve years they spent together into cinematic time. The use of repetition and blackouts transforms the time these two characters spend together into an infinite one.

*CH: I'm interested in how you work with the actors. Both of them give really impressive physical performances and Han Ye-ri and Kim Seol-jin are also both trained dancers. Did you use any special techniques when working with the actors for these roles which are physically and emotionally challenging?*

*KM: Before shooting, I asked the actors to read the script together and we spent some time discussing the poem. We also talked about the emotion conveyed in each scene. As the film progresses, Yeong-gyeong's expression through her walking becomes very important, and we had detailed conversations about that. And Han Ye-ri truly embodied this and took it beyond what I had imagined. She's an incredible performer. In our film, there aren't elaborate costumes or make-up to depict Su-hwan's terminal disease. Kim Seol-jin actually lost weight to embody his dying character physically. One of the most powerful moments in the film occurs when Yeong-gyeong returns to the nursing home from her first outing and Su-hwan crawls to her on the ground and tries to lift her as she falls. The tenderness and pain in that scene were so intense that it almost even seemed like sacred.*

*BW: Let's continue talking about the characters. One important aspect of the characters is their tenderness for each other and the other aspect of them is that there is this attention for each other as a person. Of course, a person with a past, because that's what the film is about. These two people have a past, and that's why they are who they are in the present. But also, they are not judging each other. Actually, the other way around, the film questions the social codes that come into play when judging alcoholism, the inability to be productive, etc. I was wondering how much of that is the short story and how much of it is yourself, and how you tried to make it such a strong element of your film.*

*KM: Su-hwan and Yeong-gyeong are people that have been pushed to the edge of society. The wedding after-party is mentioned in the novel briefly, and there is a description of their first meeting there. Since that moment between Yeong-gyeong and Su-hwan is so important to me, I've been thinking about how to express it cinematically. I saw their first meeting as a moment of fate, and I wanted to express it through the act of them obtaining each other's names. While everyone around them is dressed in black, seemingly asleep like the dead, Su-hwan approaches Yeong-gyeong, and they ask and answer each other's names, and call each other by their names. I hope that is a miraculous moment where they find each other.*

*CH: It seems like you subtly address a lot of issues that are relevant in contemporary South Korean society, such as women's rights and the gap between the rich and poor. Yeong-gyeong has her child taken away from her and falls into despair, and Su-hwan can't get treatment for his illness because he's too poor to be able to afford health insurance. Could you speak a little about how society impacts the characters in your film?*

*KM: Instead of focusing on social issues, I'm more focused on the character's devotion to one another. In a society that encourages people to always have more and to achieve greater success, it becomes natural for people to deceive each other, or to hurt each other to achieve that. But Yeong-gyeong and Su-hwan are people who have experienced rejection, and who have been cast out of society. They are very delicate individuals, but in a way, there is also power in that fragility.*

*CH: In your director's statement for the Asian Cinema Fund, you said that there is a similarity between your characters and*

*people involved in big national tragedies like the Sewol ferry disaster [the controversial sinking of a ferry in South Korea in 2014, which cost the lives of 304 people, around 250 among them high school students, ed.] or the Itaewon tragedy [a crowd crush during Halloween festivities in the Itaewon district of Seoul, leaving 159 people dead, ed.]. It's a fascinating connection that you draw between sorrow on a smaller, intimate stage and on a national level, the grief of a nation. Could you elaborate a bit on that statement?*

*KM: BOMBAM's log line is 'At last, sorrow will revive us. Let the tears fall.' Art has the power to evoke the great sorrow a person feels when they are confronted with intense pain. Yeong-gyeong and Su-hwan are individuals living on the edge of society, but reading about their tragic love stirred the pain hidden inside of me. That's what has led me to prepare this screenplay after 16 years, to create this film and to be here today. In a way, I, too, have been saved. Both personal and national tragedies are sorrowful and painful. Yeong-gyeong and Su-hwan's pain seems to be personal, but it is intertwined with their social environment. Moreover, when an individual's tragedy connects to a national or communal tragic event, that personal sorrow cannot be healed by the individual alone, especially when state power doesn't share in their pain or is even the perpetrator. The scale of the tragedy and sorrow is beyond words. It is utterly, utterly devastating.*

*BW: Thank you for opening the door to the question that is always hard to ask, which is about yourself and you as a person with your own past and your own experiences. What is especially interesting here, I think, is your life as an artist. What do you want to share about your own life as an artist for us as readers and as an audience who don't know so much about you?*

*KM: As I have grown older, a feeling of pain has settled deep within me. When I read Spring Night, that sense of pain became clearer, and I got a strong desire to express this emotion through film. In reality, I'm someone who struggles to cry, even the tears well up to my eyes. But Yeong-gyeong's crying in the story touched me deeply. And there were two times while shooting and editing when I strongly felt that SPRING NIGHT touched something. Though I couldn't quite pinpoint what it is, I could sense it. SPRING NIGHT is a film that is far away from conventional dramatic narratives or stylish expressions. There were some members of the audience who cried while watching it, which surprised me. While shooting the film, I'm just focused on the process of filmmaking, so I don't even think about the fact that audiences could be moved by the film.*

*BW: When you try to position this film within context of contemporary Korean cinema, how would you categorise it? It's certainly not a conventional work.*

*KM: I always think my essence is that of an independent film director. I also work in editing for dramas and movies, but as an artist, my goal is very simple: I'm always focused on trying to be original with my art. I always look for some sort of alternative form of filmmaking within the field of contemporary cinema.*

*CH: I agree, I think you're very original in what you do and your film left a very strong impression on me. I think that your background in editing gives your film a very exceptional rhythm. I was also really impressed by your use of cinematography, which I thought was very unique. The framing is beautiful, and your use of light and darkness really served to bring the character's inner lives to the outside.*

*KM: The structure of the images on the screen is very important to me. I like to keep my camera still and to place it so that the shot is centred. I like simplicity and so the most important thing in the film is darkness. I tried to express the darkness itself as much as possible without any lighting, using a small LED lamp only when absolutely necessary. In the end, the space around*

Su-hwan and Yeong-gyeong is the most important aspect of the film, so I tried to put a lot of focus on how they are framed.

*BW: I think it's a very good ending for our talk, which was really nice and enlightening. Also on a metaphorical level, I think it will be a very enlightening thing to show this film, which is about darkness, and sorrow, and pain, but at the same time is full of hope, light, beauty, and poetry. Thank you so much for this film and for this interview.*

KM: Thank you so much.