

Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter...and Spring

For a breath of cinematic fresh air in this current season, one could do worse than *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring*, a parable of Buddhist life set entirely on a tiny, pristine lake. The film is wholly the responsibility of Korean director Kim Ki-duk, who wrote, edited, designed, and even acted in the film, and it carries the weight, not only of the seasons it depicts, but of its chief character as he develops over the decades.

The film, which traces the relationship of a monk and his protege, uses the following charming conceit: each change of season (presented as chapters in the film) not only alters the physical environment on the lake, but presents a different epoch in the life of the student. Thus, when we open at spring, the student is a child learning the preciousness of nature; with summer, the boy is an adolescent experiencing his sexual awakening, etc., until the cycle comes back to spring and the young man has ripened into the mature man looking for what was always in front of him.

The story is told in simple terms, presenting itself far more in gentle action and artless acting rather than through dialogue (I would guess that a Westerner could follow most of the film even without subtitles). Though mostly placid--placid as the lake that surrounds its omnipresent little temple--the film is far from being boring, as its segments tell inexorably, with quiet tension, the almost universal story of its protagonist.

Beginning with spring, we see a small child (Kim Jong-ho), experimenting with life, who performs wanton cruelty on small animals. His master, the old monk (Oh Yeong-su) with whom he lives in the temple, notes the boy's actions and devises a similar cruelty for the boy as one life lesson. With summer, the temple is visited by a sad young woman (Ha Yeo-jin) who has been sent there for a cure by her family. Her constant presence intrigues and fascinates the young monk (Seo Jae-Kyeong), now a teenager, and his eventual advances to her teach him a lesson of desire.

By autumn, the younger monk (Kim Young-min), now 30, returns from the outside world, abandoned by his wife and soured by life. That outside world has corrupted him, and he has developed criminal ways, but, through the example of his master's sacrifice, he learns yet another lesson. Winter finds the man (now played by Kim Ki-duk himself) returning from prison to the abandoned temple, humbly replicating his master's exercises and rituals, before a new baby is brought to the temple...just in time for spring to begin again.

All of these seasons are observed entirely within a small crater lake resting between verdant hills, a contained setting where the outside world occasionally intervenes but is never seen on the screen. It is a world of Zen moments, as when we see a doorway which goes no where yet must always be properly entered. We see that intimate setting in every mood, and in striking off-angles as well as serene aerial shots. The lap of water, the sheen of ice, the brush of blossoms--all are featured players in *Spring, Summer...*, whose imagery conjures up a series of subtle Asian scrolls. (*The film contains one scene with sexual content.*)

(May 2004)