



Byong-man Jo and his wife, Gye-Yeul Kang set a wonderful example of love practiced and perfected in the film documentary "My Love, Don't Cross That River."

(Photo courtesy Film Movement)

Tender Love Story Resonates

Practice and perfection in the art of two people loving each other

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

What passes for love on most movie screens has always struck me as shallow: Movie love generally just "happens" to people (and may even "require" them to leave an existing relationship) and it usually involves an electric sexual connection between two unusually attractive people. That's about as far as it goes.

"My Love, Don't Cross That River," which set box office records in South Korea where it originated, is the antidote to all such movie romances, though unlikely to attract much notice here in the U.S. The documentary offers a tender examination of the last 15 months of a 76-year marriage. From watching the preview, I feared an emphasis on the cuteness of the elderly pair --and indeed, this small and sturdy couple (she nearing 90, he nearing 100) are adorable. But there is something much deeper happening here, and this depiction is best approached with reverence.

The film's opening scene is shot from a distance; we hear the woman sitting alone outdoors, sobbing soft-

OPINIONATED JUDGE

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ly. Having lost my own dearly loved life partner not long ago, the source of her sorrow immediately resonated.

The camera lingers on her briefly, and then we flash back to happier times. The pair has returned after a brief time away to their small and tidy home by a river, a fair but walkable distance from the small town nearby, and she is fretting about the dirt and leaves that have accumulated in their absence. So much work to clean this, she complains. He offers to do it all, and she seems glad for the offer, though she keeps sweeping --until he starts tossing leaves at her. Why are you doing that? She complains, in annoyance -- but soon they are both tossing leaves at one another, he grinning and she still annoyed. Before long, he wanders off and gathers some flowers and easily wins her over by offering them to her, tucking them

into her hair. She tucks some into his hair too, admires how handsome he is, and all is forgiven.

These sorts of playful scenes are not uncommon between them, and convey the affection and easy humor they share. The film observes them -- generally dressed in coordinated outfits that she has assembled -- gathering firewood, cooking and eating together, walking to the town to participate in a senior outing, enjoying the occasional visit from a smattering of their children and grandchildren, who cook and quarrel. It is obvious the pair takes great pleasure in each other's company. She nags and complains a bit, but he easily diffuses her. He revels in her cooking, accompanies her to the outhouse at night or to a doctor's visit, even when he isn't well himself, and sings to her when she is bored or afraid, and she al-

ways greets his voice with admiration.

I found myself wishing for photos of the two in their youth, particularly as they began to trickle little details of their lives together. She describes how they married when she was 14, but he refrained from touching her for several years because he didn't want to hurt her; they "really became husband and wife" only after she clearly signaled, with an embrace, that she was ready. I'm so grateful that he waited for me, she says. Later she mentions that she bore 12 children but only six of them lived to adulthood. That always made me so sad, she says in her understated way.

But the filmmaker resists our impulse toward youth; he clearly wants us to experience the couple in this period, weathered by the effects of age and struggle. We wince to hear his labored breathing and a worsening cough; watch them scramble precariously up to a likely familiar perch for viewing the river near their home; listen to her wistfully remind him of how

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