

Queen of the hill

So Yong Kim's kids-in-trouble story takes the road less traveled in *Treeless Mountain*.

By David Fear



TWISTED SISTERS Hee-yeon Kim, left, and Song-hee Kim have each other's backs in *Treeless Mountain*.

George Lucas was once allegedly quoted as saying that getting a reaction out of an audience was easy: All you needed to do was show someone strangling a puppy. (The irony of this wisdom coming from the Star Wars creator, a master manipulator of moviegoers, is delicious.) The only thing that arguably pushes more pressure points is showing youngsters in peril; once you force adorable moppets to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune, the sympathies of viewers are assured. That's assuming you don't turn such scenarios into simplistic, knee-jerk emotional exploitation, which most filmmakers do. Unless they're So Yong Kim.

"The last thing I wanted to do was make an After School Special," Kim, 40, says. "Believe me, it was very much on my mind throughout the shoot. I really didn't want this movie to tip over into sentimentality, which it could have done." Given the subject matter of *Treeless Mountain*, you can't blame her for having been wary. A tale of two South Korean girls—six-year-old Jin (Hee-yeon Kim) and her younger sister, Bin (Song-hee Kim)—essentially abandoned by their mother, this chronicle of kids fending for themselves might initially appear to be another Dickensian horror show. But just as the Korean-born, California-bred filmmaker's 2006 debut, *In Between Days*, turned a standard film à clef portrait into an intimate story of one first-generation American's displacement, so too does *Treeless Mountain* steer its warhorse narrative into unexpectedly tender, lyrical territory.

"Whenever you're making a movie about this subject, the question is: Are you going to let people go with these two on their journey, or are you just going to invoke pity?" the director asks, as she sits in Oscilloscope Pictures's downtown office. (The studio, founded by Beastie Boy Adam Yauch, picked up *Treeless Mountain* several months after its premiere last fall at the Toronto Film Festival.) "Instead of forcing viewers to feel sorry for the girls, why not inspire them to respect how children endure obstacles? Let Bin and Jin have a sense of dignity." Kim stops for a second and laughs. "I mean, it sounds funny to be going on about six-year-olds and dignity, right? But then you watch something like [Hirokazu] Kore-eda's *Nobody Knows* (2004), which tackles a similar situation, and you realize: He did it. So can I."

Indeed, as the film progresses, the notion that the kids are actually all right slowly takes hold. The siblings still cuddle with each other for cold comfort and pine for their absent mom. But they also ditch chores to snack on sweets, roast grasshoppers and play with other neighborhood kids at a nearby dirt mound. Even their less-than-friendly aunt's threat of relocation to their grandparents' farm turns out to be far from nightmarish. "I wanted to subvert worst-case expectations," Kim confirms. "Though truthfully, some of that restraint sprang from a certain nostalgia about the area"—the movie was shot in the town north of Pusan where Kim lived as a child—"and some of it was how my own feelings developed with the girls." Both actors were found after extensive searches in the country's kindergartens and orphanages. While Kim quickly credits her status as a new parent with helping her communicate with her underage talent, the film's producer (and Kim's husband) Bradley Rust Gray suggests an additional factor. "So only speaks Korean at the level of a seven-year-old," he confides over the phone. "That helped the three of them develop a really close relationship: They all spoke the same. Actually, Hee-yeon was constantly correcting my wife's grammar, so maybe not quite the same."

That wasn't the only bonding experience that happened during *Treeless Mountain*'s gestation: Both she and Gray, who's also an accomplished director (his latest, *The Exploding Girl*, premieres at Tribeca next month), have become part of a loose indie-filmmaking community devoted to what *The New York Times* recently dubbed "neorealism." "Yeah, that article," Kim says, chuckling. "I don't know that I'd call it a 'movement,' but I can see where people would find common ground between what Lance Hammer, Ryan (Fleck) and Anna (Boden), Rahmin Bahrani, Brad and I are doing. We're certainly influenced by a lot of the same foreign filmmakers, and we're all trying to do something that isn't what you'd consider a logical career step." Kim pauses, then smiles. "None of us is trying to make *Little Miss Sunshine*."

Treeless Mountain opens Wed 22 at Film Forum.