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TV

The 11 Best K-Dramas of 2022 to Watch Immediately

2022 was a superb year for Korean dramas.



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The best K-dramas of 2022 were bookended by a pair of brutal teen-centric dramas that premiered at the beginning of the year (*All of Us Are Dead*) and the end (*Weak Hero Class One*). They frame a year of superb Korean dramas, so many that it was difficult to narrow it down to just 11 top picks.

Big Mouth, *Juvenile Justice*, *Business Proposal*, and *Narco-Saints* were contenders. And had *Reborn Rich* released all its episodes earlier, I'm fairly certain that the Song Joong-ki series would've made this list as well. The following list features shows that romanced and charmed, terrified and scandalized, informed and celebrated — and made me laugh, too.

Below, check out the best K-dramas from 2022 that should definitely be on your watch list.

Under the Queen's Umbrella

This *sageuk* — or historical drama — is my favorite K-drama of the year. Kim Hye-soo stars as a fair and open-minded queen who serves her king but lives for her rambunctious sons. After her eldest, the crown prince, falls deathly ill, the battle over succession begins. His title won't automatically be passed down to her other children if the Queen Dowager (Kim Hae-sook) has her way. She despises Queen Hwa-ryeong and has plans of her own: to have a prince borne to one of the king's many concubines ascend in the royal hierarchy, kick out (or kill!) Queen Hwa-ryeong, and have the preferred concubine become the king's new queen. What follows is a murder mystery and a tale of political vengeance with an adorable love story thrown in for a bit of levity. As a bonus, the period-piece costumes are gorgeously resplendent. (Kim Hye-soo also stars in this year's superb *Juvenile Justice*, playing a no-nonsense juvenile court judge who despises delinquents.) (Netflix)

Weak Hero Class 1

Park Ji-hoon is almost unrecognizable from his Wanna One days. Leading this cast, which also includes Choi Hyun-wook (*Twenty Five Twenty One*) and Hong Kyung (*D.P.*), Park is so intensely good as a bullied boy who uses classical conditioning (Pavlov's Dog) and Newton's Laws of Motions to fight back against his tormentors. Unlike most bullied kids, Si-eun isn't afraid of his persecutors. He views them as aggressive blockades to academic excellence. Not one who feels the need for friends, Si-eun eventually finds himself aligned with fellow class outcast Beom-seok, and Soo-ho – who's the school's best fighter. Midway through, there is a plot twist that will leave many viewers shocked and heartbroken. Be forewarned: the ending is definitive and bleak. Based on a webtoon, *Weak Hero Class 1* is one of the few K-dramas where I'm hopeful for a second season. (Viki)

Little Women

Though both revolve around sisterhood and the distinctions between the haves and the have nots, this female-centric series isn't a true adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's novel of the same name. We know early on that the rich and powerful are the villains in this series. But how are we to feel about the underdogs who manipulate the truth and dip their toes into crimes because they have nothing left to lose? *Little Women* shows viewers that you can do everything right and still be destined to a life of poverty, because the families that accumulated generational wealth know how to work the system. Kim Go-eun turns in a magnificent performance as the eldest sister who's struggling to hold it together without endangering her younger siblings. Nam Ji-hyun is wonderful as the alcohol-dependent middle sister, while *All of Us Are Dead*'s Park Ji-hu's portrayal of the family *maknae* is appropriately pragmatic. (Netflix)

Our Blues

A beautifully-executed K-drama that deals with teen pregnancy, bullying, death by suicide, child abuse, insurmountable debts, and profound prejudice against the disabled, *Our Blues* manages to inject humorous subplots that balance the show. The first episode isn't indicative of the quality of writing that will follow, or the stellar performances by lead actors Lee Byung-hun and Shin Min-a — neither of whom are overly likable in the beginning. But the series does such a great job at depicting how childhood traumas aren't something people can just grow out of. The repercussions are complicated, especially when a family bets its entire future on the success of one child. *Our Blues* is also one of the few shows I've seen where teenagers are given ownership over their bodies, stand up for their beliefs, and don't capitulate to the brutal demands of adults to do "what's right." (Netflix)

All of Us Are Dead

Set in a high school, *All of Us Are Dead* quickly became the most-watched Netflix series within days of its January 28 release. The K-drama utilizes the zombie genre to reflect on societal issues worldwide, but the apathetic students who bully their poorer classmates are even more frightening. The series is well written and offers nail-biting suspense. It also informs viewers with hot-button storylines that tackle feminism, academic stress, fat-shaming, and the way South Korea failed in handling preventable tragedies like the MV Sewol Ferry disaster, where the victims were primarily teenage students. (Netflix)

Thirty-Nine

K-dramas often depict women in their 30s as benevolent wives or mothers but neglect their sexuality and dreams. *Thirty-Nine* centers on a trio of female best friends living their best lives. None of them are married. Their relationships with partners are messy. And unlike many Korean shows where the characters don't engage in any kind of physical relationship, the first episode shows Mi-jo (Son Ye-jin) having a one-night stand that will lead to much more. Early on, we know that one of the friends will die. And while many viewers may guess who it will be, it won't negate the pain and shock when it happens. There also is an **adoption element** thoughtfully weaved into this series that depicts how an adoptee can have a loving relationship with her adoptive parents, while still longing for the biological family that relinquished her. (Netflix)

Extraordinary Attorney Woo

Park Eun-bin has been singled out for her extraordinary portrayal of a highly-functioning autistic attorney. She is indeed very good as Woo Young-woo, who loves whales even more than she loves the law. At work, she finds solutions to difficult cases that don't appear winnable. At home, she navigates a complicated family background that includes a mother who has never been in her life, and an overprotective father whose own dreams of a legal career ended when she was born. Young-woo also enjoys one of the sweetest love stories in K-drama history, courtesy of co-star Kang Tae-oh. The only thing that would've made this show better would've been the inclusion of autistic actors to play at least one of the periphery characters who are on the spectrum. (Netflix)

Yumi's Cells 2

Kim Go-eun is having a great 2022 with *Little Women* and this second season of *Yumi's Cells*. She beautifully conveys all the complicated emotions that Yumi goes through as she risks her stable office job to pursue a career in writing. Romantically, she is unable to overcome the insecurity of previous relationships. This uncertainty is adorably depicted by her very vocal animated cells, who try to help out as she self-sabotages a relationship with an enamored and super hot boyfriend (played by GOT7's Park Jin-young). While many viewers were Team Babi (Park's character) or Team Woong (Ahn Bo-hyun's character from the first season), I was ultimately Team Yumi. In order to find love, she needed to love herself first. (Viki)

My Liberation Notes

The Yeoms are 30ish siblings who blame their dreary lives on their circumstances. Instead of being based out of Seoul like their office colleagues, they reside in the countryside with their parents. This means their nights out are dictated by the final subway run or splurging on a cab together, and their weekends are spent working on their parents' small farm. Passed over for promotions and feeling suffocated by their small-town existence, each sibling looks for an escape. For youngest sister Mi-jung (Kim Ji-won), this comes in the form of a mysterious farmhand (Son Seok-koo), an alcoholic with a troubled past. Finding love doesn't absolve your debts or ease your insecurities. But what this K-drama does incredibly well is allow for character growth. Who the siblings are at the start of the series is not who they are by the finale. And that's a good thing. (Netflix)

Again My Life

The series starts off with Hee-woo (Lee Joon-gi) being offered another chance at life after he has already been murdered. Just hang in there, because it will all make sense. A vengeful otherworldly being gives him the opportunity to go back in the past to relive his life, if he promises to catch the corrupt power players responsible for his (and others') deaths. Lee is charming and charismatic as the law student who knows what will happen in the decades to come and uses that information to take down some of the most corrupt and powerful players in the South Korean government. Using his brains (and martial arts skills), Hee-woo's goal is to create a future that will benefit the downtrodden and punish the elite who only care about themselves. (Viki)

Twenty Five Twenty One

The title refers to the lead couple's Korean ages when they fall in love. But when the series starts — with Kim Tae-ri playing high school fencer Hee-do and Nam Joo-hyuk portraying Yi-jin, a college student who had to drop out to support his family — they are 16 and 20, respectively. While there is a certain *ick* factor involved in the friendship between a child and a grown man, this K-drama cautiously takes its time in developing the platonic relationship that is the basis of the characters' interest in each other. There is a second lead syndrome with Hee-do and a classmate vying for Yi-jin's attention. But ultimately, the girls find strength and validation from each other, rather than a man. (Netflix)

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