



Smoke and Mirrors

The cast and creator of epic family drama *Pachinko* talk life, love and the weight of ancestral inheritance in this sprawling new series.

The vibrant colours of a pachinko parlour serve as the dizzying, electric backdrop for the opening credits of *Pachinko*, which sees the cast dance uninhibitedly to the 1967 song 'Let's Live for Today' by The Grass Roots. These scenes are cut and edited with archival footage of Japan's colonial

by **Donnalyn Xu**

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occupation of Korea, interweaving the past with the present, fiction with reality, the suffering with the joyful, and everything in between.

"Life is this balance, and maybe a crazy balance," says creator, co-writer and executive producer Soo Hugh. "But it's that balance between laughter and tears. It's

between crying and between sadness and joy, and just making sure that the full spectrum of feelings is explored in the show. That was always the intent."

Based on Min Jin Lee's bestselling 2017 novel, *Pachinko* crosses multiple generations and geographies to tell the story of Sunja (Yu-na Jeon as a child, Kim Min-ha as a teenager, and *Minari*'s Youn Yuh-jung as a grandmother) over a period of 70 years. Growing up near the Japanese-occupied port city of Busan in the early 20th century, Sunja's fateful encounter with the Korean-born Japanese fish broker Hansu (Lee Min-ho, *Boys Over Flowers*) propels her into a new life as a migrant "Zainichi" – a Korean person with permanent residency in Japan – in Osaka. Her experiences have a lasting, rippling effect on the lives of her descendants.

The series signals the lasting importance of uplifting these untold migrant and diasporic histories beyond flattened narratives. "For so much of history, the stories of Sunja were not captured," says Hugh. "They were never considered important enough to be part of the historical record.

"It is the Sunjas of the world – the people who actually do the labour, who go to the rice fields and get the rice that is put on the table – that are really building and making something that we need. They're a necessity," she says.

Straying from the linear timeline of the novel, Sunja's coming-of-age occurs simultaneously alongside her grandson Solomon's (Jin Ha, *Love Life*) in 1989. Their stories are entangled through a visual slicing, where events separated by years are isolated only by seconds. This structure feels essential to Korean American actor Ha, who believes, "[It's] impossible [to] not contend with our past by trying to make any differences or changes in the present.

"There is no end to the unravelling of how each event – each world event, national event, or national tragedy – links to the previous, or to the next," says Ha. The past does not feel like a flashback, or a cinematic act of remembering what once was. Rather, these delicate threads lead to visceral ways of experiencing history in the present.

Pachinko, like the gambling arcade game from which it takes its name, is ultimately a story of chance, loss, triumph and misfortune. As Sunja's son Mozasu (Soji Arai) teaches a



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**PACHINKO CREATOR
SOO HUGH**



↑
THREE GENERATIONS OF SUNJA:
YOUN YUH-JUNG (TOP), YU-NA
JEON (BOTTOM) AND KIM MIN-HA
(FAR LEFT), WITH LEE MIN-HO

young assistant to adjust the nails of pachinko machines so each game is rigged, he says, "Most people think if they can flick the handle *just right*, they will win. But they have no control over the outcome. Not really. And neither do we."

While the show ambitiously traces Sunja's migrant history through an epic narrative across decades, it is sustained by the quiet details of everyday life, much like the slightly bent nails of a pachinko game: the flavour of white rice, the shared conversations between women, or the familiar turn of the streets leading towards home.

"It didn't feel like I was doing something that happened a long time ago," observes Japanese New Zealander actor Anna Sawai, who plays Solomon's co-worker Naomi. "I think a lot of people will see it as something that they encounter in their everyday life right now."

This feels especially poignant in scenes exploring the experiences of women, from being denied an education in Yeongdo in 1915, to encountering the male-dominated corporate world of Tokyo in 1989. However, the resonances between the women in *Pachinko* are more than simply the burdens carried over years. They are also illuminated by their hope, spirit and vulnerability. "Let's be scared together," a young Sunja says to her new sister-in-law Kyunghee (Jung Eun-chaee) as they hesitate outside a moneylender's office in Japan. "Perhaps some strength can come out of it."

Although this scene is specific to the trials that Sunja and Kyunghee face as two women doing "men's work" without their husbands in 1920, this conversation is instantly familiar to modern audiences.

In many ways, the blissful opening title sequence reflects where we stand in relation to the stories of our ancestors – how history cuts into the present, and how this knowledge is both the source of pain and a balm that brings us comfort. Perhaps it is how we would like to imagine our cast of characters after seeing the hardship of their lives in every episode: smiling, brightly lit, dancing to the same chorus in a shared space, connected despite all their distances. ■

PACHINKO IS NOW STREAMING ON APPLE TV+.