A sassy celebration of sisterhood with heart, soul and humor. Wickedly funny and wholeheartedly tender, the goodwill, pluck and zappy 80s pop songs beaming out of "Sunny" are totally infectious.
BUSAN, South Korea -- Wickedly funny and wholeheartedly tender, the goodwill, pluck and zappy 80s pop songs beaming out of Sunny are totally infectious. A dramedy about the life-changing reunion of seven, fortysomething women who were best friends in high school, Sunny is easily Korea's feel-good film of the year. Kang Hyeung-chul, whose charming family comedy Scandal Makers became a giant sleeper hit, ups his own ante in production scope as well as emotional range. The director-screenwriter's large ensemble of 14 characters all stand out, and their checkered personal experiences are deepened by a nostalgic but not artificially rosy historical dimension.

The film sold 7,400,000 tickets back home and if not for the language barrier, would make the perfect girls' night out in any multiplex in the world. It can still shine in some Asian markets and achieve positive word-of-mouth in DVD circuits beyond.

Na-mi (You Ho-jeong) is stuck in a stale marriage to a high-flying but unaffectionate husband and bullied by her moody teenage daughter Yae-bin. While visiting her mother in hospital, she re-encounters high school friend Chun-hwa (Jin Hee-kyung), who is in the terminal stages of cancer. With two months left to live, she asks Na-mi to look up all the members of their high school clique “Sunny” for a reunion. She first locates Jang-mi (Koh Soo-hee), an unsuccessful insurance salesperson. They hire a private eye to get hold of three more members, but Su-jin (Kang So-ra as the teenager), the most beautiful and aloof one, eludes their search. Na-mi commissions the detective to find someone else exclusively for her.

Back in the mid-80s, a much more conservative time under military dictatorship, Na-mi arrives in Seoul from Jeolla province to enroll at Jindeok Girls' School. She is bullied for her regional accent and country girl ways until towering, straight-talking and irresistibly cool Chun-hwa takes her side. Together, they form the gang "Sunny" with Jang-min, Su-ji, plus three others: foul-mouthed professor's daughter Jin-hee (Park Jin-joo), barber's daughter Bok-hee (Kim Bo-mi) who dreams of becoming Miss Korea and dentist's daughter Geum-ok (Nam Bo-ra), who has literary aspirations despite a violent streak. In between gang wars and dance sessions, Na-mi has the first adolescent crush on Sang-ho, a gentle music-lover.

Even though Kang's screenplay strays from the traditional three-act movement, at no point does it feel rambling or run out of steam. Instead, it flows gracefully like a continuous stream of golden moments that together comprise a rich coming-of-age experience. Avoiding the usual mawkish or stridently feminist clichés of female friendships, Sunny celebrates a solidarity that's forged in violence and repression.

The girls' early clashes with a rival gang are tinged with the puckish humor of Jin-hee firing swear words like bullets or Na-mi pretending to be possessed. But the harshness and intensity of peer pressure and school authoritarianism escalates in the later episodes, reflected in the reckless use of razor blades, glass bottles and even a blazing firebrand as weapons. A subplot involving Na-mi's brother whose idealism as an anti-government activist gets dragged through the mud and scenes of police crushing demonstrations put the girls' restlessness and small transgressions into perspective. The climactic breakdown of a glue-sniffing classmate symbolizes the implosive national psychosis.
In this light, survival of their friendship and their joie de vivre which is revived in their reunion despite each person having taken hard knocks in life becomes especially precious and comforting. Even the inevitable death of Chun-hwa is not treated in a tear-jerking way. Admittedly, the ending wraps everything up rather too neatly and ideally, but the women’s performance of the Boney M number that give their clique its name is an indescribably warm and stirring moment.

It is rare for a film to develop three or four fully-fledged characters, so it is even more impressive that all seven girls and their adult counterparts have their distinct quirks and personalities and a diverse range of social backgrounds. While the fates of the adults differ wildly from what the girls envisaged themselves, there is subtle continuity between them.

Much time and attention is invested in their hairstyles, wardrobe and accessories, like Jang-min’s fake eyelashes or Bok-hee’s perms to turn their physical attributes and body language into extensions of their characters.

While technical credits are flawless on all fronts, virtuoso editing can be singled out for effecting the seamless transitions between scenes to evoke a feeling of synchronicity between past and present.

The superb use of 80s pop songs not merely furnishes the story with a vivid nostalgic background, the careful choice of lyrics helps to articulate feelings the characters are unable to express in words, such as the very different moods evoked by Cyndi Lauper singing *Time After Time* on the radio in the opening, and Tink and Patty’s soul-jazz version during end credits.

The first print released theatrically is 124 minutes and trimmed of some swear words to pass a Korean PG-15 rating. The director’s cut screened at the festival is 10 minutes longer and retains more scenes set in the present.

**Busan International Film Festival, Korean Cinema Today, Panorama**
Sales: CJ Entertainment
Production companies: Toilet Pictures Inc., Aloha Pictures Inc.
Cast: You Ho-jeong, Shim Eun-kyung, Jin Hee-kyung, Kang So-ra, Min Hyo-rin, Kim Shi-hoo
Director: Kang Hyoung-chul
Screenwriter: Kang Hyoung-chul, adaptation by Lee Byung-heon
Producers: Ahn Byung-ki, Ahn In-kin
Executive producer: Katherine Kim
Director of photography: Lee Hyung-deok
Production designer: Lee Yo-han
Music: Kim Jun-seok
Costume designer: Chae Kyung-hwa
Editor: Nam Na-young
No rating, 134 minutes.