

Formula works but subplots save the day

Shady character meets rich boy in stylish romantic comedy drama

My Girl

(2005)

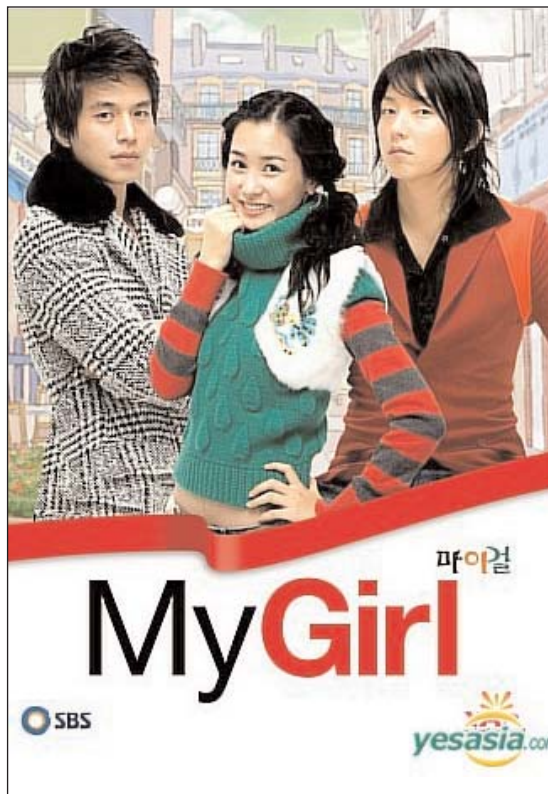
SBS drama, 16 episodes

My Girl is one of many recent Korean romantic comedy imports that have gained a significant and devoted audience despite there clearly having been written to a formula. The typical plot — in which a spunky girl and a rich, snobby boy are thrown together by fate and are kept together by outrageous plot devices — is a very well-worn one. The Rae-won Kim vehicle *Rooftop Room Cat* and the runaway hit *Full House*, which starred Ji-hoon Jung (the real name of music superstar *Rain*), are two notable examples.

This genre takes for granted that the audience is aware of the clichés employed and is fully on board with them. It is in the particulars that these dramas seek to distinguish themselves from one another: The heroine can be more or less plucky or conniving, the hero can be more or less arrogant or cold, but viewers can be sure that before the 16 episodes are up, certain hoops will have been jumped through: For example, each lead will have a love rival, there will be nearly impassable obstacles to their love, and credibility will have been strained repeatedly.

My Girl features Da-hae Lee as multilingual Jeju Island tour guide Yu-rin Ju, who lived all over Asia with a hapless, chronic gambler of a father, has grown up to be a self-reliant and resourceful young woman. Never having been secure, Yu-rin is hungry for money, love, and food. One of the funnier aspects of her character is her large appetite; she's like a dessert predator who, accustomed to a feast-or-famine life, loads up eagerly whenever food is available. In other words, Yu-rin can really put it away, and she pays the price with occasional bouts of indigestion.

Yu-rin is on the lam from her father's creditors when she runs into Gong-chan Seol (Dong-wook Lee) — or, rather, he runs



My Girl, now available from YA Entertainment

into her with his car, resulting in a visit to the hospital for Yu-rin. When she finds out he is the managing director of a luxury hotel chain, she attempts to finagle a large cash settlement in compensation for her nonexistent injuries. Instead, coincidentally finding himself in the middle of a business crisis with some Chinese associates, he hires her as an interpreter. (The actress Lee seems to have a real-life command of multiple languages, including Chinese, Japanese, and English.) After a number of other encounters with Yu-rin, Gong-chan ends up hiring her to pose as his long-lost cousin in order to please (and possibly save the life of) his grandfather, who has been pleading on his deathbed for Gong-chan to find her.

Because of Yu-rin's spotty background and Gong-chan's distrustful nature, he paints her, somewhat unfairly, as an unprincipled con artist who lies as easily as breathing. This is true to an extent, but Yu-rin is basically a person who longs for stability and has had to lie and wheedle in order to survive. The continued lying involved in her new career as a bogus family member and the mutual deception

and director of *My Girl* may have felt that they were presenting a new take on the genre with a main character whose ethics are open to question. Unfortunately, Da-hae Lee cannot really pull off all of her character's potential dimensions. In the early episodes, when the actress is called upon to show Yu-rin at her most conniving and crafty, she resorts to a great deal of mugging, so much so that it becomes tiresome. Lee is better at portraying sadness and anger, but though her character is meant to be funny, she has a hard time pulling off the humor. (To be fair, however, many other people have found her to be funny).

One exception is a scene in which the drunken Yu-rin, exasperated with Gong-chan's airs of superiority, reels down the street taking her anger out on inanimate objects. She berates a large advertising sign, calling it out with absurd taunts. "You're full of yourself, too? You're fluorescent? Are you? Talk to me! Fluorescent..." she mutters while raining blows upon it and then collapsing.

Two secondary romances show much more creativity than the

(self — and otherwise) that comes into play when the two begin falling for each other bring up a theme the writers hit over and over: Lies versus truth — which hurts more? A lie can save a life, but it can also condemn others to misery. And sometimes, coming clean can make things even worse.

main storyline. One is the odd courtship between Yu-rin's friend Jin-kyu (Kye-hyung Jo) and Gong-chan's beautiful and highly capable assistant, Jin-kyung (Eon-jeong Lee). These two model-gorgeous people with the nearly-matching names are both as shy and reserved as maidens. Their wooing consists of the exchange of formalized pleasantries and meaningful looks at Jin-kyung's workplace, where Jin-kyu meets her each day as she's leaving. In this context, the bestowal of business cards becomes something tender and romantic, and a gift of a tangerine is tantamount to an admission of love. This tangerine, by the way, becomes a cherished stand-in for the loved one, and some very funny business with the ill-fated fruit ensues.

Even better is the relationship between Gong-chan's aunt, Ok-seun (Ran Choi), and his grandfather's factotum, Mr. Chang (Suk-hwan Ahn). At first they are at odds, but the two come together while watching Jacques Demy's romantic tear-jerker *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. That movie's main musical motif becomes the couple's theme song. The middle-aged love story between the somewhat rakish, earthily sexy Mr. Chang and the grown-up "little girl" Ok-seun is a pleasant bonus. She brings out his protective instincts, and she falls for his rugged charm, and this late-blooming love is very sweet indeed.

References to another classic film, *An Affair to Remember* (or perhaps *Sleepless in Seattle*), enliven Gong-chan and Yu-rin's story, as they make repeated visits to the 63 Building (the Korea Life Insurance Building), once the tallest building in Seoul and in Asia. (It was Yu-rin's long-held dream during her peripatetic childhood to visit the 63 Building — the news never reached her that taller buildings had since been built.)

Worth special mention among

the supporting cast is Jun-ki Lee as family friend Jung-woo Seo. This actor was catapulted to fame in 2005 with this drama and the huge hit film *King and the Clown*, in which he played a member of a traveling acting troupe who takes the female roles. Lee, possessing a preternaturally feminine beauty, was stunning in that part. His delicate bone structure, long doe-eyes, and smooth skin make him fascinating to watch, and he was perhaps better showcased in that film than in *My Girl*. As international playboy and ladies' man Jung-woo, his looks are distracting, but his acting is up to the challenge and in general the casting works.

A few words about the DVD subtitles; at times the translation can be odd. For example, one character, complaining that another is living in the past, says, "Stop attaching expired denotation."

More problematic is the repeated use of the word "prick" — as an epithet by the grandfather, accusing his grandson, and by Yu-rin's father, describing himself apologetically to her. This word does not mean what the translator apparently thinks it means. It is a small point, but it is a problem because it is used so frequently. In a gangster movie, it would not be a problem, but in fluffy *My Girl*, it's jarring and, in these particular circumstances, a little creepy.

Overall, as is so often the case with romantic comedies, some things could have been better in *My Girl*. Korean drama producers need to take more care to develop their lead characters and their scenarios and avoid the all-too-common tedium and predictability. If *My Girl* had been several episodes shorter, it would have been tighter and made for more enjoyable viewing without sacrificing much else. But particular fans of the genre, of broad comedy, and of quirky, cutesy female heroines will find a lot to enjoy. ●