

# Rooting for the bad guy

Early subtitled Korean dramas now available in the U.S.

## LOVABLE LOSERS

### *Shoot for the Stars*

(*Byeorul Ssoda*)

(2002)

SBS drama, 16 episodes

Review by Duncan Mitchell

By temperament I find it very painful to watch self-defeating characters. I can't watch slasher films because of the "Okay, everybody stay together!" trope — the cue, of course, for the characters to wander off alone into the jaws or blades of the killer. *Shoot for the Stars* is a romantic drama, with hardly a drop of blood shed, but it's structured like a slasher film, and before long I was climbing the walls.

Sung-tae Ku (In-sung Jo, *Something Happened in Bali*), a handsome young aspiring actor, has a dark secret: He's illiterate. But he can memorize almost anything on one hearing, so he relies on his managers, So-ra Han (Do Yeon Jeon, *You Are My Sunshine*) and her older brother Ba-da Han (Sang-myung Park, *My Wife Is a Gangster*), to read his lines to him. That means they have to stay with him constantly when he's working, but of course, to keep the story moving, they keep wandering off alone.

Sung-tae is confronted with a written text he can't read, and at one point, he panics and runs out, and is told subsequently he will never work again. He and his managers bow and scrape to the director, and promise it will never happen again. Sung-tae then exults: He'll become a big star and find his long lost birth family, from whose loving bosom he was torn at the age of six. And all is well, more or less — until the next episode. Well, this was all too much, and before the midpoint of the series I was rooting for the monster, as I do when I have to watch a slasher film: Get him! Finish her off! Rip them all to shreds!

The monster here is the model/actress Yae-rin Jung, who had been managed by Ba-da until she decided to hitch her rising star to Do-hun Kim (Seo-jin Lee, *Since We Met*), Ba-da's former partner and So-ra's former fiancé. Do-hun swindles Ba-da out of his life savings to buy his way into a

CEO job with a production company, and brutally dumps So-ra. Yae-rin then blackmails Do-hun into taking her with him. Yae-rin is played by Eun-hee Hong, who went on to play the wicked step-sister character in *My Love Patji*.

Her trademark is a mean, smug little smile whenever she's working her evil — the kind of smile you want to wipe off her face with a two-by-four. (Yae-rin has a dark secret of her own: She was a bar girl before Ba-da rescued her and took her under his ample wing. Known for his stinginess, Ba-da likes to brag that he never gives anything to anyone, but in fact he's almost pathologically generous to lost sheep like Yae-rin and Sung-tae.) As an added complication, Sung-tae and So-ra fall in love with each other, which has to be kept secret from Ba-da the overprotective big brother, and from Sung-tae's adoring fans.

Ba-da, So-ra, and Sung-tae keep lying to each other, for their own good, of course, and withholding important information from each other, to protect them from being hurt, of course, and every time it just makes things worse.

But they never, ever learn, and can hardly wait for the next crisis, so they can lie again. The saving grace of the series is So-ra's old friend Mi-ryun Lee (Jung-soo Byun, *Man in Crisis*), a hardboiled hair stylist who always tells the truth and sees through every problem, often getting the others out of trouble when no one else can. (When Mi-ryun beats up Yae-rin about halfway through, it's immensely satisfying.) But even she can't dig these losers out of their morass. Despite their best efforts at failure, though, they thrive and the series ends happily — this is a TV drama, after all.

Despite all this, I couldn't stop watching *Shoot for the Stars*. One night I watched three episodes in a row (on DVD). The cast members are all very good, making their doofus characters believable and sympathetic, even lovable. Do-yeon Jeon stands out, which is no surprise, but Sang-myung Park and In-



*Shoot for the Stars* now available from YA Entertainment.

sung Jo are right behind her. The setting includes parts of Seoul that I know and want to return to; the sight of snow falling in Myungdong, the skyline of Seoul seen from a rooftop at night, made me ache with nostalgia. The writing is tight and mechanical, like a windup toy that churns along mindlessly, with the actors giving it a heart.

## SETTING THE BAR FOR CREEPINESS

*M*

(1994)

MBC drama, 10 episodes

Review by Lorraine Murray

*M* is a dark and troubling horror drama that was a huge hit when it was broadcast in 1994. To a first-time American viewer, it appears not to have aged too well. The special effects and production values are not nearly up to the standards to which modern viewers have become accustomed, though they were state-of-the-art at the time.

The premise of *M* is certainly original, although its execution is ham-handed at times. When we meet her, the main character, Ma-ri Park (Eun-ha Shim), appears to be a typical high school girl with a small cohort of close friends, played by Ji-su Kim and Jeong-ah Yang. The three girls play at the beach, take pictures, giggle, and compare notes on the local hunk, gymnast Ji-suk Song (Chang-hoon Lee). But despite the very thin veneer of normality over her life, it is clear to viewers and to the other characters that Ma-ri has serious problems of a supernatural nature.

One clue to this is Ma-ri's telepathic power, evidenced, for example, during a ballet class when she becomes dizzy and tells her teacher to call home because there has been an accident. This is immediately proved true. Ma-ri also is prone to what could mildly be termed an anger-management disorder. When she gets mad, she turns into what one reviewer called the low-budget "Korean version of The Hulk": She goes wild, her eyes glow green with an intense power that causes objects to fly around and explode, and people get hurt.

We soon learn more and more about Ma-ri's bizarre dual nature, which in the beginning seems more or less explainable as a product of her family's tragic history, which comes out bit by bit. If one believes in things like poltergeists, ESP, and telekinesis, one can see how such things would be enough to explain a troubled teenage girl's problems.

What's wrong with Ma-ri, though, goes way beyond family issues. In fact, she was an unwanted child whom her parents attempted to abort. But in the doctor's office, something went terribly wrong: An angry spirit, later explained as that of an aborted child, entered the room and lodged in the fetus that was to become Ma-ri herself. (The scary scene, complete with spinning gurneys, flying scalpels, and flashing lights, would not be out of place in *The Exorcist*.) The incident left Ma-ri's mother in a coma that lasted until Ma-ri's birth, at which time the mother died. The title of the drama, *M*, is the name given to the evil spirit inhabiting Ma-ri.

Vengeful ghosts, of which there are many kinds, have a long tradition in Korean folk culture, and it is likely that Korean audiences immediately recognized the spirit that inhabits Ma-ri as a familiar element. "M" should be understood as an extremely powerful force, one that represents primitive anger that can't be reasoned with or appeased and only gathers strength as the years go by. When it appears, it takes over Ma-ri's body and gives her super-

human strength. As she grows up, it starts coming out more and more, apparently seeking to take her over entirely.

As high school comes to an end, Ma-ri and her friends rent a beach house. There they become the targets of a gang, who are so eager to attack and rape the girls — based on just a glimpse of the friends at the beach — that they break into the house in the middle of the night. Unfortunately for them, "M" makes its appearance; taking over the body of Ma-ri, it battles the attackers, wreaks havoc, smashes up the place, and kills one of the men. The friends survive, but Ma-ri is gravely injured; she has suffered extensive brain damage and, it appears, she subsequently dies.

Several years go by and the girls grow up, never forgetting their friend and what she did for them. However, a chance encounter in a hospital with a brilliant young doctor who looks shockingly similar to her makes them question what really happened to Ma-ri. The doctor is cold and robotic and has no memory of them or of any former life, claiming that her name is Joo-ri Kim and that she was raised in the United States as the daughter of an eminent American neurologist, Dr. Prohm. But how can a woman so young be a fully qualified doctor? Why does she look so much like Ma-ri? Why does "Dr. Prohm" (seen during international phone calls to Ma-ri) act so weird? And, not least of all, during a hostage incident at the hospital, how did slim young Dr. Joo-ri Kim manage to overpower a deranged man, kill him with her bare hands, and throw him off the roof?

It doesn't take very long for the secrets of Dr. Joo-ri Kim to be revealed, but the plot that spins out thereafter is a complex one of increasingly dark energy and mysterious motives. "M" reappears and resumes its pursuit of vengeance against any and all human sins, particularly those rooted in selfishness and lies.

The drama *M* could be a great horror-movie ride, but in many ways it is just depressing. Its