

Two great cats and a few dogs

Principals in rooftop drama run away with the show

ROOFTOP ROOM CAT "OKTAPPANG KOYANGI"

The 2003 MBC series *Rooftop Room Cat* (sometimes translated as Attie Cat) is a comedy-drama about the awkward friendship/romance between two people who often can't stand each other.

Good-looking law student Kyung-min may be book-smart, but in most other ways he is just a big, dumb, hapless kid. The audience's understanding of his character is set from his first scene, in which he worms out of a dressing-down from his girlfriend by pretending to have been waiting for her in the restaurant where they have agreed to meet, when in fact he has just arrived, hours late. He smoothes things over by proposing marriage and presenting her with a beautiful ring.

No sooner has she accepted the ring than he receives a message on his cell phone from a friend, saying that rich girl Hye-run, his long-time crush who had gone away, has been seen back at school again. Upon hearing this news, Kyung-min, flustered, takes back the ring, tells the girl something urgent has come up, and compliments her on her hair as he runs out of the restaurant to catch Hye-run back at school, leaving his "fiancée" in the dust. She is never seen onscreen again.

"Meeting cute" is a staple of Hollywood romances, but in the case of *Rooftop Room Cat*, the two leads actually "meet disgusting." Having missed Hye-run at the law school, Kyung-min goes to the library to do some studying. He finds his place at the table usurped by ragamuffin Jung-eun, asleep with her head on the table and drooling all over his books. He wakes her up and sends her off. In her haste, she picks up one of his books by accident, and he chases after her to get it back.

Upon his return to the library, the camera lingers on the pool of saliva on the table as he puts his hand down into it. He wipes it off in disgust and he notices that a folder is missing.



Rooftop Room Cat, released by YA Entertainment.

He doesn't know that a friend has just taken it without telling him, so he runs off to accost Jung-eun again and accuses her of stealing it. She won't be intimidated, even after he cottons to the fact that she is only pretending to be a student.

He blusters and threatens her, grabbing her bag and knocking her over. Outraged, she spills out its contents for him and proves her innocence. For good measure, she bites him hard and kicks his shins.

Jung-eun comes from a family not well-off enough to give her any help or advantages in life. Neither do they give her much respect or emotional support. Jung-eun did not go to college and has not had a steady job in three years. By her own admission, she is not beautiful or smart or well educated, but she is extremely hard-working and dedicated. She knows she will make something of herself, although she does not know what, and she is to be admired all the more for believing in herself because her family (father, mother, and three younger brothers) does not believe in her. Her parents tell her to find some man — "some blind fool," as her mother puts it — and get married.

But she has other plans; she has secretly been working a paper route and has saved enough money to put a deposit on a rooftop apartment of her own, a kind of studio built on the roof of an apartment building. She plans to move in soon and begin to make her mark on the world as an independent woman.

Unfortunately, her father, a police

officer, has just been transferred to another town. Jung-eun doesn't want to give up her dream and tries to insist on staying by herself in Seoul, but her parents are adamant that she is coming with them. Her rotten teenage brother, Jung-woo, who doesn't want to move either, makes matters worse by stealing Jung-eun's savings and disappearing, putting her apartment plans at risk.

By a stroke of luck, Kyung-min has realized that Jung-eun is a high school friend of princess Hye-run's and decides to get on her good side; he catches her brother and sends him back home. Jung-woo having spent all the money, Kyung-min lends his own money to Jung-eun so that she will speak well of him to Hye-run, although Jung-eun thinks that he truly wants to be friends.

It is only by hiding on moving day that Jung-eun avoids having to go with the family. The first scenes of Jung-eun in her rooftop room, with its wonderful cityscape view, are a delight. We have seen her working cheerfully every day to earn money, borrowing Hye-run's school ID to get into the library so that she can get a good job, and putting up with insults from her family. So when she is home at last with her own little rice cooker, bathroom, kitchenette, and neat, girlish bedroom, the sense of peace and contentedness is palpable. Here, anything can happen.

Too bad that one of the first things to happen is that Kyung-min comes begging, on the run from the gangsters to whom he owes money and at odds with the rich grandparents (who raised him) because of his wastrel ways. He has no place else to go, and she is forced to take in this "stray cat."

Their household is not a peaceful or a stable one. The roommates alternate between being warm friends verging on intimacy, and being at each other's throats in one spat after another. Many times over the course of this 16-episode series either he packs his bags and leaves in a huff or she throws him out "once and for all." Yet they always get back together

for one reason or other.

Kyung-min, stuck on Hye-run despite her arrogance and mistreatment of him, cannot see Jung-eun as anything but someone easily taken for granted. She is not good-looking enough to win his notice as a woman, but he clearly is drawn to her, even if he doesn't know it himself because he has his heart set on spoiled Hye-run. And Hye-run is set on Dong-joon, a longtime friend of the family who has no interest in her in spite of her and her mother's best efforts to get them married. Jung-eun coincidentally meets Dong-joon on her own and manages to impress him enough with her pluckiness and determination that he takes a chance on her, giving her a job at his company.

Rae-won Kim and Da-bin Jung carry the series with their charming performances. Kim plays a "bad boy" one can't help but like; he portrays Kyung-min as a man too clumsy and transparent in his hurtful behavior to resent for long. His natural comic gifts keep the viewer laughing off sins that would be too cruel to take from a more successful playboy. When Kyung-min takes Jung-eun's money to buy gifts for Hye-run, for example, the fact that his ploy doesn't work makes it easier to forgive him somehow. As much as he can be a jerk to Jung-eun, he is in turn Hye-run's fool. It is also clear that he doesn't know that he has outgrown his crush on Hye-run.

Kim brings out undertones of incertitude in Kyung-min's admiration of Hye-run. On some level he knows that she is not worth the slavish devotion he lavishes on her and that Jung-eun, though she may be poor and unglamorous, is the real jewel.

Da-bin Jung as Jung-eun makes us believe that spirit, personality, hard work, and belief in oneself can make up for almost any other deficit. Though she is treated as some kind of skivvy by most people she meets, the few people who matter recognize her finer qualities. The slim, childlike actress, costumed in what appears to be secondhand clothes and

coiffed to look woebegone, brings brightness and charm to her character. She has an endless repertoire of odd and funny facial expressions, from shy embarrassment to righteous indignation to shock and dismay at her own social and professional gaffes.

She deserves recognition for being able to pull off simultaneous pathos and humor, for example, while she disconsolately stuffs down off-brand Spam, straight out of the can, forcing herself to eat breakfast after one of Kyung-min's many departures.

Together they make an entertaining duo. Although he tells himself he doesn't-care-for-her, Kyung-min still keeps coming back to Jung-eun, hovering around her like a giant moon around a tiny planet, trying to make her laugh and to get into her good graces. She, outwardly grudging but obviously happy inside, puts up with him and (just barely) his frequent misbehavior. But, as she says when he has ruined her birthday to run off to Hye-run's party, "She doesn't even like you! Why do you follow her around like a sick puppy?"

Why, indeed. There is little to enjoy in the character of Hye-run, played by Jeung-yun Choi, but one must admit that the actress does a creditable job with the part. It cannot be very difficult to play a spoiled, pretty, wealthy girl who uses men, but she manages also to bring out her character's vulnerability when Dong-joon spurns her advances.

It is Hyun-woo Lee as Dong-joon who is the weak point in the cast. As he does in his recent role in the KBS series "Wedding," Lee plays the part as stiff, poker-faced, and cold; it is hard to tell how much of this is intentional. Occasionally he does break into a genuine smile at something Jung-eun has said or done, but by and large he is hard to like. In fact, it is only in his relationship with his employee and eventual protégé, Jung-eun, that anything like a three-dimensional character emerges.

The rest of the cast, including Kyung-min's grandparents and Jung-eun's family, is filled with

familiar faces from previous dramas and films. Spotting these actors and actresses is part of the fun of watching dramas from Korea. On the other hand, the drawn-out nature of many multi-episode dramas like this one is not so much fun. *Rooftop Room Cat* is too long by two to four episodes.

Once the setup is in place and the characters are established—which occurs by about the third episode—there is too much repetition, with minor variation, of the same situations: Kyung-min and Jung-eun fight and he moves out; Kyung-min moves back in and they reestablish their tenuous

ménage; Jung-eun unwittingly charms and impresses her boss, Dong-joon, incurring the jealousy of Kyung-min, who then acts out childishly; Kyung-min ignores his feelings for Jung-eun and continues to pursue Hye-run, hurting Jung-eun's feelings yet again.

This is not to say that there is no plot or character development, but it simply takes too long for things to happen. Sweetening the pot, however, is the soundtrack, which is filled with catchy tunes, including a funny rap/rock hybrid reminiscent of a Korean Pat Benatar song. The resolution of the drama

is a bit satisfying and a bit annoying, but overall the viewer is left with some pleasant memories of two charismatic characters and their life in a little rooftop room. ●

Rooftop Room Cat, 16 episodes (eight DVDs) is available from www.yesasia.com