

Star-studded traditional drama

Stairway to Heaven becomes a hit by recycling same old themes

2003 could be said to have been a pretty fulfilling year for Korean dramas. From *All In* to *Mermaid Lady*, *Yellow Handkerchief* to *Damo*, these dramas have garnered a pretty faithful following when played on TV. To top off that moving year of titillating Korean dramas, SBS broadcast *Stairway to Heaven*, starring current heart-throb Sang-woo Kwon and entrancing actress Ji-woo Choi.

This show was a big hit, considering that it could absorb a viewership of anything from 25 to 45 percent. Of course, one of the main reasons could be its star-studded cast, including Sang-woo Kwon, who returned to the screen after his major movie hit *My Tutor Friend*. Fans can't seem to get enough of him. The drama also stars Ji-woo Choi, the awe-aspiring actress from *Winter Sonata*, who had not been in any productions since then, except a Hong Kong-Korea production, *101 Proposals*. Another of its lead actors, Hyun-joon Shin had also been missing from drama productions since 1999. With a cast like that, it's no wonder that it was one of the most anticipated dramas of 2003, even in its pre-production stage.

Alas, this drama is not exactly captivating or exciting. The storyline is a bit too cliché. Most of the plot seems to have been copied from other dramas such as *Autumn Fairy Tale* and *Winter Sonata*. Certain parts of it also parallel the storyline



Stairway to Heaven

of *Beautiful Days*, which might be due to the fact that the director of this drama, Jang Soo Lee, was the director of *Beautiful Days*.

Like any other melodrama, this story opens with two childhood friends: Song Joo Cha (Sang-woo Kwon) and Jung Suh Han (Ji-woo Choi). However, when Jung Suh's father remarries, her new stepmoth-

er Mira Tae, brings her two children along, Tae Hwa Han and Yuri Han (Tae-hee Kim). An introvert, Tae Hwa (Hyun-joon Shin) is touched by Jung Suh's kindness towards him and gradually falls in love with her. On the other hand, Jung Suh and Song Joo have an inseparable relationship. At the same time, Yuri also likes Song Joo. So you can see that there's a pretty

complicated relationship triangle, or rather, rectangle here.

The show then fast-forwards years later, when the children have all grown up. However, due to a freak accident, Jung Suh is run over by Yuri's car, which leaves her suffering from memory loss and living with Tae Hwa under a pseudonym. Song Joo is devastated, but never forgets about Jung Suh even though the irritating Yuri tries at all times to get his attention. When the lovers finally reunite, further cruel misfortune occurs.

Like *Autumn Fairy Tale*, this story also depicts two children who grew up together and become lovers. Sang-woo Kwon is captivating as Song Joo. In fact, the media reported that Kwon shed so many tears in one of the scenes of the show that even the production crew became teary. In fact, this seems to be one of his best productions to date, having acted in pretty minor roles before this series. Ji-woo Choi is also charismatic in her role as Jung Suh Han. However, it seems like she has become so fixated in playing pathetic, damsel-in-distress roles (recall: *Beautiful Days*, *Truth*, *Winter Sonata*) that it is becoming numbing for the audience to see her in such pitiful renditions.

On the other hand, it is refreshing to see Hyun-joon Shin in dramas again. Taking a five year hiatus in drama productions to concentrate on his movie career, there have

been significant changes in his acting style. He is becoming more mature and in-depth in his character portrayal. Another actress Tae-hee Kim, who plays the evil Yuri, also failed to impress with her bad-girl impersonation. Going by the same few expressions, Kim clearly shows her weakness in portraying the inner feelings of Yuri Han, especially since the four main characters in the drama focus a lot on inner feelings. Wan Lee could be said to have brought in a breath of fresh air. Acting as the younger Tae Hwa, Wan Lee is considered one of the most prominent up-and-coming actors to look out for. In fact, he is Tae-hee Kim's brother in real life.

Stairway to Heaven is a typical Korean melodrama. Unless you are a big fan of Sang-woo Kwon or Ji-woo Choi, you would probably find this story a bit boring, since the storyline has been used in so many other high profile drama productions before. Watching the last episode, one feels not forlorn, but rather, melancholic.

Stairway to Heaven ("Cheonguk-ui gyedan"). 20 episodes. Written by Hye-kyung Park. Produced by Jang-soo Lee. Starring Sang-woo Kwon, Ji-woo Choi, Hyun-joon Shin, Tae-hee Kim, Jae-young Ha, Ji-sook Kim, Han-yong Jung. Aired on SBS in Korea from December 3, 2003 to February 5, 2004. Available on DVD with English subtitles from YA Entertainment, www.yaentertainment.com ●