

Corporate comedy

Super performance delivered in this story of an office clown | BY LORRAINE MURRAY

Super Rookie

(*Shinip Sawon*)

2005 - MBC Korea (20 episodes)

To a reviewer who is ordinarily no fan of its star, *Super Rookie* came as a pleasant surprise. The obscure charms of Jeong-hyeok Mun (also known as Eric Mun or simply Eric in his life as a star of the boy band *Shinhwa*) make good capital in this comic drama about a loser-turned-corporate hotshot. Although thousands of Korean and Japanese youth would disagree, Eric's appearance (to this reviewer) has something vaguely simian and unpalatable, even "cheesy," about it, and he has a rather dull image when he's not singing and dancing. Earlier in his acting career (for example, in *Phoenix*) it seemed he lacked the chops to overcome it. *Super Rookie* smartly takes Eric's flaws and allows him to build the comic aspects of his character, Kang Ho, upon them.

Kang Ho is a 30-year-old loser who barely managed to graduate from a low-quality university with a degree in physical education (and it took him six or seven years to do that). Since that time, he has been unable to hold down a job for any length of time. One thing going for him is his perfect physical condition (Eric's impressive physique is frequently displayed in this drama), and as the story begins, he teaches ballroom dancing to middle-aged women and fights the occasional boxing match for the prize money.

Other than that, he is a washout and an embarrassment to his family, especially to his mother, who also has an unemployed husband and another useless son, Min, to cope with. Kang Ho (who seems not to have a middle name and is referred to as "Kang Ho" even by his family) fools around, reads comic books all day, and hangs out with his best friend, Sung-tae (Jin Jung), who is also unemployed despite a first-class degree and being a hard worker who is trying to find a job. Sung-tae does earn some money as a tutor but can't catch a break. Like everyone else, he's also frustrated by Kang Ho's fumbling through life. In fact, even Kang Ho is beginning to lose patience with himself.

Their old high school friend, Bong-sam (Ji-ho Oh), has fared much better. He's just back from a year of training abroad and is ready to start work at prestigious and competitive LK Corporation as a star recruit. We know nothing about his past, so we think we understand what kind of a person he is: A very handsome, privileged, and ambitious professional on the fast track to the top. His first order of business is to break up with his longtime girlfriend, Mi-ok (Ga-in Han), who's been anticipating his return joyfully. Instead, he now wants the sophisticated Hyun-ah Sun, who is currently working as a secretary at LK Corporation, although she is the chairman's daughter.

Through some highly improbable strokes of luck, Kang Ho becomes a trainee at LK as well — and, to boot, the number-one trainee, the "Super Rookie" who got a perfect score on the entrance exam. One could say without fear of contradiction that, given how selective the competition is between applicants, and how unbelievably unqualified Kang Ho is to work there, this would never happen in real life. But the drama gets around this by having the corporate officers who know about his background acknowledge that the computer system on which they've staked their reputations has made a mistake, and they try to hide it for as long as possible.

The situation allows Eric to try his wings as a comic actor, and he acquits himself well. Kang Ho tries his best to appear polished and professional, but he doesn't have any business background and must rely on his energy and creativity. As a person who has no experience in anything except bumbling, he has to work hard to adapt to the pressure-cooker environment at work. Even though it would be easier for him to quit, he's motivated to try because of newfound respect from his family and his own wish to finally make something of himself.

In some respects the business environment is handled realistically enough — many people grow suspicious of this "Super Rookie"



Super Rookie now available from YA Entertainment (www.yaentertainment.com)

as his legend grows, and Kang Ho just barely keeps it together — but with powerful people covering for him, and with his making the occasional lucky strike, it all manages to work for a time.

This infuriates Bong-sam, who expected to be the company's golden boy, and it puts Kang Ho squarely in his gunsights. At first it's easy to hate Bong-sam for his arrogance and sense of entitlement, and his vendetta against his sad-sack old schoolmate seems irrational. When flashbacks show Bong-sam and Mi-ok's earlier relationship, it can be seen how much he has changed; formerly a kind and loving but poor student who adored Mi-ok, he now jettisons her because she no longer fits his lifestyle. He breaks up with her on the banks of the Han River in the pouring rain, then drives off and leaves her there.

It's hard to understand how someone could change so completely during a year's absence. But character development is one of *Super Rookie's* strengths, and

when more is revealed about where Bong-sam came from and how he got to where he is now, a grudging sympathy for him becomes possible. Ji-ho Oh, most recently seen in the 2008 KBS drama *Single Papa in Love*, is proving to be a fine actor, especially in roles like this one that allow him to play against his heroic good looks. As Bong-sam, he makes it believable that a fine specimen such as himself could at heart be plagued by feelings of insecurity, and he even pulls off a scene or two in which he comes off as a goofball and, deep down, a bit of a loser himself.

Not much can be said about the two female leads. One (Mi-ok) is a good girl, one (Hyun-ah) is a bad girl, and though the two actresses do a creditable job, their characters play out much as expected. Among the second-tier cast, Jin Jung as Sung-tae brings shadings of realism, to the depression and hopelessness that result when no lucky break is on the horizon as it was for his friend Kang Ho.

The real standout supporting actor is Dong-won Seoh as Kang Ho's younger brother, Min, but for no reason that's easily explained. His character is just plain weird and creepy in a way that at first is distracting but over time becomes a lot of fun to watch. Min is almost completely silent, looking out balefully from under a greasy forelock of long hair which he's constantly patting into place — an incongruous and unsettling touch of vanity. With his constant study for an academic examination, he might be taken for some kind of unheralded genius but for the fact that he can't seem to retain, let alone comprehend, even the simple facts he repeats endlessly to himself. As his brother's fortunes rise and their parents lavish all their attention on him, Min's silence seems to take on a malevolent quality: Is he going to blow up and go postal? No, in fact, he's the same Min he's always been, just hanging around in the background and bringing a frisson of inscrutable oddness that somehow seems right.

There are plenty of laughs in *Super Rookie*, some of them a bit crude but most of them character-based. Much of the humor is to the credit of Eric, who shows a modest gift for physical comedy as well as being able to mine the comic possibilities of a character who is thrown, sink or swim, into a shark pit. The drama, however, suffers from its rather lazy portrayal of LK Corporation, which at first is given a big buildup as an elite, ultra-professional, world-class operation. When the work life of the characters becomes the focus, however, LK devolves from its first impression into the usual den of petty jealousies, routine incompetence, love triangles, and suck-ups that populate the world of Korean television dramas.

Although *Super Rookie* is a fantasy, the plot hinges on whether Kang Ho will be able to make it within LK's competitive milieu, and better care should have been taken to show the corporate world more realistically. Even so, there is a lot here to like. *Super Rookie* provides humor, escape, and the occasional touch of sadness to keep the viewer's interest. ●