

# Not five stars

Hotelier satisfies the slavish addicts of K-drama | BY AMBER DORKO STOPPER

## Hotelier

MBC drama, 2001  
20 episodes

(available from YA Entertainment  
www.yaentertainment.com)

I took my time getting onto the K-drama bandwagon. When I did, it was my desire for Korean language immersion that eventually drove my husband to program our DVR to record a few shows daily from AZN network and from a local PBS station. Our Korean teacher had warned us against historical dramas due to the outdated dialects, and so we cut our teeth — at first with bemusement, and then with slavish addiction — on contemporary family dramas like *The Bizarre Bunch*, *Here Comes Ajumma*, and *Likeable or Not* (which airs in some states by the title *I Hate You, But It's Okay*).

I love how similar these shows are, often sharing actors, sets, and furniture (the overstuffed, curvy-armed armchair — often in purple or mauve — seems to be the staple of the modern Korean household). I love the way that almost every character has a musical cell phone ring tone as a leitmotif. I like the break from the childishly oversexed nature of American television; I crunched the numbers, and in over 100 hours of K-drama viewing, I had seen two kisses. In both cases, my jaw dropped at the unexpected, and passionate, nature of them. In one instance, I even cried.

But, while a lot of K-dramas are similar to one another, others are not. Serial dramas are sometimes presented in 20 or so one-hour episodes, rather than the 150-plus half-hour vignettes that accrue over a year or more with my preferred daily dramas. These lengthy “miniseries” are often grittier than the daily dramas — or are supposed to be so — portraying full-contact kisses, cigarette smoking, and various states of deshabille. These “grittier,” more “serious” K-dramas do themselves the disservice of erasing the suspension of disbelief that the daily half-hour dramas allow. At the ends of my daily dramas, the theme music revs up, about as serious as roller rink music, to remind us that this is, all, really, rollicking and ridiculous. The “grittier” dramas seem

all the more self-important and, therefore, easier to poke fun at. 2001’s *Hotelier* is no exception.

I’ll admit that it at least started out strong for me, with Goodfellas-esque running shots of behind-the-scenes food service prep in the large and swank Seoul Hotel. There were frantic and well-choreographed sequences of dining tables being set in banquet halls, and two amusing, gossipy cleaning-service women who serve as the series’ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. I hoped, early on, for a modern Korean *Upstairs, Downstairs*. But “plot” soon gums up the works; the same overlapping power-and-love triangles that are the basis for many a good (and crappy) drama, the world over.

When Tae Jun Han (actor Seong Woo Kim) is fired from Seoul hotel after a racy it’s-not-what-you-think run-in with a female guest, he flees to Las Vegas and ends up washing dishes in an Outback Steakhouse. Manager Jin Young Seo (actress Yun Ah Song), his former Seoul Hotel flame, is sent to find him and bring him back. In Vegas, Tae Jun lives in a tar-roofed shanty, with a mysterious character named Jenny, a wayward Korean girl dropped into his lap apparently by his now-deceased high school teacher-slash-pastor. Jenny is trouble, a battered, smoking, drinking, crimp-haired hellion (I must note, as I have in the past, that when a woman is “bad” in Korean dramas, she often has crimped hair), in continual trouble with gang-bangers and shady types. When it is decided that Tae Jun will return to Korea with Jin Young, to save the Seoul Hotel, Jenny is in tow; we see her on the airplane, suddenly barely recognizable with shoulder-length, smooth hair, a bright, unbruised and unblemished face, making the claim that even though she has brushed her teeth, she can still smell the “drugs and tobacco” on herself. What seamless reform, all brought on by mere transit to Korea!

Tae Jun is made General Manager



of the hotel, to the great envy of the scheming Manager Oh (Joon Ho Hu), whose character and performance are among the best in the series. Jin Young and Tae Jun still have feelings for one another, but interference is now being run by the ostensibly nefarious Dong Hyuk “Frank” Shin, played by the popular Young Jun Bae. Shin is a mergers and acquisitions specialist who calls to mind a “How I Won The War”-era John Lennon — not just in his little rimless glasses, but in his general druggedness. His performance is outshined by that of his own hyperthyroidal henchman, the unsavory Leonardo Park, who along with his “boss” is out to bag the Seoul Hotel in a hostile takeover.

The English dialogue between these characters — which I assume was an attempt to make them seem cosmopolitan and gangsterish — is appallingly bad. Shin is a supposedly a Harvard graduate, and yet he and Leo speak English like schoolchildren reciting the Pledge of Allegiance or the Lord’s Prayer, going by a stream of phonemes alone, unaware where words begin and end. And when it comes to the portrayal of native English speakers — incarcerated Vegas mob bosses and the like — the casting directors of *Hotelier* have accomplished a feat just in finding people with what I call negative acting ability — not just none, less than none — to fulfill these roles. These aren’t the only reasons that the production crew of *Hotelier* could have used a few more English-speakers; a rap song in an early nightclub scene obviously made it into the series only by

passing through censors who could not possibly have understood its lyrics.

The translation and subtitling for *Hotelier* are quite poor; verb-tenses and gender-appropriate pronouns are wrong more often than they are right. But at least whoever was behind the subtitling was creative: Dong Hyuk Shin confesses to Jin Young that, when living in Manhattan, he regularly attended a church he calls “Santifiltelic” (I laughed out loud, but did at least run to Google it at the same time — and can find no record of the “Santifiltelic” church in New York). When some *kimchi jigae* is presented for a meal, the character clearly says “*kimchi jigae*,” but the subtitles refer to the dish as “Kraut Steamboat.”

In an emotion-muffling moment, the chairman of the hotel finds she is dying of lung cancer (she is far from the series’ only cigarette smoker, but she is the only female cigarette smoker, and seems to be punished accordingly) she confides in Tae Jun, as a dying mother who wishes her young adult son to avoid remembering her in her wasting state. “If he sees my look now, he’ll absolutely be bummed,” is the unfortunate translation.

*Hotelier* keeps pace, though, with the comforting, familiar features that make up the mandala of any good K-drama — or, as a Korean acquaintance of mine puts it when speaking of Korean dramas, “the same shit for the last 30 years.” There is the requisite “man falling deeper in love with woman when he sees her eating a meal messily

and with real appetite” scene. There is the “two men standing in the rain when one of them sees the other has their shared object of affection under his umbrella/jacket, causing great envy of the heart” scene. Other not-particularly-original scenarios are trotted out episode by episode: A child has gone missing in the hotel! Some jewelry has gone missing in the hotel! A wild party of young people has slipped date rape drugs into the cocktails of their female guests... in the hotel!

And, as is often the case in Korean dramas, adoption rears its monster head. In a small noodle shop, a shell-shocked “Frank” Shin shares rice wine, cigarettes, and food with a doddering old man who fails to see the difference between having sent his young son and daughter “abroad to study” and having put them up for adoption. Americans “like” to adopt, the old man says, so what was the harm?

Shin eventually makes some peace with his biological father, but makes it clear that he considers his adoption “a very serious shortcoming” and at times seems confused himself as to whether or not he was really adopted at all, speaking of his kind, Christian “foster family” in America, who raised him as their own, but also of an orphanage, and of “adopted” siblings. Like the English-speaking characters in *Hotelier*, this facet of plot is meant for Korean audiences — and moreover, Korean audiences who do not question its verity.

Shin’s status as an “adoptee” fails to explain why his English is so damned unintelligible. It also fails to demonstrate his rant about his “inability to love” — a direct result of his “abandonment” — which seems not to present itself as much of a stumbling block when he’s trying to make time with Jin-Young, a situation in which Shin is the clear and consistent aggressor. And, as the pursued, Jin-Young gives the standard K-drama heroine performance; the biggest sin would be too appear too eager, so not only does she not