

How shoes are important to life

Tomato redeems itself with great performances

Tomato

(1999)

SBS drama, 16-episodes

Review by Seongdok Kim

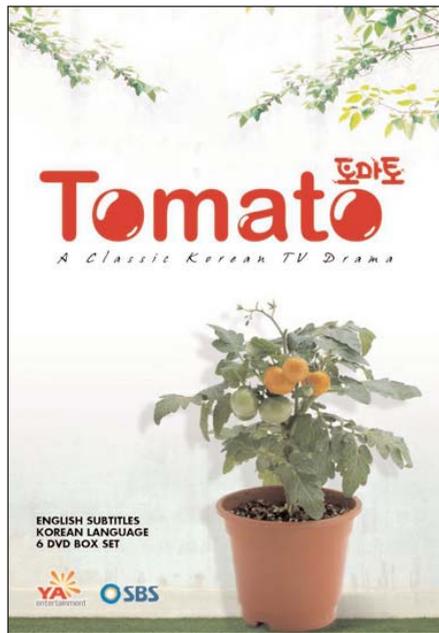
The bad luck of a junior employee who gets fired after arriving late for a store grand opening starts off the story of Hani (Hee-Sun Kim) in the drama *Tomato*. Hani, a shoe clerk at the prestigious Hae Sung Shoe Company, holds the key to the warehouse and is in charge of setting up the new arrival display.

However, on her way back from her father's hometown on Jeju Island, the bus taking her to the airport breaks down in the middle of the road, and she misses her flight back to Seoul. The CEO of Hae Sung, a Mrs. Sung (Won-Suk Park), becomes infuriated with Hani and fires her. This is a disaster for Hani whose dream is to become a shoe designer at the company.

On the same day of her fiasco, Hani runs into her high school friend, Sara (Ji-Young Kim), a shoe designer at Terra, the rival company of Hae Sung. On their way from a high school reunion, Hani and Sara find a bloodstained man, Seung-Joon Cha (Suk-Hoon Kim), collapsed on Sara's car. Hani asks for Sara's help to carry him to the hospital but Sara refuses.

Hani takes him by herself to the hospital, then realizes she left her handbag in Sara's car. She calls Sara and asks her to drop it off at the hospital. While Hani is in the nurses' lounge washing the blood off her shirt, Sara arrives. When Sara comes into Seung-Joon's ward, CEO Sung (who, we find out, is Seung-Joon's mother) comes in, and thinks Sara is the one who saved his life. Sara plays along with Sung's assumption, hiding the truth.

Misfortune does not stop for the jobless Hani. She is forced to leave her shared room, because her roommate, an aspiring singer, used their room deposit money to buy the rights to a song. By a strange coincidence (so strange, that it would only happen in a drama), Seung-Joon is the new renter of Hani's room! At that



Tomato now available from YA Entertainment.

moment, they do not recognize each other since Hani left the hospital before Seung-Joon regained consciousness. Seung-Joon lets Hani stay at his room temporarily since she has nowhere to go.

At this point, a key character; Ki-Joon (Sang-Joong Kim), the general manager of Hae Sung, is introduced. He is the cousin of Seung-Joon and Sara's faithful boyfriend. At Sara's request, he denies Hani's application, and agrees not to reveal their relationship to anyone.

CEO Sung finds Hani's design sketches by chance and hires her as a contract designer. CEO Sung realizes that Hani is talented and gives her some difficult assignments in order to train her. CEO Sung is a cool-headed and creative CEO but has a dysfunctional relationship with her son, Seung-Joon. He considers her self-centered, concerned only with her business, at the expense of his father.

Sara uses every opportunity and all her personal connections (boyfriend, friends, etc.) to abuse Hani, making Hani's work life an endless difficulty. Meanwhile, having known Seung-Joon as a lawyer and son of CEO Sung, Sara approaches him, still leading him to believe she saved his life.

Hani, innocent by nature, believes what Sara says and does not become aware of Sara's true per-

sonality until almost the end of the series. This is a particularly good example of the stereotypes in a Korean melodrama. Hani, poor and not professionally educated, develops a rival relationship with Sara, who is rich and highly educated (in Italy), but proud. Hani becomes a top designer at Hae Sung, overcoming all hardships and Sara's plots against her. Eventually, Sara's true character is revealed and Hani triumphs over Sara at the new shoe fashion show.

Tomato is one of the so called "trendy" dramas, in which the development of the story is quick and the subject matter light. The first drama in this recent "trendy" genre was *Jealousy* starring Soo-Jong Choi (who also stars in *First Love*), Hae Sin, and Dae Jo-Young and Jin-Shil Choi (starring *Star in My Heart*, *My Rosy Life*), which was sensational.

Like a typical "trendy" drama, *Tomato* casts major stars that are popular with the young generation and presents an easy-to-follow drama plot. *Tomato* was a great hit with a high (52.7 percent) program rating, making it the 18th most popular program in Korean drama history.

It is impossible to discuss this drama's success without mentioning Hee-Sun Kim. Since her debut in *Gong Ryong SunSaeng* (literally "Dinosaur Teacher") in 1993, she has dominated every drama she has appeared in. Her classic Barbie-doll-like beauty and fragile skinny body is almost fatal to Koreans (male and female). Any clothes, jewelry or hairstyle she chooses become immediately popular. She was a fashion icon during the 1990s. There has even been a saying among Korean TV drama producers, "If you cast Hee-Sun Kim, your drama will never fail."

Suk-Hoon Kim got the spotlight as a result of his rookie drama *Hong Gil Dong* (a story about a Korean historical hero in the tradition of Robin Hood) in 1998. He became a famous star in 1999

due to his role in *Tomato*. His acting skills are evident in this, despite a short career.

Ji-Young Kim became famous playing the evil Sara opposite Hee-Sun Kim. The English name "Sara" hints at a success-seeking modern female. Her luxurious costume and thick make-up suits her character well. She overacts, however, and often exaggerates her facial expressions, which does not look too scary, just unnatural.

Despite its popularity, *Tomato* is criticized as an epigone of *Mr. Q* (1998) for several reasons. First, both dramas deal with the designer's world. While *Mr. Q* is a story about underwear designers, *Tomato* is about shoe designers. Both have a similar story line, with Hee-Sun Kim in a leading role. She is poor and indomitable, conquers all barriers and achieves her love as well as her dream. Suk-Hoon Kim of *Tomato* is in a similar role as Min-Jong Kim of *Mr. Q* and they are both cool as well as warm hearted. Additionally, the Sara character of *Tomato* is similar to the character of Yoon-Ah Song in *Mr. Q*, playing a negative role. The two dramas were even produced by the same person, Ki-Hong Jang and the same writer (Hee-Myoung Lee), only a year apart.

Moreover, the main characters of *Tomato* are professional (shoe designers, lawyers, CEOs). However, the drama does not describe them in-depth; it does not get into the struggles and troubles they face in their everyday lives. Rather, the drama builds conflicts by complicating personal and love relationships within the plot.

In the area of logic, the plot also suffers a few mishaps. For example, there is little justification of how Hani, who apparently draws only thumb-nail sketches, can be viewed as superior to Sara, a formally-trained professional. Not that a higher degree in shoe design would necessarily prove superiority over a lower degree, but the writer could have at least thrown the audience a few explanations from time to time, or maybe a couple of additional transitions to

describe the plot developments.

Despite all its problems, superior performances in supporting roles makes this drama less flawed. Won-Suk Park, who plays CEO Sung deserves special recognition in her supporting role. It is laugh-out-loud funny to observe the quarrels between CEO Sung and CEO Na (Jah-Ok Kim). CEO Sung, with her hot temper, always loses arguments to CEO Na, the calmer and more cynical of the two.

The character of CEO Sung gets more viewer affection because she is extremely funny and appeals to a wider audience. Won-Suk's character in *Tomato* is a huge transformation from her other work. She played the world's meanest mother-in-law in *My Sweetheart*, *My Darling*, and a vain, greedy, and shallow fashion designer in *Star in My Heart*.

Another fine performance is delivered by Jah-Ok Kim as CEO Na. She knows how to make fun of CEO Sung and is gracefully mean, which grinds on CEO Sung's nerves. She is always a forgivable character. Her character is reminiscent of Sam-Soon's mother in *My Lovely Sam Soon*.

Why is the drama entitled *Tomato*? Is it simply because main characters talk about this topic? Maybe not. The reference to "tomato" seems to represent Hani's transparent mind. Let me quote her lines. "I like tomatoes. You can tell how the inside is by looking at them from the outside. If it looks green, it's unripe inside too. If it's red on the outside, it's ripe on the inside, too". Maybe Hani wants to believe in people and see things at face value.

Tomato will interest those who like Korean classical love stories and favor nostalgia romance. Hae-Sun Kim, one of the most popular actresses of Korean drama, and Suk-Hoon Kim, a fresh good-looking actor, are both sources of excitement. Incredible performances by supporting actors such as Won-Suk Park, Jah-Ok Kim make this drama well worth watching. ●