

"Business Proposal" Explores the Love Contract Trope

But it could've done a better job dealing with consent



K-CULTURE WITH JAE-HA KIM

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Everyone is thirsting over Ahn Hyo-seop's *voice*. Ahn was the vocal actor for Jinu in Netflix's hit film *KPop Demon Hunters*. And yes, he is even better looking than the animated character he portrays.

Previously, he's been in some really great K-dramas, including one of my favorites, "*A Time Called You*." But one of his most popular shows is "Business Proposal," where he portrays a handsome chaebol heir whose grandfather wants him to get married. *How (not) unique, right?*

Still, it's a fun series that made him a big star.



From left: Kim Min-kyu, Seol In-ah, Kim Se-jeong, Ahn Hyo-seop

☆☆½ (out of ☆☆☆☆)

Kang Tae-moo (played by Ahn Hyo-seop)

Shin Ha-ri (played by Kim Se-jeong)

Cha Sung-hoon (played by Kim Min-kyu)

Jin Young-seo (played by Seol In-ah)

↑*Note: Korean names denote the surname followed by the given name.*

“Business Proposal” (사내 맞선) relies on the love contract trope, where a man hires a woman to be his *pretend* girlfriend. In these shows, almost all of the men are drop-dead gorgeous and would have no problem finding a real-life partner. But real relationships also come with real problems that these men don’t want to deal with.

In the case of Tae-moo, he is the heir to his grandfather’s packaged-food dynasty. Orphaned after his parents died in a car crash, Tae-moo was raised by his grandfather (played by the puckishly charming Lee Deok-hwa), who he describes as someone who was his father, mother *and* grandfather. Chairman Kang Do-goo wants nothing more than for Tae-moo to get married and give him lots of great grandchildren to dote on.

And you know what's coming next, right? He orders Tae-moo to go on blind dates with young women whose families' wealth matches their own.

One of those women is Young-seo, an heiress who has no interest in marrying a rich scion. When her chaebol father orders her to go on a blind date with Tae-moo, she begs her best friend Ha-ri to take her place. Ha-ri has done this for her in the past and is persuaded to do so once more.

But as luck would have it, it turns out that Ha-ri is a food researcher at Chairman Kang's company, where Tae-moo is the CEO.

As always happens with these kinds of rom coms, the two dislike each other on sight, before eventually falling in love. And no, that's not a spoiler, because what else do you think would happen in this series?

There is a second male lead in the form of Ha-ri's chef friend, who has been in an on-again off-again relationship with a woman for the past seven years. Of course, when he sees that Tae-moo is interested in Ha-ri, he then becomes jealous of their relationship ... even though he never pursued Ha-ri.

And, there is a delightful second lead couple who I was rooting for more than the main couple, to be honest. Young-seo and Tae-moo's assistant (and childhood friend) Sung-hoon *meet cute* at a convenience store, end up being next door neighbors and advance into a sexual relationship much quicker than the main characters.

And not that this is a competition, but when Tae-moo and Ha-ri finally do go to bed together in the penultimate episode, it was filmed in such an stilted way that I could almost hear the director saying, "OK, *lift her up. Now kiss her. Turn your head to the right side.*" Their love scene was awkwardly lacking, especially compared to Sung-hoon and Young-seo, whose scene was shorter but held much more impact. (Though there is a problematic aspect. More on this in the Spoiler Alert below...)

And finally, I appreciated that one of the subplots addressed the issues of *molka* — the illegal filming of women without their consent.

Airdates: Twelve hour-long episodes aired on SBS from February 28 to April 5, 2022.



Spoiler Alert: When I originally watched this series, I was inclined to rate this show 3 out of 4 stars. But I lowered the score a bit. And the following scene is what bothered me even the most.

Hints are given early on that Tae-moo has an aversion to rain. This led me to correctly believe that his parents died when it was raining.

In Episode 6, the aftermath of their death is explored more. He is driving back to Seoul with Ha-ri. When it begins to storm, he freaks the fuck out and (*get this*) orders her to get out of the car and find her way back home. I get that he has unresolved trauma issues, which surely would have benefited from years of intensive therapy. But this is not the way a man should treat the woman he cares for — or *anyone* he was giving a ride to, actually — at night, on a desolate road, during a storm. He dumps her off at a bus stop at least. But honestly, that was some sociopath behavior that was eventually forgiven because (1) she felt sorry for him and (2) he's heart-stoppingly good-looking.

For all of Tae-moo's flaws throughout this K-drama, it was this scene that made me think he wasn't ready to be in a serious relationship. He needed to work through his own issues first, before committing to Ha-ri.

As for Young-seo and Sung-hoon, she severs herself from her rich father's grip when he orders her to break up with her boyfriend. She resigns from his company and launches her own business, with \$1.5 million seed money that Sung-hoon gives her. *Say what?* How does a 20something secretary have that much money? Sung-hoon grew up at an orphanage until he was in middle school. At that point, Tae-moo's grandfather took him into their home and raised him. (There's no mention of adoption. Had he been adopted, it's likely he would've had a higher position at work, rather than as Tae-moo's assistant, who uses honorifics in his presence.) The money was a gift from the chairman, as well as his shares in the family business.

The gift, which he described as his investment in her, was incredibly generous. However, I would never advise any real-life couples to do this (unless you can afford to lose that kind of money with no repercussions).

Circling back to Sung-hoon and Young-seo's first sexual encounter, there is a problematic aspect that I thought would be addressed as a misunderstanding. The next day, Young-seo doesn't remember if they had sex or not. She was very drunk and therefore couldn't legally consent to having sex — even if she was completely into it on the night of. I was sure that the writers would use the *you-thought-we-slept-together-but-we-really-didn't* trope. I was really surprised that a man as conscientious and kind as Sung-hoon did indeed sleep with her when it was obvious she had too much to drink (which he was well aware of since he was there).

For a series that touched on the seriousness of issues like *molka*, the showrunners could've made a point of how important consent is, especially when liquor is involved.



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