

## Take Care of My Cat (Goyangireul buiakhae) - 2001

Starring: Lee Yu-won, Bae Doo-na, Ok Ji-yeong, Lee Eun-sil, Lee Eun-ju

Director: Jeong Jae-eun

Availability: Korean-import DVD (multi-region)

Rating:



Take Care of My Cat DVD box art (image courtesy of Warner Bros.)

Hae-ju (Lee Yu-won), Tae-hee (Bae Doo-na), Ji-yeong (Ok Ji-yeong), and Chinese twin sisters Bi-Ryu (Lee Eun-sil) and On-jo (Lee Eun-ju). Unfortunately, their elation and vows to always remain friends eventually give way as they awaken to the harsh reality of their post-high school lives.

When we catch up with these young women some time later, their lives are beginning to diverge onto different paths, and their differing personalities come to the surface. The vain and ambitious Hae-ju has landed herself an entry-level position at an upscale brokerage, and her growing arrogance quickly becomes a

Virtually ignored when it was released in South Korea at the tail end of 2001 but revived by a legion of dedicated fans, "Take Care of My Cat" is a well-written and smartly directed feature film debut for Jeong Jae-eun. Though at first glance the film appears to be a 'chick flick' version of Kwak Kyung-taek's gangland saga "Friend", as it details how the relationships of five female friends evolve after graduating from high school, "Take Care of My Cat" ends up being a carefully orchestrated character study that illuminates the insecurities and challenges of South Korea's marginalized youth.

The film's opening scene has five young women taking a picture to commemorate their graduation from high school:

source of conflict with the other girls, particularly when she decides to leave their working class hometown of Inchon for the bright lights of Seoul. In contrast, the shy but artistically gifted Ji-yeong is at the other end of the economic strata, drifting from one low-paying job to the next while sharing a crumbling hovel with her impoverished grandparents. In-between is the rebellious yet considerate Tae-hee, whose strong ties with both Hae-ju and Ji-yeong often relegate her to the role of peacekeeper. She also has dreams of her own, as she longs to become a sailor, though her rigid patriarchal family life limits her choices. Finally, twins Bi-ryu and On-jo, who lighten the heavy atmosphere with some comic relief, operate a stall in Inchon's Chinatown selling their homemade fashion accessories.

The film's title stems from a stray cat that Ji-yeong picks up and names 'Titi'. As the story unfolds and the dynamics of the relationships between the characters change, it is revealed that the cat becomes a symbol for these five women who, because they never had the opportunity to go to college, are looked down upon (one character muses that most people love dogs, but some hate cats). However, as the cat is passed between these girls for various reasons, the act of giving Titi to one another becomes a symbol of their friendship, and each character's reaction to the responsibility is rather revealing.

The bulk of the film, except for the last act, has very little plot to speak of, as it essentially details the interactions between these five friends. Though this may sound uninteresting and pointless, writer-director Jeong actually does a superb job of fleshing each of the five main characters, particularly their insecurities, and distilling compelling drama from the everyday. Most of the tension comes from the escalating animosity between Hae-ju and Ji-yeong, with the former's insensitivity and the latter's pride being the catalysts. For example, when Ji-yeong confides that she wishes to study art abroad, Hae-ju shoots the idea down by telling her that studying requires money-- something she clearly doesn't have. Another memorable scene has Hae-ju inviting the rest of the gang to go shopping, a situation that creates some visible discomfort for Ji-yeong.



**Ok Ji-yeong, Lee Eun-sil, Lee Yu-won, Bae Doo-na, and Lee Eun-ju** (image courtesy of Warner Bros.)

Jeong also injects plenty of great character moments into the film. One telltale scene reveals that Ji-yeong is not immune from the influence of Hae-ju's lifestyle aspirations, as she ends up living beyond her means when she plunks down her

meager earnings for a sleek new cell phone, buying a brief respite from the dreariness of her everyday life. And despite her arrogance, Hae-ju is wrestling with a few demons of her own, constantly concerned about her looks (even to the point of spending thousands on laser eye surgery and contemplating plastic surgery in the future) and the limitations to her career path, given that she does not have a university degree. Another scene has Tae-hee lashing out at her father in a Western restaurant after he decides that everyone will eat the restaurant's most popular dish, rather than conceding that he cannot read the menu. These character studies are ably backed up by strong performances from the cast, particularly by Bae, Ok, and Lee as the core triumvirate.

Another refreshing aspect of "Take Care of My Cat" is how Jeong grounds his film in reality. The film's setting is the port city of Incheon, which is a sharp contrast to the typically cosmopolitan settings of other youth-oriented Korean films ("My Sassy Girl" or "A.F.R.I.K.A." for example). Like the lives of its characters, the settings used in "Take Care of My Cat" are cold, bleak, and firmly rooted in the lives of the working class. And instead of spending their days wondering if a certain boy likes them or what to wear to an upcoming party, the issues that the characters must deal with are far more mundane but far more gripping and universal, such as trying to find a job, coping with being glossed over for advancement at work, trying to get a belligerent landlord to fix a hole in the roof, and dealing with death in the family.

Finally, production-wise, "Take Care of My Cat" is very slick, with a particularly noteworthy aspect being the use of on-screen text to highlight the text messages that the girls send to one another over their cell phones. Jeong also makes good use of contemporary beats in the film's soundtrack.

"Take Care of My Cat" is an unforgettable character study cum coming-of-age story that resonates from start to finish, thanks to a strong script, excellent performances, and purposeful direction. And as a result of overwhelming critical and fan support, "Take Care of My Cat" has recently enjoyed a special edition multi-region DVD release-- though the case does specify 'Region 3', it will work on all players. Hopefully, this new lease on life will allow an even wider audience the opportunity to appreciate such an uncommon film.