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# Reviews

## KING AND THE CLOWN

**In Cinemas 22 June 2006**  
**Language(s):** Korean (with English & Mandarin Subtitles)  
**Genre:** Comedy, Drama  
**Duration:** 119mins  
**Rating:** NC16 (Some sexual references)  
**Starring:** Lee Joon-ki, Kam Woo-sung, Jung Jin-young, Kang Sung-yeons  
**Director:** Lee Joon-ik



During the Chosun Dynasty, Jang-seng (Kam Woo-sung) and Gong-gil (Lee Joon-ki), a talented pair of clown act, versatile in acrobatics, tight-rope and puppetry, street busk a meagre living. Gong-gil, with bewitching androgynous look, perfectly suited to portray female roles, and Jang-sen, manly and rugged, the actor complementing him.

After a violent tiff with their agent they fled to Seoul where after they teamed up with a trio of buskers, their audacious act of lampooning King Yong-san (Jung Jin-young) and his lady Nok-soo (Kang Sung-yeons) became a big crowd pleaser. The King's aides soon learnt of this mockery and sentenced the troupe to death. The unyielding Jang-seng however pleaded with his captors to allow the offending performance to be staged for the King himself, that should he enjoyed the show, their lives would be spared.



King Yong-san did laugh, and so he ordered the whole troupe into the palace to continue entertaining him regularly. Especially Gong-gil, who performed finger puppet theatre in the private chambers of Yong-san nightly; the King's fancy grown affectionately. However, Jang-seng became increasing pensive at this triangular development, and Lady Nok-soo scorned and abandoned by the King for a younger man, attempted to murder Gong-gil. And the entire ministerial cabinet, whose relationship with the King has soured, plotted to overthrow the increasingly mad and unscrupulous ruler.



King and the Clown started off light and comic, especially when Jang-seng and Gong-gil poked fun at the royal court. However, all 3 male characters seemed to have lost their voice to express themselves - Gong-gil was generally quiet off-stage and used finger puppets to express his thoughts aloud. The inscrutable King resorted to shadow puppet to enact a deeply bitter moment between him and his father. Even the outspoken Jang-seng was unusually reserved when his beloved Gong-gil was sent away to the King's side.



The clown's real world was poor and downtrodden, but somehow their uncanny showmanship and chemistry created uplifting magic on stage. The King who reigned supreme, but was thumbed by imperial politics and the very ministers who vowed to serve him, started joining the duo on stage to clown about. All 3 could only find freedom for their bottled up troubles through exonerating themselves on stage. However when art imitated life too closely and reflected much hypocrisy, corruption and deceit in the palace, their stage soon turned deadly and bloody.

This small budget movie has been extremely successful in Korea where it sold 12 million tickets (Korea's population is 47 million), this in spite of its subtle gay theme. Many have compared it to Ang Lee's "Brokeback Mountain" (2005), but the movie that came to my mind was Chen Kaige's "Farewell To My Concubine" (1993), where pretty male actors destined to play female roles their entire lives have blurred gender and sexuality in the real world. But while Director Lee Joon-ik's effort would have benefited from tighter editing and even pacing, he has managed to create 3 likeable characters that represented what it's like to lose everything, live life precariously high up on a tightrope and yet have that top of the world feeling. And as the old saying goes, everybody loves the clowns.

**Rating: 3 out of 5 Admission Tickets**



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