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King And The Clown

by Nicholas Sim, NUS

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RELEASE DATE

22 June 2006

CAST

Kam Woo-sung, Kam Woo-seong, Lee Joon-ki, Lee Joon-ik

GENRE

Period Drama - Korean with English and Chinese Subtitles - NC-16, Homosexual theme

RUNNING TIME

1 hour 59 minutes

DIRECTOR

Jun-ik Lee, Lee Joon-ik

THE POPCORN BUCKET

4 kernels out of 5



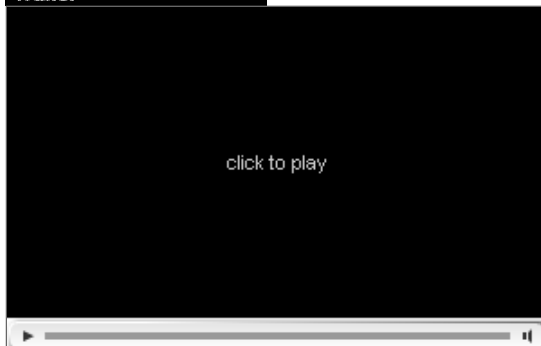
REVIEW



Set in the Cheosun Dynasty (14th Century), *King And The Clown* is a film about corruption of the human spirit, the power of friendship and the beauty of theatre.

Lee Joon-Ki is Gong-Gil, the androgynous minstrel who flees to Seoul after accidentally murdering his playwright/pimp. He is an effete, his movements demure and his speech soft as satin. Kam Woo-Seung is Jaeng Sun, Gong-Gil's best friend and protector, a wild country bumpkin who also displays intelligence and tenderness. The pair team up with a trio of fellow misfits and make a fortune satirizing the king in a series of skits. By a twist of fate, they are summoned to perform for King Yeongson (Jeong Jin-Yeong), a monarch with a savage heart and a traumatic past. The king is enthralled by the minstrels, and in his deluded mind, is unable to separate fantasy from reality. Unable to come to terms with his raging, unrequited lust for Gong-gil,

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he is driven to greater heights of cruelty and madness. The ending is poignant and tragic, yet it celebrates humanity's power to carve a fantasy out of bleakness and death.

Despite a relatively modest production budget, *King And The Clown* boasts lavish sets that evoke a sense of grandeur and other-worldliness. Think emerald-green bamboo groves, bustling city streets and exquisite imperial chambers. In a sense, *King And The Clown* uses the idea of a show within a show. Pansori, the traditional Korean opera, is widely featured. The minstrels use the stage to express how they feel about issues like corruption in the court.

The performances by the cast are of high caliber. There are layers of complexity to the characters. For most of the movie, Gong-gil is placid and subservient. He relies on small gestures- a coy smile here, a lowered head there, to show desire, shame and even greed. As King Yeongson, Jeong Jin-Yeong is a deep portrait of incipient madness. Yet there is vulnerability in his tortured soul as well. His violent and unpredictable outbursts reflect a man who is slowly being suffocated in his role as a God-king.

I marveled at the way the script balanced pregnant silences with vivid exclamations to show the conflict in each of the characters. The psychological depth of Gong-gil and Yeongson also impressed me. It would have been so easy for these characters to be turned into flat, one-dimensional stereotypes. After all, similar characters have surfaced in similar films (for instance, Farewell, my concubine).

What the film lacks is focus. *King And The Clown* attempts to tackle too many issues at once: corruption in the Cheosun court, society's need for theatre, homosexuality and the dangers of a tyrannical monarch. As a result, some of the ideas are not inadequately explored. Thankfully, the main issue of homosexuality is handled well-the sexual tension between king and clown is raw and unbridled.

King And The Clown is a must watch, especially for fans of Korean period films. It is a majestic tragedy that imbues the audience with a strong sense of hope. It is a panoramic portrayal of humanity's latent beauty and bestiality.

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