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Tears of a Clown



In the waning days of 2005, a film opened in Korea which, by all outward appearances, had little potential for box office draw – a Chosun dynasty drama featuring no bankable stars, and with a strong homoerotic subtext to boot (still held to be taboo in many parts of Korean society.) Yet somehow the film won the hearts and minds of Korean audiences, and it went on to become not only the highest grossing film of 2005, but the single most successful Korean film in history.

The unexpected success of Lee Jun-ik's *King and the Clown* (or as it will be called in America, *The Royal Jester*) is the stuff of future thesis papers. Is it an indication of a softening on homosexuality, or is it perhaps rooted in a sense of national pride fueled by the film's embracing of traditional folk culture, much like Im Kwon-taek's *Seopyeonje* (another box office smash)? Maybe it has something to do with the political subtext

– that of the lower classes standing up to tyranny – an impossibility in the many years where South Korea was under a military dictatorship. Of course, none of the above actually matters, for *King and the Clown* is first and foremost a brilliant piece of entertainment.

Based (in part) on actual events, *King and The Clown* is set during the reign of King Yonsan, a brutal tyrant who was dethroned in 1506. Jang-sang and Gong-gil are a pair of clowns (minstrels is more accurate) who earn a living by performing bawdy street plays for the lower classes. Polar opposites in every respect, there's tremendous affection between the two, though the true nature of their relationship is only hinted at. Jang-sang's macho, aggressive, outspoken demeanor is countered by Gong-gil's passive, demure, and rather effeminate poise -- it calls to mind *Farewell My Concubine*, a film *King and the Clown* definitely owes a debt to.

Forced to flee to Seoul after an unfortunate incident, the duo soon join forces with a local troupe, and it's not long before Jang-sang has the idea to perform a play that mocks the King and his favorite concubine, Nok-su. Naturally, this lands them in prison, but they are given the opportunity to perform their play for the king -- a troubled, borderline insane despot with daddy issues who surprisingly finds great joy in the clowns, and something far greater in Gong-gil.

Simply stated, *King and the Clown* is an outstanding film that far exceeded expectations. It's very conscious of what it is, and knows its limits. Unlike the more ambitious *Farewell My Concubine*, which was just as much about the history of China in the 20th century as it was its two leads, *King and the Clown* is strictly character-driven, with an almost Shakespearean dramatic structure. (There are numerous allusions to *Hamlet*.) Though unlike Shakespeare's jesters, who speak truths and satirize their lords, but are otherwise powerless, the clowns here play an active role in challenging the status quo. As mentioned above, Korean audiences might very well see this as allegorical to their own struggle against a dictatorship that ended only in 1992.

Not since Im Kwon-taek has another Korean director devoted so much attention to folk art and customs, and this sense of nationalistic pride, combined with the overall anti-establishment and pro-freedom tone of the film, might explain why audiences were willing to accept the (implied) homosexual aspects of the film. Like *Brokeback Mountain* in the States, *King and the Clown* was often referred to as 'taboo breaking', though Lee Jun-ik's film is far more chaste than Ang Lee's cowboy romance. While it is news that a film with a gay romance became such a smash hit, it's not exactly revolutionary.

Though only his third feature, Lee Jun-ik's direction is assured but economical – never flash, and with tremendous attention paid to details. The performances are solid, particularly Kam Woo-seong (*Spider Forest*) as Jang-sang, who at times approaches Choi Min-shik levels of pathos. The third act unspools as classic tragedy, and includes a final scene that, while perhaps a bit manipulative, is unquestionably a *frisson* inducing moment.

Not quite a masterpiece, *King and the Clown* is still one of the most enthralling Korean films in recent years, and borderline perfect in many regards. And though it's deeply rooted in Korean history and culture, there is a remarkable sense of universal appeal. The international release contains some additional background information on the Chosun dynasty, and renowned Korean philosopher [Kim Yong-ok](#) volunteered to translate the film in order to bring out the "finer points of Korean culture." His resulting text beautifully blends the vulgar vernacular of the clowns with genuine Shakespearean English. If you've never seen a contemporary Korean film, *King and the Clown* is a perfect place to begin.

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can't wait to see it... i think the title directly translated from the korean is "the king's man" which seems even more appropriate given the story, so strange they don't use it. same with 3-iron, instead of Empty House.

Kam Woo-seong also has a leading role in a very popular tv drama (name slips my mind), married couple seperates but stays friends while secretly longing for each other... something like that :)

Posted by: [blese](#) | Jun 24, 2006 11:15:51 AM

Can't forget Lee Jun Ki's supporting role in the popular TV drama My Girl. Thankfully that role was a bit more masculine for him. :-)

I'm still on the fence about Hwangui Namja. Even though I like films with "metro/bi sexual" motifs (am I the only person who liked Alexander?), I usually don't enjoy movies (Korean or otherwise) unless they have a strong visual sense to them. In fact, after getting used to watching so many hyper-stylized Korean films over the past year, I have a feeling The King's Man will come off too plain for my tastes.

Posted by: [John Pitts](#) | Jun 25, 2006 2:33:50 AM

Hi, I'm a great fan of "King and the Clown". I like your review. If you are interested in the movie and its original play, take a look at this. http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=547ECD67B05C1FBE

Posted by: [Mirager](#) | Jun 25, 2006 5:39:11 AM

Glad to see you liked it. Something that's been bugging me now for a while - I've actually come across the "what's the big deal?" reaction quite often, and after a lot of arguing and talking find such people totally unmoved. It's a bit beyond the normal divergence of opinion any movie generates. I guess there's something about this movie that some people 'feel' and some people just don't - and I feel the discrepancy to such a degree that by now I'm a bit mystified. As a pretty extreme example, a poster over on koreanfilm.org said it would have been better to take out the clowns altogether and go with a conventional biopic on YunSan. I just feel the utter futility of any response to this kind of comment.

Anyway, since you liked this film and I assume you'll be recommending it to people you know, I'd be interested to hear if you eventually come up against similarly polar reactions, and what your take is on the reasons.

Posted by: [leefr](#) | Jun 25, 2006 12:46:23 PM

I wonder which version you saw? The International version (that was included in the Limited Box set released few days ago) has ten extra minutes. I found them completed the film in a much more satisfactory way. It consisted mostly of establishing/long shots of the environment, giving the film a wider scope and smoother transitions. It elaborates more on the struggles among the ministers. It also include a few scenes that would enlighten the relationship between Jang-sang and Gong-gil (which must be the sensitive parts that the director mentioned he cut in fear of 'offending' people or whatever), and a nice touch of the fatality aspect between the three men. The English translations are interesting like you said, though I did notice a few misses, including a crucial one at the ending part.

Posted by: [Eunder](#) | Jun 27, 2006 9:51:34 PM

Mirager - thanks for those links. Some great stuff up there.

Leefr - I certainly have recommended it to people, but as of yet don't know anybody who has seen it. Reading reviews and comments elsewhere on the web, I agree with your assessment about individual reaction. It seems to be a love it or hate it kind of film.

Eunder - I have not yet seen the extended cut, but I'm looking forward to it.

Posted by: [Filmbrain](#) | Jun 28, 2006 11:52:31 AM

I need to see The King and the Clown again -- one viewing wasn't enough to clear away the preconceptions I'd brought from reading about it -- but I do have a few comments. One is that it doesn't have a "homoerotic subtext" -- the homoeroticism is in the *text*, not hidden below it. That's important, because it signals that elements that might be ambiguous in another context can and should be read homoerotically, instead of as mere male bonding and the like. (I read one online review which insisted that Jang-sang wasn't in love with Gong-gil, they were just good friends. Maybe yes, maybe no; it is ambiguous, at least in the theatrical version. But it's certainly legitimate to read the relationship as sexual-romantic, given the homoerotic context.)

After everything I'd heard about the movie, I was a bit surprised by Lee Jun-gi's performance as Gong-gil. He did a fine job, like everyone else in the film. But his 'effeminacy' seems to reside entirely in his hairdo, and the fact that the character plays female roles. In the still photos, like the one which attends your review, the camera angle was chosen to emphasize his sexual ambiguity; but in motion, and speaking, I didn't think he was any more 'effeminate' than Wong Bin, Hyeon Bin, or any number of other Korean pretty-boy pop stars and actors. Or soccer stars, for that matter.

"Maybe it has something to do with the political subtext -- that of the lower classes standing up to tyranny -- an impossibility in the many years where South Korea was under a military dictatorship." It wasn't impossible; in fact, there was a great deal of resistance to the military dictatorships. Are you reading the clowns' mockery of the King and his concubine as "standing up to tyranny"? I get the feeling that you're

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trying to read this as the One Lone Man who comes to town and stands up to tyranny where no one else dared -- the mindset which sees (for example) Rosa Parks as One Lone Woman whose feet were sore one day, instead of as the committed activist she was? Older Koreans, the demographic who made this movie a huge hit, would know very well that resistance to tyranny isn't a clown show.

Anyway, The King and the Clown was good entertainment, as you say. I'm looking forward to watching it again. After I watch half a dozen more recent Korean films, that is...

Posted by: [Duncan](#) | Jul 25, 2006 12:09:58 PM

political subtext.... the original play for theatrical drama may have been written under military dictatorship. but the movie was produced and released under civilian government which still struggles to fight against the economic crisis of 1997-1998. in this situation, Roh Mu Hyun, the president of the present civilian government is being estimated not to listen to other voices and advices as George Bush Jr. does not listen to other US voices. that is, the political subtext is changed.

In the movie, eunuch Kim Cheoseon brought the clowns to the palace to let King Yon San listen to other voice and current people's thought about his reign. Unfortunately, King does not get Kim's intention but falls in escapist and unrealistic pleasure. and even political corruption and scandal still exist in the civilian government as similar corruption existed in Yon San's reign. In this powerless and hopeless situation, audience find the movie allegorizes the situation, which is the one reason why the movie succeeds in Korea.

Posted by: [nkw88](#) | Aug 18, 2006 5:13:21 PM

It is one of my favorite movies. There was high art involved in its making and i really appreciate the lead character's performance. Unfortunately, the version I saw had no subtitles, but that made it stand out for me. I watched it over and over again. Even if i can't understand the words, I understood the movie, i felt the emotions, i somewhat felt how it was like to be living in the clown's shoes. In the last part, i just came back to my senses. I didnt realize i was crying.

That was one great movie!

Posted by: [jedi](#) | Dec 1, 2006 2:51:45 AM

coooool....!

Posted by: [esti](#) | Apr 17, 2007 2:18:41 AM

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