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JULY 28, 2007

DRAG QUEEN WREAKS HAVOC (KING AND THE CLOWN AT AAIFF)



Years ago, I was sitting in an airplane when I overheard an older gentleman behind me talking about a film. "I just saw a movie that made me jump from my seat in applause!" His exhilaration was palpable—as if his seatbelt was keeping him from jumping up again. "Seabiscuit!" he exclaimed. "Yes, the horse movie."

During the tail end of the Asian American International Film Festival, Lee Jun-ik's *King and the Clown* seemed to have the same effect. No, I didn't jump, but I sensed others wanted to. People were laughing so hard that the chairs were rocking, and during moments of hilarious suspense, they were cringing behind their hands.

Of course, a plotline about an all-male troupe that tries to win the laughter of a tyrannical king is bound to be funny. But this story of two jesters—an ass-whopping alpha-male and an effeminate drag queen – blurs the lines of intimacy and desire through a love triangle that results in disaster. Think *The Last Emperor* (a horribly isolated ruler) meets *Farewell, My Concubine* (male friendship and pervasive misery), but add the bang-and-clang of traditional Korean drums, comedic brilliance, and a gender-bending male actor with flawless skin.

Before *The Host*, *King and the Clown* was the highest grossing domestic film in South Korea, a zeitgeist-changing feat given its

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raunchy political satire and homoerotic subtext. We're talking South Korea here—a Confucian-rooted country that produces more heterosexual sap than Martha Stewart Weddings.

As the popularity of the *King and the Clown* attests, South Korea has come a long way (though the press tended to gloss over gay desire and praised the acting instead.) Not too long ago, actor Hong Suk-chon lost his job when he became the first South Korean celebrity to come out as gay; he's now made a comeback. And in 2004, the country's Youth Protection Commission dropped homosexuality from its list of "socially unacceptable" acts.

But on my way out, I overheard a woman debating the film with her friends, claiming that the two main characters were "just friends."

"There was *nothing physical*; it was purely platonic," she emphasized.

Looks like the South Korean media isn't the only thing in denial.

Posted by **Kai** at July 28, 2007 1:49 PM

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