

## herstory

A Tale of Two Spirits Dancing



### A Clown With Heart

Considering that video reviews appear to be my least read postings, I'm over indulging my inner masochist by doing two in a row. Still if you've read the disclaimer as you entered, I've made it clear you'll occasionally have to suffer through whatever I chose to serve up in the way of (or is it in place of?) thought. Besides which I paid the rental on TWO movies, so I'm being practical and getting my money's worth.

"King And The Clown" (Wang\_Ui Namja, literally "The King's Man) was on high on my "Must See" list (its not available "yet" in Australia). It is South Korea's second highest grossing film ever (The Host currently has the number One spot). A historical drama set in the Joseon Dynasty, it is very loosely based on a snippet of historical fact. The plot revolves around a troupe of ragtag rural jesters who gain noteriety by mocking the sexual exploits of the emperor and his concubine/queen. Which inevitably results in the group's imprisonment and sentencing to death. The leader of the troupe proposes that the emperor decide if they are treasonous, and it is agree if they can make the emperor laugh they will be spared. They succeed in this, perhaps a little too well, as the ensuing complications of the story, involving various political intrigues, several love triangles, and the emperor's moral ascendancy, then degeneracy proceed to detail.



## Jang-Seng and Gong-Gil

MSNBC has touted its reviews of this film under the banner of a Gay love story. I disagree completely with this categorization. The movie's emotional basis is genuinely transgender. One of the jesters, Gong-Gil (played by relative newcomer Lee Jung Gi) is obviously feminine, even outside the female roles he takes on in the troupe's various routines. Lee Jung Gi's portrayal is sensitive and genuine, even in scenes that are meant to be obvious satires during the skits. The naturalness of the role is comparable to Jaye Davidson's portrayal of Dil in *The Crying Game*.

Though there is never any overt statement about their relationship, the troupe leader Jang-Seng (Gam Woo Seong) is obviously genuinely in love with Gong-Gil. Yet the lack of overt detailing strengthens the sense of their intimacy. Early in the film, this sense of intimacy is established. While journeying to Seoul the two jesters stop to rest and perform a skit of two blind people meeting by chance. At the skit's conclusion they spontaneously embrace momentarily. That momentary embrace convincingly conveys the depth and breath of both friendship and love.

The Emperor (Jeong Jin Yeon) displays his own intentions and emotions towards Gong-Gil more explicitly, starting from first curiosity and interest, then growing through infatuation to the obsession of possessive love/lust.



Director Lee Jun Ik's film as a whole, is quite polished. Costume and production design are sumptuous and the acting exceptional. The jesters' routines are often hilarious and lewd, serving as a strong counterpoint to the complexity and seriousness of the emotional issues. Though a historical piece, the relevancy of the drama remains exceptionally contemporary. There are a few obvious parallels to Chen Kiage's *Farewell My Concubine*, including what I took as a homage, the inclusion of a Chinese opera reference. The one minor fault, I felt, was that the cinematography did not always do full justice to the production and costume design. The script was adapted from a popular stage play, and in a few minor instances I felt the camera seemed indeliberate about point of view: screen or stage? This never interfered, however, with my thorough enjoyment of the film.



One of the paradoxes of King and The Clown is its actual popularity and success in South Korea. Costing just over \$4.5 million US (excluding marketing) the film grossed over \$85 million US in its initial South Korean release.

There are no established “stars” in the cast. There are no CGI effects. The story is a historical drama (not epic), and it deals forthright and sensitively with nontraditional sexuality without extreme or excess. None of the components of the “formula” for successful general release films is present. Amazing how an intelligent script of an engrossing story utilizing a competent cast under skillful direction seems to work just fine. South Korea is not especially tolerant of gay or transgender issues. Yet the film generated very little controversy inside South Korea. The film was banned from showing in China (though the sale of DVDs of the film has not been prohibited).

Interestingly, Lee Jun Ki’s effeminate portrayal of Gong-Gil has earned him an immense fan base among younger South Koreans, both male and female. Actor Kang Dong Won received a similar public response for his effeminate portrayal of Sad Eyes in [Duelist](#).

A Plea To Hollywood: PLEASE DO NOT REMAKE THIS MOVIE. You’ll only end up fucking it up.

~ by emma on August 17, 2007.

#### 4 Responses to “A Clown With Heart”

1. For some reason, the description of the movie leaves me thinking “Midsummers Night Dream”... I’m not quite sure why, though. (It is one of my favorites, though!)

Insofar as readers, I’m not so sure that the quantity of readers is so important. I don’t track readership for a couple of reasons:

1. I’m interested in the readers, not in their measurement, and
2. I write for myself; or, more simply: I write because I don’t actually have a choice in the matter.

So if you want to write movie reviews, and your current readership isn’t particularly interested... Maybe you shouldn’t care?

Next month I'll see about applying to the disbanded office "Devil's Advocate" in the Vatican. I wonder if the commute is reasonable?

Carolyn Ann

PS I like your reviews. 😊

[Carolyn Ann](#) said this on [August 17th, 2007 at 3:52 pm](#)

- Carolyn Ann is right - it *does* sound reminiscent of A Midsummer Night's Dream!

I look forward to more reviews of Asian films - the ones you recommended in various comments on my blog I've really enjoyed. And now I've just received the DVD of The Duellist which you wrote about here once...

[Stephanie Delacey](#) said this on [August 17th, 2007 at 5:45 pm](#)

- It is your blog Emma, so write about what you want. I don't think you can court a blogger readship, they arrive (and depart) in their own sweet time.

> Hollywood

That should also be said of The Italian Job and Get Carter, but it didn't stop them. Art vs profit. Discuss. 😊

[Lynn Jones](#) said this on [August 18th, 2007 at 6:07 am](#)

- LOL. Thank you all for the comments.

I couldn't help giggling to myself a wee bit. Writing sometimes doesn't convey well certain states of mind. I often take myself far less seriously than I might be able to put into words. And I frequently poke fun of myself in a sarcastic/ironic manner that I wouldn't apply to anyone else. Largely to remind myself not to be so serious about myself (or others).

I'm not really concerned about having any particular size readership. I assume readership to be like real life relationships in general: others visit me when they want and/or can, but they don't live in my home or hang on my every word. Thankfully. Imagine how exhausting that would be!

@ Carolyn Ann & Stephanie. I agree too about the Midsummer Night's Dream connection. Shakespeare is so rich and complete in his range that there is little he doesn't somehow seem to connect to. If only he were available to do the rewrites that Hollywood insists on re-issuing.

@ Stephanie. I'm happy you've enjoyed the recommendations. It's not always easy to get some of the Asian films that don't fit into accepted (ie marketable) western genre. So I'm aware that your time is then doubly invested.

@ Lynn. Yet another good idea for my "To Do" list. There does seem to be an unfortunate correlation. It will be interesting to see how Asia cinema as a whole survives the current stirring of international investment. Do you do motivational counseling as well by any chance? 😊

Thank you all. 😊



[emma](#) said this on [August 18th, 2007 at 7:38 am](#)

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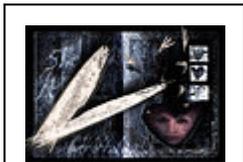
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