

Movie Reviews

WELCOME TO SEOUL

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**Genre:** Drama**Cast:**

Lee Jun-ki

Kam Woo-seong

Jung Jin-Young

Director: Lee Jun Ik**Year released:** 2005**Run Time:** 119 min

KING AND THE CLOWN

Korean cineastes have a penchant for excessive melodramas; hence, the Korean film market is flooded with corny, overblown tear-jerkers. In order for a dramatic movie to work, it has to have pitch-perfect acting or else it might inspire an eye-roll or a "Gimme a break!" instead of evoking the audience's emotions. This is where the movie "The King and the Clown" really succeeds. This silent blockbuster crept up on Korean audiences and captivated moviegoers despite the fact that there was not one big-name actor in the cast. Over the course of a year, the King and the Clown became Korea's highest grossing movie ever, with ¼ of the country's population going out to see the film.

The King and the Clown takes place in the Joseon Dynasty, like so many other generic Korean dramas, but the plot has a very original spin. The story centers on a band of impoverished traveling entertainers. The two main characters Jang-Saeng and Gong-il are lovers. The fact that they are both men should be shocking to Koreans, but Gong-il played by actor Lee Jun-ki is looks so much like a girl; you almost want to believe that he's female. It's obvious the two have an amazing bond as they really look out for each other. They decide to go to Hanyang (now Seoul) where they can put on a bigger and better show. There, they find other talented minstrels to join their act.

In order to draw a crowd and make more money, Jang-Seang, the default leader of the troupe, decides to stage a show mocking the King and his favorite concubine Nok-Su. One of the King's officials gets wind of the show and has the troupe arrested for treason. The official agrees to let them perform for the King with the agreement that if the King enjoys the show, their lives are spared. In fact, the true motive the official has in taking the troupe to the palace is to expose the corruption plaguing the King's regime.

Enter the tyrannical King who is brilliantly played by actor Jung Jin-Young (This character is based on a real-life king). The king becomes psychologically marred as a result of a childhood trauma when his mother was forced to commit suicide by the royal family. As a grown man, he exhibits the unstable caprices of a spoiled and profoundly wounded boy. However, after seeing the clowns perform, instead of being insulted, the King is so

amused that he decides to invite the troupe to become court jesters in the palace. In fact, it seems as if the king himself is a frustrated theater actor who unfortunately just happened to be born into a royal bloodline. Eventually, the King becomes enamored with Gong-il's talent and androgynous beauty, and this infuriates Jang-Saeng, Nok-su and the ministers.

Jung-Jin Young is very powerful in his role as the King displaying a wide range of emotions from vulnerability and passion, to anger and madness. Kam Woo-Seong is an absolute hero in his portrayal of the masculine clown, Jang-Saeng. Lee Jun-ki rightfully became a superstar after his sensitive and courageous portrayal of Gong-il, the feminine clown. Before seeing this movie, I had often wondered why Lee Jun-ki's girly face was plastered all over every billboard and magazine in Seoul. After seeing the film, I can now see why the hype is justified. Is Lee, Jun-ki gay in real life? Koreans are not saying and artistically speaking, it doesn't matter. Magazine interviews skirt around the fact that Lee plays a borderline transvestite in the most popular movie ever to hit the Korean box office. Instead, interviewers prefer to ask Lee generic questions like: how is he dealing with fame, or, what does he carry in his pocket with him every day.

The most remarkable thing about King and the Clown, besides the acting, is how it manages to walk the tight-rope without falling into the realm of the shocking or over-exaggerated. A movie with a latent theme of homosexuality has the potential to upset the sensibilities of conservative Koreans, but each element of the King and the Clown is so compelling and perfectly played out that the underlying premise never seems vulgar.

The director Lee Jun Ik pointed out that the main point of the story was not to talk about homosexuality but rather to evoke the world of the traveling clowns. For the movie, Lee consulted Korea's last surviving traveling performer, Kim Gi Bok. Mr. Kim, who is 77 years old, said that in those days it wasn't uncommon for traveling clowns to engage in same-sex relationships. Firstly, minstrels were so poor, they were practically considered beggars. In this financial situation it's virtually impossible to get a wife. Secondly, men were always traveling in groups together and they ended up forming a very close bond, a bond which is perhaps more intimate than a male-female one.

King and the Clown is a historical drama which has the same cinematic beauty as Untold Scandal or Farewell my Concubine, with the added bonus of a unique plot and highly talented actors. In addition, it walks on the edge, gracefully breaching subjects that have been considered taboo. One of the sub-themes of the movie is to demonstrate how art imitates life. There are several occasions in the movie where actual situations and actual words that people speak become dramatized in a theatrical sense. In the movie, the clowns' sexuality is completely accepted and not even discussed. Will this movie be a milestone for gay rights? Will life imitate art?

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