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## 'King and the Clown'

This blockbuster features period setting, traditional arts and a gay subtext

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The closing days of 2005 saw the debut of a rather different sort of Korean blockbuster. "King and the Clown," with its lack of star casting, its period setting, its focus on the traditional arts, and an obvious gay subtext, did not seem to fit the mold of an event film like "Tae Guk Gi" or "JSA." Yet despite screening at the same time as big budget films "Typhoon," "Blue Swallow" and "King Kong," this was the movie that got young viewers excited and talking during the winter vacation. It seems there are two stories to tell about "King and the Clown": the story of the film itself, which though not a masterpiece represents an interesting and engaging take on a creative subject; and the account of how and why this film turned into a popular phenomenon -- a story that can tell us interesting things about the Korean audience.

The film, by director Lee Jun Ik ("Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield") focuses on a pair of clowns who perform comic plays, songs, and acrobatic tricks for aristocrats or commoners during the Joseon Dynasty. Jangsaeng, played by Gam Woo Sung ("Spider Forest"), possesses a disarming self-confidence and disrespect for authority that seems likely to get him into trouble one day. Konggil, portrayed by Lee Joon Ki ("Flying Boys"), plays the woman to Jangsaeng's man in the comic skits they perform. Konggil also possesses a certain self-confidence and grace that turns him into an object of fascination and desire for the pair's aristocratic patrons (not to mention modern-day Korean schoolgirls). In contrast to his later relationship with the insane King Yonsan, romantic feelings between Konggil and Jangseung are strongly implied, but never stated explicitly.

After the two arrive in the capital Seoul (or Hanyang, as it is called at the time), the entrepreneurial Jangseung hits upon the idea of performing a skit that satirizes the king and his famous concubine Noksu. The somewhat lewd and hilarious parody brings them quick fame and piles of cash, but before long it lands them in chains at the feet of the king himself.

Like "Welcome to Dongmakgo!" and "Memories of Murder" before it, "King and the Clown" is based on a local play (titled "Yi"), and the film makes good use of its source's rich narrative material. Although the second half, centered in the palace, lacks the energy of the first, the slower pace is not inappropriate given the film's darkening tone. Jeong Jin-young ("Hi, Dharma") is quite interesting as King Yonsan, one of Korea's most famous and notorious monarchs who possessed concentrated power but lacked the sanity to use it effectively. Apart from a well-formed plot, however, the film's real highlight is the play-acting by the two clowns. Both actors are mesmerizing in their verbal sparring and their enthusiasm for performing, and one wishes there were even more of these scenes to enjoy.

If "King and the Clown" had possessed a visual and cinematic sophistication to match the skills of its actors, then it may have emerged as a breakout international hit, like an earthy version of Chen Kaige's "Farewell My Concubine" (a film with clear plot parallels, that "King" seems to reference in a parody of Chinese opera in the second half). Alas, Lee's direction is capable but rather plain in a visual sense, despite the colorful costumes and set.

The original Korean title of this film is "The King's Man", which references much more directly the erotic current underlying this film. And indeed it is Lee Joon Ki as the King's man who is credited with enabling this film to sell 10 million tickets. Virtually unknown before the film's debut -- although his simultaneous appearance in the TV drama "My Girl" gave his popularity a twofold boost -- Lee has become an instant sensation, a perfect example of a film creating its own star power. (Supposedly Jang Hyuk was originally cast in this role, until he was shipped off to the army after being found to have illegally dodged his military duty). Amidst Lee's burgeoning popularity, news stories have proliferated about how teenage Korean girls are supposedly less interested in muscular, alpha male types compared to androgynous or outright feminine-looking boys such as Lee or Kang Dong-won ("Duelist").

Yet it's also notable that a society which is commonly believed to be strongly homophobic has so embraced a film that -- let's face it -- contains a highly charged if largely implied homoerotic tone. This is not because attitudes and prejudices have changed overnight, rather it seems that the filmmakers have been extremely skillful in their portrayal of Konggil.

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Like many other instances of discrimination in modern-day Korea, aesthetics or appearance can sometimes write over prejudicial, ideological attitudes. This may not represent any progressive advance, but it wouldn't surprise me if many young men who saw this film with their girlfriends spent time thinking about their inner reaction to Konggil.

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Notes

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