



The King And The Clown (15 (Korea), Lee Jun-ik, 2005)

Starring: Gam Woo-seong, Jeong Jin-yeong, Kang Sung-Yeon, Lee Jun-gi, Jang Hang-Seon, Yu Hae-jin, Jeong Seok-yong, Lee Seung-hun,

Region: 3 / **DVD Country:** Korea / **Release Date:** 26 June 2006 / **Running Time:** 121/128 minutes / **Primary Screen Ratio:** 1.85:1 / **Anamorphic**

The success of **The King and the Clown** is unprecedented in Korean film history. A modest film rather than a hyped-up studio blockbuster, a period drama with no known star actors, it was released at the end of 2005 and unexpectedly became the highest grossing film in Korean cinema history. The popular success of the film has been followed with wins in all the major categories at the Korean cinema awards, leaving the film with rather a lot to live up to on its DVD release.

Set in the early 16th Century, the story takes place during the reign of one of Korea's twenty-seven Kings during the 500 year span of its legendary Chosun Dynasty - the notorious King Yeon. Jang-seng (Gam Woo-seong) and Gong-gil (Lee Jun-gi) are street entertainers – actors, minstrels and acrobats who work for a team of travelling players, performing stunts and bawdy skits for villagers as they travel across the country. However, the manager of the troupe finds that he is able to make more money in selling the charms of the female impersonator Gong-gil to the rarefied tastes of the Korean nobles, who are attracted to the ambiguous sexuality of the young man.



Jang-seng has had enough of this abuse of his friend, and together they escape from the troupe to make their fortunes in the capital. Arriving in Seoul however, they find that the previous King has reduced the opportunities for performers, seeing them as vagrants or beggars and having most of them run out of the city. Combining forces with another group of entertainers they meet, Jang-seng has a new idea for a show that will make them famous – a risqué sketch mocking the King's current Royal Consort, Nok-su (Kang Sung-Yeon), a once notorious courtesan. Not unexpectedly, they find themselves arrested for treason and about to be flogged for their audacity, but manage to convince the authorities to allow them to put on the performance before the King, to let him decide himself whether it is funny or not. The King's advisor Cheo-seon (Jang Hang-Seon) agrees – if the King laughs they will be released, but if he is displeased heads will roll. But Cheo-seon has an ulterior motive and, as the minstrels nervously perform their treasonable show, the King (Jeong Jin-yeong) does not look amused...



The King and the Clown, as the above description might indicate, is not particularly original in its storyline. It's the old story of the King and his Jester, the minstrel who speaks the truth that others dare not, Jang-seng and Gong-gil revealing to the King not only how his subjects view him, but gradually opening his eyes to the corruption of his Ministers and the scheming within his Royal Court. One major revelation about his parents during the performance of a Chinese Opera in front of the Queen Mother even recalls the travelling players drama in Shakespeare's *'Hamlet'*, the performance having a similarly violent denouement, while the opera itself and the course of the friendship of the two performers - their success caught up in the political machinations of the period - follows to a large degree the trajectory of the Chinese Opera singers in Chen Kaige's [Farewell My Concubine](#).

What the film most successfully achieves however, particularly through its own very nature as a colourful popular entertainment, is the power of art and drama to express emotions and communicate with audiences important messages about life, love and politics. Abruptly changing tone in the second half however, the film questions how a person armed with powerful and privileged knowledge should wield such information. Does one have a duty to make such knowledge public, or is it better to allow the people to remain "blind" to what is happening behind closed doors? It's a small-scale theme for a relatively small-scale film, one that has no pretensions towards the epic grandeur that the period and the enormous box-office of success of the film might indicate, but the manner in which it presents this central question, and handles the abrupt changes of tone, is compelling. Simply put, the film makes the very best of its modest storyline, plot development and characterisation in a workmanlike fashion that has little flair, but makes the most of its strengths, which are the not overly ambitious theme of the solid storyline, the colour of the period and outstanding performances from the cast of clowns and acrobats. (It's aided in many of these respects for English viewers with an excellent English subtitle translation, which captures the tone of the period as well as the rhyming and bawdiness of the dialogue superbly). **The King and the Clown** is all about entertainment and entertain is just what the film does.



The unexpected success of **The King and the Clown**, becoming the highest grossing film of all time in Korea, has surprised many people – the period drama, particularly one that has homosexual references - not traditionally being a genre that attracts the younger audience that is necessary to compete with Hollywood blockbusters that usually dominate Korean cinema screens. It has had many critics and Korean journalists (and no doubt studio executives) seeking to find a pattern in film viewing trends and searching for sociological changes in the make-up of the viewing public. It seems a lot simpler to me than that. I've said it before in my review of [Memories of Murder](#) and it still holds true – Korea is making the best, popular genre films in the world today, and **The King and the Clown** is the best in its field, taking on the strengths of solid traditional Hollywood cinematic storytelling, giving it a fresh and uniquely Korean twist and beating the increasingly formulaic, sequel and TV-remake reliant US blockbusters at their own game. For two hours the superbly paced **The King and the Clown** is utterly gripping and as pure an entertainment as you are likely to see – mixing comedy and tragedy, action and adventure, drama and political intrigue into a moving story of an unusual friendship, never faltering and never failing to convince.

DVD

The King and the Clown is released in the Korea by Art Service. It is released in a Special Limited Edition four-disc box set, which contains three DVDs and a CD of the soundtrack. The DVDs are in NTSC format and is encoded for Region 3. Disc One contains the Theatrical Release of the film, Disc Two the Extended Version, Disc Three the supplements. The discs are housed in a digipack within a magnetically clipped sturdy box. Also included in the box are 8 A5 sized postcards of character poster designs held in a display case, and a beautiful photobook containing cast photos and biographies, and set designs.



Video

The film is a blaze of colour in the sets, and in the bold costume designs of the performers and the Royal Court. This comes across quite impressively on the transfer, which is strong throughout and actually almost overpowering, such is the richness of the colourful costumes and sets. Colours may be slightly oversaturated and overly processed, with tints looking slightly unnatural and reds in particular being very bright, vivid and tending to bleed at edges. As I often find on Korean releases, the black levels are also rather flat, lacking in shadow detail or tone. I imagine however that few people will have any problem with these niggling details, since otherwise there is really nothing else here to fault. The image is clear and stable, free from any marks whatsoever and shows good detail, with reasonable definition even in wider shots. Judging from the somewhat clinical lighting of scenes and the overall flow of the image, it may well be that the film has been shot in High Definition Digital Video.



Audio

The audio tracks are both fine and get a good workout in the thumping of drums and surround-sound audience noise when the actors perform their open-air routines. The DTS track doesn't have any particular advantage over the Dolby Digital 5.1 mix, both mixes functionally serving up the dialogue and sound effects clearly and strongly without ever being either overly impressive or distracting.

Subtitles

English subtitles are provided, in a reasonably sized white font. As I observed in the review of the film, they are excellent at capturing the tone of the various situations, the formality of addressing royalty, the common dialogue of ordinary folk and the bawdy qualities and rhymes of the performer's routines, which can consequently be uproariously funny. The subtitles curiously also seem to provide some background historical information during the opening title sequence, for which there is no corresponding Korean text.

Extras

Disc 1 Extras

There are two commentary tracks for the Theatrical Version of the film - Commentary 1 by the Director and Crew, Commentary 2 by Cast. Neither commentary is subtitled.

Disc 2 Extras

The second disc contains the 128 minute Extended Version of the film, which I've seen listed by some retailers as the "Director's Extended Version". Whether it is the director's cut I can't say, but none of them alter the pace or the content of the film in any significant way. Among the extra scenes I noticed an additional scene with a fortune teller on the duo's arrival in Seoul, an extended scene of the Seoul street performance duel, involving the hot coals, some fooling around between Jang-seng and Gong-gil after the minstrel auditions and a scene where two of the ministers plot the Kings downfall after the banquet scene. The

quality of this feature is on a par with the Theatrical Version, containing identical specs and fully subtitled in English, though it has no commentary tracks.



Disc 3 Extras

The extra features on Disc 3 are divided into 3 sections. None of these extra features have English subtitles, although those marked * require no subtitles.

Act 1 The first section looks at the making of the film from various aspects. The Making of documentary (22:27) shows filming of the acrobatic and performance scenes and some sequences between Gong-gil and the King. It is interspersed with interviews with the director and filmmaking crew. There's a more in-depth look at the Art and Costume Design (19:21), with interviews with the production designer. Cast interviews are divided into two sections, one (17:10) with the main cast, the other (12:43) with the "three clowns". Six Deleted scenes (9:37) are included, some of them extended versions of scenes in the film. One of the extended scenes – the hunting scene climax – is certainly more complete in this version, the fate of one of the characters being quite evidently missing in the Theatrical Cut, but it is not in the Extended Cut either. There is also an interview with the Music Director (6:21) and a *Behind The Scenes featurette, showing outtakes, stunts and candid shots, which has no real dialogue, but is set to music from the film.

Act 2 The second section shows the preparation for the historical period detail of the film. "Samul Nori" Dance performance (13:49) shows footage of some traditional clown groups in performance, with cast and crew attending clown school. "Pung Mul" Dance performance (17:46) focuses on the drummers who perform for the acts. The King's banquet performance (8:20) shows rehearsals for the dances that make up part of the performance. Beyond the Movie: "Yi" - The original stage play (23:41) takes a look at the original play that the film is based on, showing scenes of the stage performance and interviewing (I assume) the original author. The True Story of Yeon San (14:31), a look at the historical background of the King and the period, is the one feature here that I wish was subtitled, as it would be very interesting to know the factual basis of the film. The Banquet Scene - Behind the scenes (5:44) shows rehearsals for the main performance piece in the film.

Act 3 The third section, the promotional material for the film, is the only section that is mainly friendly for non Korean viewers. The *Poster photo shoot (5:34), shows the cast being photographed in costume for the promotional materials (the final versions of which are included in this set as postcards). There are a couple of Q&A sessions in a Press conference (6:00) and the Footage from the premiere (4:39). The *Music video (4:19) is the obligatory plinky K-pop ballad with sweeping strings. The *TV Spot (1:04) and the Trailer (2:28) are letterboxed and contain what could be considered spoilers. A *Stills gallery (2:05) frames the images in such a way that they can scarcely be distinguished.



Overall

The King and the Clown has recently won no less than seven major awards at the 43rd Daejong (Grand Bell) Awards 2006, for

Best Film, Best Director, Best Leading Actor, Best Supporting Actor, Best Script, Best Cinematography and Best New Actor. Does it deserve to be the most popular film ever in Korea? Well, isn't that up to the people, rather than critics or studio hype, to decide? The film has succeeded on its own strengths and through word of mouth, touching a chord with the people to become the most successful film ever at the Korean box office. I can't think of another Korean film more deserving of popular success than **The King and the Clown**.

<i>DVD Details</i>		
Soundtracks	Subtitles	Special Features
Korean Dolby Digital 5.1 Korean DTS 5.1 Korean Dolby Digital 2.0	English Korean	Commentary by Director and Crew Commentary by Cast 'The King and the Clown' - Extended Version Making of documentary Art and Costume Design featurette Cast interviews Deleted scenes Music Director interview Behind the scenes featurette "Samul Nori" Dance performance "Pung Mul" Dance performance Full version of the King's banquet performance by the clowns Beyond the Movie: "Yi" - The original stage play The True Story of Yeon San The Banquet Scene - Behind the scenes Poster photo shoot Press conference Footage from the premiere Music video Trailer & TV spot Stills gallery

<i>DVD Ratings</i>				
Film	Video	Audio	Extras	Overall
9	9	9	3	9

Reviewed by Noel Megahey on 30-07-2006 18:00

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