

Cinevue

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LOVEFOOL



By Pete L'Official

It seems that in South Korea, good things come either in sets of three or twelve million. Over one quarter of South Korea's population, or about twelve million people, lives in its densely-packed capital, Seoul. A similar number—more than a quarter of all of South Koreans, [a percentage that leads the world](#)—are served by broadband Internet. And, in 2005, just about the same amount of people bought tickets to see Lee Jun-ik's Chosun Dynasty drama, [KING AND THE CLOWN](#)—the highest-grossing film of that year and, until 2006 (and the release of Bong Joon-Hoo's [THE HOST](#)), the most successful Korean film in history.

Research into whether such record-setting attendance was the result of what would certainly be the most successful [spamming](#) of a digitally plugged-in capital city's residents the world has ever known is, as of yet, inconclusive. Whatever did stoke the cinephilic flames of the nation's audiences—the film's elaborate, gracefully chromatic evocation of the era, or perhaps the [pansexual attractiveness](#) of its breakout star, [Lee Jun-Ki](#)—the film's wild success still seems anomalous, as homoerotic period pieces about minstrels and the monarchs who love them don't exactly scream "epic blockbuster." Perhaps that is precisely the film's greatest triumph: though it has the shape of what you know to be mildly charming, thematically-challenging art-house fare, fit almost impossibly within is a well-engineered piece of pop entertainment.

Adapted from the Korean play Yi, the film follows two talented minstrels, the bold Jang-Sang and the beautiful Gong-Gil, who first find great success in mocking the king and his favorite consort. Then, once discovered by the authorities, they are threatened with death for their public parodies—that is, of course, unless they can draw a laugh from the tyrannical king, Yeonsan. Though the delicately-featured Gong-Gil can make the whole kingdom, from peasant to potentate, swoon with a shimmy of his hips, when compared with the childhood-traumatized (his mother was forced to commit suicide), emotionally capricious king, he's just another pretty face. Yeonsan, whose bloodthirst is equaled by his penchant for the ribald joke, is a blood

vessel waiting to burst, and his astute prime minister, recognizing the value of having a fearless, in-house truth-and-honesty commission that can also put on a fine hand-puppet show helps to hasten the explosive process.

It is well-known, and no less true here, that court jesters were historically given wide latitude to speak truth to power as long as they couched their truth-telling as jest. This figurative fine line between being risqué and literally risking your neck is cleverly made literal in the film—the two minstrels are expert tightrope tricksters. Yet KING AND THE CLOWN probes slightly deeper into the intimate dynamic between lampooner and the lampooned as the profoundly insecure king, sensing in their performances both a newfound liberation from the formalities of his court and an outlet for his own repressions, becomes disastrously obsessed with the troupe, forcing them to become bit players on the stage of his damaged psyche. Though the political import and expediency with which their riotous act influences instant—and sometimes gruesome—governmental reprisal may seem a little far-fetched (though American audiences can only wish this were so), the film's scorn for secrecy, and faith in the therapeutic, expressive power of artistic performance is both well-placed and comforting.

The quality of any political humor is often directly proportional to the fallibility of the government being mocked. The more barbaric—or incompetent—the more potential for laughs exists, generally. The same is true within the simple logic of the film: the less rational the king becomes, the higher the stakes, but also, the sharper the humor, and the deeper the pathos. The minstrels' work, in effect, proves the old adage that comedy is merely tragedy, with time.

[Pete L'Official](#) is a writer living in New York. Pete has written about film, music, and books for [The Village Voice](#), [Vibe](#), and [The Believer](#), and he is currently doing research for a book on racism in socc-, [or rather](#), football.

Posted by Hieu Ho on July 15, 2007 11:26 PM | [Permalink](#)

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