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## MH-Asia - 29/11/07

**Date :** November 29, 2007      **Writer :** Clint Morris

Colin Moore is running late for a train – no kidding – so he's shot this over for me to post-up. Here is his latest look at Asian Cinema... without the salted noodles.

### "The King and the Clown" (2005)

Korea has history and it uses it. Recently, it's bulked its international standing on a handful of television shows that use the glory and gluttony of past dynasties for a backdrop. The major figures and details of periods like Joseon (1392-1910) and Goryeo (918-1392) are accurately supplied by the history while the fiction adds fake beards and the cheese. "Dae Jang Geum" (The Jewel in the Palace) is the better known of the lot, a historical drama based on the true story of one woman's rise to become a royal court physician. Its connection to another Korean success story, the hit film "The King and the Clown," is in the era, early 16th century and the rule of King Yeon.

Jang-seng (Gam Wu-seong) and Gong-gil (Lee Jun-ki) have secured patronage at a satellite court as jesters and performers. They walk a tightrope, humoring the crowd below with a playfully crude story about sexual conquest. Gong-gil is effeminate enough to do justice to his role as the teasing wench. But food and a roof over their head comes with a price Jang-seng isn't willing to pay anymore: Gong-gil's role as an after hours plaything for their patron. Jang-seng rescues his friend with minor violence but a high level thug is killed by Gong-gil during their escape. What else to do but make for Seoul.

There they join forces with another minstrel troupe led by the ratillian Six Dix. Jang-seng quickly singles himself out as the likely leader. The group finds modest success mocking the King and his concubine Nok-su (Kang Seong-Yeon) with their street theatre, again using a sexual story-line for humor. Cho-Seon isn't laughing. As a servant and advisor of the King, he arrests the troupe and gives the order for the mother of all floggings when Jang-seng makes a proposition. "Let us show it to the King. If he likes it, then we're innocent." Cho-Seon grunts a response. "And if not, heads will roll." It's not so easy at first. The group is headed for a supreme botching, but Jang-seng and Gong-gil finally manage to crack the King. He's so pleased he invites them to stay as his private entertainers.

King Yeon is a man-child. Historically he's described as a tyrant, though the film partly shows him to be a giddy fool. He's as likely to giggle as to rain down on anyone who's wronged him, but there's enough emotional baggage to explain both. Yeon's father, Seongjong, was Joseon's 9th King. Without a son to sew the royal lineage he married Lady Yun, a former concubine and Yeon's mother to be. Yeon is born but without his mother. The film explains Lady Yun's death simply. She was made to drink poison following some inter-court "machinations." between Seongjong, a pair of the king's consorts, and the Queen mother. The history books fill in the gaps. There's talk of jealousy and outbursts by Lady Yun and even an instance where she attempted to poison one of the king's concubines. Whatever the back-story though, it's implied to account for Yeon's mental tiddly winks.

The King finds himself attracted to Gong-gil and eventually extends a regular invitation to spend time together. Jang-seng can't help but think that the cycle is repeating itself, and that royal liberties are being taken with his friend. But it's not what it seems. The king isn't a sexual predator (single non-arousing smooch aside), more a damaged man who needs a play partner and a sensitive ear. Nok-su won't have it. She's the bed-mate but nothing close to matronly, the role that Gong-gil only seems able to fill. She tries to destroy him for it.

There's enough sameness between "The King and the Clown" and "Farewell My Concubine" to swat it off as another Korean copycat. Both stories feature a performance duo religiously nailed to their art, one the abused she-male and the other the more butch protector. Both are at the mercy of the politics of the day. Both make use of hard-boiled women (Gong-Li in "Concubine") who see the she-males as dangerous distractions for their men. And both narrowly avoid cameos by Iron Maiden's Bruce Dickinson. The difference is in how they present the friendship. "Concubine" has the feel of an intimate relationship that spans an epic period, a turbulent 20th century China. It's about a relationship in time, not the time of the relationship. "The King and the Clown" can't quite match it. It starts strong by forging a bond between Jang-seng and Gong-gil then abandons it for an hour hoping we'll remember. In between is their encounter with the king. It adds a sense of danger sure: the king is a sometimes bipolar canon. It provides an element of humor yes: the minstrels openly mock the very court that keeps them in gag style. But it all serves the moment more than the relationship we barely got to know. It's a winner if you keep expectations light. Gam Wu-seong and Lee Jun-ki do a proper job of balancing their characters' free-spirited joviality with the pains of being at the bottom rung of society, but not much more. By the end, it's the film that seems bipolar. If it would only pick a mood.



Audiences may disagree. "The King and the Clown" is the current Korean box-office champion.

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