

Sennett: “The King and the Clown”– A Review

It is rare for the University of Toledo to explore the east. The theatre season is usually booked with Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde and anything from the American Great White Way. But, this spring, we were given something unusual: a play from South Korea.

“The King and the Clown” is based on the 2000 play called “Yi” and tells the story of 15th-century Korean King Yeonsan and his relationship with the cross-dressing court clown, Gong-gil.

The king’s complicated ego leads to something of a romance with his effeminate court jester and, eventually, his downfall.

What makes this particular production special is that it is its first-ever performance in English.

Student translators worked hard to bring “The King and the Clown” to Toledo. They blended the language into our northwest Ohioan setting.

Student director Keeyong Hong placed the indescribable into his creative blocking. This helps to avoid focusing on some of the untranslatable idioms found in the original Korean play.

Often, characters do not speak at all and perform in dumbshow to carry their dramatic points. If I have any criticisms here, it’s that there weren’t enough of these silent moments that held me in such genuine suspense.

Hong seems to have a very natural talent for blocking. The actors flow organically with the bold scenery, designed by Daniel Thobias and crafted by Nathaniel White.

Thobias based the backdrop on a real Korean temple. This temple was simplified to fill Toledo's intimate theatre space and functional for the characters to enter and exit dramatically.

The subtle haze that fills the theatre, in collaboration with the traditional Korean pre-show music, creates a thick atmosphere for the story that never seems to leave. It is a short play, but a dense one.

Yet, I expected much more sex from a play marked "mature audience only (17+), due to sexual situations and adult material."

I often complain about UT's shows and how they tend to make sexual innuendo too obvious, to the point where it is not innuendo at all, just gratuity.

But this is a play that does not call for innuendo. This is a play that requires the direct address of its sexual content. It is a study in 15th-century queer politics and could most certainly be an allegory for today.

I wanted to feel the dagger and the pain of the conflicted characters more, but it feels like something was cut at the last minute. Some crucial element must have been wrongly judged as going "too far," or else the sign should have said (13+).

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