



Innovations for Environmental Protection

CLP Power launched the CLP Energy Innovation Fund in 2003 and has so far contributed \$3 million towards sponsoring community environmental protection projects. For a greener future, CLP Power will keep going that extra mile. For more information, visit www.clpgroup.com/env_care

SCREEN

Edited by Clarence Tsui clarence.tsui@scmp.com

FILM STUDIES

Andrew Salmon

Boy, oh boy

The King and the Clown may lack the usual ingredients of South Korean blockbusters – no North Korean secret agents, gunfights or gangsters – but that hasn't stopped the period drama from luring a staggering quarter of the country's 48 million people to the cinema, making it the most popular domestic movie ever.

The film, about minstrels at the 16th-century court of a tyrant king, features a homosexual subplot, and has fuelled what has been dubbed a nationwide "pretty boy syndrome". However, quite how it's managed to sell 12.2 million tickets is a mystery, even to its director. "Let's say I'm a midfield soccer player, who just kicks a ball, and it bounces around and then goes into the goal," muses Lee Jun-ik.

In the film, Kam Woo-sung and Lee Joon-gi (below) play



two wandering minstrels. They perform a bawdy play, which mocks royalty and the aristocracy, for an unstable and violent king, played by Jung Jin-young.

The king falls in love with Lee's character, Gong-gil, who plays feminine roles, provoking tension with Kam's character, who is Gong-gil's protector and possibly his lover – their relationship is ambiguous. The affair also stirs the jealousy of the king's consort, played by Kang Sung-yeon.

As his lust for the boy increases, so do his clashes with his ministers, who are appalled that the king has embraced the raucous theatre of the peasantry. Meanwhile, his consort plots against Gong-gil and the troupe.

The film has created an unlikely idol in Lee, a virtual unknown before the film, and fuelled a trend in macho South Korea: the pretty boy syndrome.

"I think there was a hidden need for men to express themselves and become prettier," Lee says. "Now, it's become easier for men to express themselves in a more feminine way."

However, *The King and the Clown* doesn't just portray pretty boys – who already populate many Korean pop groups. The movie, based on a stage play, was called *The King's Man* in South Korea, a title clearly alluding to homosexuality. "Movies have talked about so many things – there aren't many sensitive themes left," says Kam, who plays the more heroic and macho of the pair. "But these sensitive things are what people want to see."

In neo-Confucian South Korea, homosexuality is taboo. Only in the past few years has a community appeared, with gay and transvestite bars opening in the capital's Itaewon district.

The gay theme isn't the only reason for the movie's success. Lavishly shot, with beautiful attention to period detail, the film also features some of the bawdiest and most original dialogue in recent Korean film. These factors, allied with its unconventional theme, testify to a new creativity in the industry.

Such is the film's popularity that President Roh Moo-hyun even invited Lee to join him for a nationally televised speech to the nation last month.

They just don't make them like Kar Ling these days. Ahead of a major retrospective, Winnie Yeung meets the shining star of the 50s and 60s

Yesterday once more

SEEING IS BELIEVING when it comes to the glamour of movie stars from half a century ago. Patsy Ho Kar-ling – better known simply as Kar Ling – stands out effortlessly in the restaurant. Her neat hairdo, crimson lips and a complexion with few of the wrinkles one might expect in a 70-year-old are reminders of how she charmed Hong Kong audiences in the 1950s.

Then there's her immaculate attire: a tailored black suit, manicured nails painted with polish matching her eye-shadow, and a gold, diamond-studded watch.

Her poise sets her apart from today's stars. Whereas they might give the paparazzi the finger, munch fishballs on the street or slouch during interviews, Ho retains the elegance of a bygone era.

Ho is back in town – and the limelight – for a few days because the Hong Kong Film Archive (as part of the Hong Kong International Film Festival) is showcasing 40 films produced by the Kong Ngee studio, to which she was signed for most of her 13-year career.

Kong Ngee, one of the top profit-makers in the 1950s and 60s, produced films that reflected society then, with a strong grasp of trends and human mores and emotions. Characters in its films often have chic professions: in *The Happy Bride* (1963), Ho plays a wedding gown designer, while Patrick Tse Yin – her partner on- and off-screen in the 50s – is an architect. The movie shows how the couple deal with their complicated feelings for each other after Tse's character loses a leg.

Ho and Tse – together with Kong Suet, Chow Chung and Nam Hung – were the most popular actors of their time, with fan mail flooding the company's mailboxes. Their popularity seems undimmed. Aficionados line up at the Film Archive hours before a seminar at which Ho, Tse, Chow and Nam speak about their Kong Ngee careers.

What makes these veterans such perennial favourites is their distinctive qualities. Whereas many of today's celebrities talk and walk the same, the Kong Ngee stars have an individuality that sets them apart.

In the case of Ho, who made her debut with *The Strange Case of Three Wives* in

1955, it's the image of a strong, sophisticated and independent woman with sex appeal – and an exquisite wardrobe – that makes her stand out.

It's an attribute Ho was fully aware of – and nurtured. "If I read a script and found the woman in the story was sad and weak, then I would pass it to others because I knew the role was not for me."

The way scripts were passed around was testament to the camaraderie at Kong Ngee – cut-throat competition among actors, Ho says, was unheard of. "We had very strong relationships," she says. "We never fought each other for a role."

Ho, who has starred in more than 40 films, says the actors and directors respected each other. "I didn't feel pressured at all when I was making movies because the studio never gave us any," she says. "Whether or not the movie could sell wasn't my business because I've got my salary already – going to the studio to work every day was just a way to earn a bowl of rice."

It's a living that Ho came across by chance. When she was 16, her mother saw an advertisement by the Lan Kwong Film Company in the newspapers. Given that Ho wasn't doing well in her studies at Maryknoll Convent School, her mother



Patsy Ho in her acting heyday (above right) and today (top)

urged her to give it a try. "It was the deadline that day and I hadn't had my photos taken," she says. "So I tore off the passport photos on my student documents and sent them to the studio."

Ho's strong nature is probably rooted in the turbulent days of her childhood. Born in Guangzhou in 1936, she moved with her family to Hong Kong – only to flee back to the mainland after the second world war broke out. "When we were fleeing, my mother would take away my peanuts if I complained my portion was smaller. I think that's how I was trained not to be calculating in anything."

The close relationship among the actors also stemmed from the fact that they all started together. Ho, Tse, Nam and Chow were hired and trained by Lan Kwong before they all moved to Kong Ngee.

But whereas modern actors are trained in singing and acting, Ho and her co-workers studied film theory. They also worked as production assistants to learn the basics of filmmaking and followed the established stars to learn how to act.

Stars these days often start out big and have an entourage almost immediately after they've signed the contract. Not so for newcomers at Kong Ngee. "We had no transportation back then," Ho says. "Every day we had to go to Jordan pier to take a bus to the studio in Tsuen Wan, which cost 60 cents. I remember that be-

cause we had to keep the ticket or else we couldn't claim the expenses."

And although movies these days often have sponsors for everything, the costumes Ho wore were often designed by her. "If you didn't design them well and you looked bad, then it was your problem," she says.

Often dubbed the Elizabeth Taylor of the east, Ho says she sometimes adapted what she saw Hollywood actresses wearing in magazines.

And then there were the nightgowns. She got her pretty sleeveless night clothes

But she often returns to Hong Kong to meet her old friends, including Tse, who remains as well known today as his son, singer-actor Nicholas Tse Ting-fung.

Now a philanthropist with three children and four grandchildren, Ho doesn't seem to miss show business, and isn't tempted to return – even when famous directors come knocking. These have included Tsai Ming-liang, a festival-circuit favourite from Taiwan who went to Bangkok a few times this year to try to persuade Ho to star in a film he had written specially for her, in which she would play a

"WE HAD NO TRANSPORTATION BACK THEN. SO EVERY DAY WE HAD TO TAKE A BUS TO THE STUDIO IN TSUEN WAN, WHICH COST 60 CENTS"

and sexy see-through gowns from Lane Crawford because she knew the department store sold the best. "I was very smart – I wore one nightgown in a movie, then I would ask the tailor to get rid of the ruffle collar and sew on another one to turn it into a new nightgown," she says.

Ho married Thai-Chinese architect Burin Wongsanguan in 1963 (the relationship with Tse didn't work out, although they remain close friends), and retired from the acting and the public spotlight in 1967 to move to Thailand with her family.

widow. "He said he would fully accommodate my schedule. But I said no, because I couldn't allow myself to act again after being away for 40 years."

"I thought, he is so famous and has got so many awards. If it happened that the one with me did not win anything, then it would be very bad."

The Glorious Modernity of Kong Ngee, Hong Kong Film Archive, 50 Lei King Rd, Sai Wan Ho, Inquiries: 2739 2139. Ends Jun 11

CINEMA SCOPE

Jason Gagliardi

Clowning through the tears

Job description: A funny thing happened on the way to the tragedy. Or so runs the premise of films that mine the power of life-affirming laughs in the face of sadness and horror. Call it the opposite of the tears of a clown, or the ability to smile when the whole world isn't smiling with you.

Recently seen in: Italian master of pathos and pratfalls Roberto

Benigni's return to the silver screen, *The Tiger and the Snow*. Benigni (right) writes, directs and stars in this film about a love-struck Italian poet caught in Iraq at the start of the US-led invasion. His attempts to win a beautiful woman's heart (his real-life wife Nicoletta Braschi) go unrewarded in Rome, so he follows her to Iraq, where she's working on a biography of an Iraqi poet.

This sets the stage for Benigni to do what Benigni does best: namely, find the funny side of violent disaster while weaving a compelling fable about love. Added interest comes from a supporting cast that includes Jean Reno at his mournful best and a strange, gruff Tom Waits.

Most likely to say: "I want to be rocked by waves of your love, with egg salad sandwiches in aisles of liquid." (Especially if he wins another Oscar.)

Classics of the genre: A brooding Leonardo DiCaprio cracks wise in *Marvin's Room* (1996), based on Scott McPherson's play of the same name, which opened shortly before McPherson died of AIDS. The laughs and the tears fall in equal measure as we're taken on an emotional roller coaster through a dysfunctional family's reconciliation. The all-star cast includes Robert De Niro (as a doctor with a penchant for one-liners), Dan Hedaya (as his bumblingly inept brother), Diane Keaton (as the leukaemia-stricken aunt), and Meryl Streep

(as her chain-smoking, hard-boiled sister).

More tears are jerked along with chuckles by Robin Williams in 1998's *Patch Adams*. (Not everyone's cup of tea – reviewer Roger Ebert wrote: "It's not merely a tearjerker. It extracts tears individually by liposuction,



without anaesthesia.") Williams plays a troubled man who gets well with the help of the patients in a mental hospital, enrolls in medical school, and discovers to his horror that the world of medicine is just a big evil business. So Patch decides to teach the world that laughter is the best medicine.

If you're feeling art house-inclined, consider nonagenarian Manoel de Oliveira's 2001 film *I'm Going Home*, with Michel Piccoli, Catherine Deneuve and John Malkovich. It elicits the comedy that underlies the absurd tragedy that is life, seen through the eyes of an ageing actor (Piccoli) who learns that his wife, daughter and son-in-law have been killed in a terrible accident.

Ultimate avatar: Love him or hate him, in these kind of roles you can't beat Benigni. And Benigni is at his best in *Life is Beautiful* (1997), with his Oscar-winning performance as an Italian-Jewish hotel waiter who is deported to a concentration camp, along with his wife and son, on the day of his son's birthday. Through a clever series of lies and coincidences, Benigni protects his son by convincing him that the whole thing is an elaborate game. Of course, no matter how outrageous his lies become, they pale into insignificance before the grotesque invention of the gas ovens and genocide.

Not to be confused with: *It's a Wonderful Life*, benign humour.

PHOTO: RICKY CHUNG