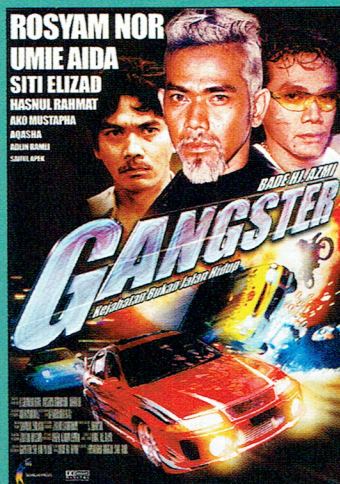


IMPACT LOVES FILM FESTIVALS - THEY ARE THE BEST WAY TO FIND OUT WHAT WE'LL ALL BE WATCHING IN A YEAR OR SO - AND THE FESTIVAL WE LOVE BEST IS THE ECLECTIC MADNESS THAT IS THE NYAFF. NY NATIVE ABE GOLDFARD REPORTS...



"I DON'T REALLY LIKE TO MAKE ACTION MOVIES. I DO DRAMA, REALLY. THAT'S MY KIND OF MOVIE."

Spoken by director Bade Haji Azmi about half an hour before the US premiere of his down-and-dirty crime epic *Gangster*, these words were wryly amusing. After witnessing his 90-minute rampage of bullet holes and car chases, they inspired incredulity. Bade, for his part, seemed pretty unruffled by the whole affair. Sat in a plastic chair, stubby and dressed in jeans, a blazer and a nice shirt, he looked as though he might as well have been vacationing. Pressed to comment on the fact that he was probably giving an entire theatre its first look at Malaysian cinema, he shrugged. Very quietly he said, "Don't make a big deal about it. We'll make more movies, the next ones will be better."

Subway Cinema's *New York Asian Film Festival* turned five years old this summer, a fact occasioned by co-founder and 'mascot' Grady Hendrix donning a diaper and running rampant in the upstairs theatre of the Anthology Film Archives (the other charter members are Paul Kazee, Brian Naas, Goran Topalovic and Daniel Craft). 'More' and 'better' seem to be the bywords for their annual celebration of Eastern cinema. Like a goodie bag full of candy, dynamite and live bugs, you never

NEW YORK ASIAN FILM FESTIVAL

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Main image: A kids movie from Takashi Miike? *The Great Yokai War*.

Far left: Malaysia's first action movie *Gangster*.

Top: The fans.

Above: The Subway Cinema collective.

Above right: *The Great Yokai War*.

Below right: *It's Only Talk*.



know exactly what you're going to pull out. There is, however, a lot of it and you'll never forget the first time you sink your teeth in, whether it goes bang, crunch or crack.

Gangster goes crunch. It's a sweaty, mean, dirt-cheap and as healthy as a sugar lump in a mud puddle. Luckily, that's a good thing. Focusing as it does on the a handful of exceptionally unlucky people on the wrong side of the law, and climaxing in a spectacular car accident that brings them all together, the film hasn't got much in the way of memorable dialogue, aesthetic craft or clever plotting. What it does have is narrative economy, terrific stunts, a thumping techno soundtrack that will refuse to vacate your brain and a shocking triple performance by an actor named Rosyam Nor. Nor plays a scarred drag racer, a humble merchant and, most strikingly, a silver haired crime boss with a sneer where his scruples used to be. He walks off with the picture, but not before dropping a handful of completely outrageous moments on the bewildered audience (his slow-motion punch-up is a sight to behold). This is a film from the Roger Corman school of B, and how closely it fits that model comes down to a moment in the director's post-screening Q&A. Asked why he had shown the climactic crash once at the beginning of the film and once (in a slightly longer version) at the end, Bade replied that he only had

\$200,000 to make *Gangster*, and action films "should look expensive". Lacking the budget to shoot another stunt sequence, he simply thought that showing the crash twice was the best way to beef it up. His cheerful opportunism is what defines the movie, and one can't imagine it'll be long before he's heard from again.

Subway Cinema may have started by screening action films from Hong Kong (all five founding members were longtime patrons of the now-defunct Chinese cinema the Music Palace) but that country's output has become far less significant to the festival since its inception in 2002. This is partially due to the catastrophic drop in production, and partially because most HK studios are looking for distribution deals; they don't want to play what is perceived as a smaller festival. "We're not Cannes," said Hendrix, "and a lot of these folks are looking to basically play Cannes, or Toronto, make a sale and go home." Countries like Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea are gaining ground, and more on them later, but one country dominated this year, accounting for nearly half of the line-up: Japan. And no director says Japan like the man who brought the world *Ichii the Killer*.

One of the festival's biggest draws was a children's film by Takashi Miike, *The Great Yokai War*. Yes, tongue-slicing, acupuncture, excrement-splashing Takashi Miike. He is, in a sense, a perfect director for the young. His love of chaos and nonsense is perfectly childlike, even when it manifests itself in decidedly child-unfriendly imagery (*Yokai's* slimy cow foetus with a human face babbling about doom and destruction comes to mind). The story of a boy, a magic sword and a lot of goblins, *Yokai* is a rare excursion into mainstream blockbuster territory for Miike. Lord only knows who okayed the clearly massive budget, but the director gets away with leaving his gonzo fingerprints on every frame. If the results are mixed, they're also impossible not to enjoy.

Nearly every story beat is predictable from a mile off, making this a less than top-shelf work (though after 70 movies in 15 years it's hard for Miike to preserve the element of surprise), and the CGI work can be very, very clunky. But where *Yokai* scores most is in letting its director's perverse, fecund visual imagination run gobsmackingly amok. It starts with a bluff: the first monster we get a good look at is

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"SHOW ME YOUR DANCING!"



It's Only Talk



a sweet-natured, furry sock puppet, and no, that's not a joke. By the time we reach the end, though, Miike is packing his frames with thousands of goofy, springy, creepy, loveable monsters. An umbrella with a mouth, a wall with feelings, a turtle with a dinner plate for a scalp, a blue-faced man with an expanding head, a furry red caterpillar-wolfman...it's a big, loud, block-rocking monster mash and, as long as he's given free reign to indulge his personal variety of insanity, Miike delivers on a grand scale. He also gets to chuck in a few terrifically dry asides, such as the frame freezing during an action sequence and displaying a warning for children not to try this at home. Then there's a beer sponsorship that the director interpolates in a fashion so utterly, hilariously irresponsible that it's almost admirable.

The Great Yokai War is enormous fun, even with its merely serviceable script, and Miike

Oh! My Zombie Mermaid



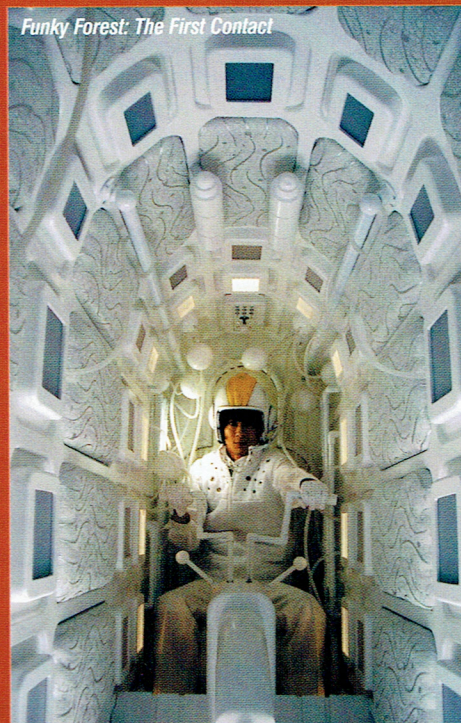
Oh! My Zombie Mermaid



ends on a note of sweetly achieved melancholy. The real test of the film's success or failure: a little girl at the screening with her parents reacted to nearly every moment with shrieking glee. Someone probably would have told her to shut up if she'd been audible over the crowd of adults doing the same.

Japan was also responsible for some of the festival's smaller gems. Ruichi Hiroki's *It's Only Talk* is a level, shattering study of manic depression, notable not only for its unfussy craft but for Shinobu Terajima's fearless performance. Playing a bipolar 35-year old woman with no job and an insurance payout that's funding her directionless wanderings, Terajima quietly tears a hole in your heart. On the other end of the spectrum, *Ski Jumping Pairs: Road to Torina 2006* proved to be a modest comic triumph, a mockumentary about a fake, ridiculous Olympic sport and the struggle to keep it alive. Directors Riichiro Mashima and Masaki Kobayashi mix live action with cartoonish CGI, but they never drop the film's deadly serious face. If it catches you in the right mood, expect to have trouble breathing. And the wrestling-horror-action-comedy-tragedy *Oh! My Zombie Mermaid* has not only the greatest title of the decade, but a

Funky Forest: The First Contact



lot of heart and a lot of fun. Not everyone will be tickled by this fruity blend of romantic melodrama and extreme body-slams, but it's one-of-a-kind, and no mistake.

Speaking of one-of-a-kind, the festival's most unpredictable success story was the cultish adoration and sheer bafflement that greeted Katsushito Ishii's supersized omnibus of odd, *Funky Forest: The First Contact*. Hendrix said that one critic approached him after a viewing, almost in tears, begging to know what it all meant. By three minutes into the film, it's easy to see why. *Funky Forest* is a jamboree of verbal misdirection, visual wonderment and wet, fleshy gland-creatures, the love-it-or-hate-it proposition of the year. Impossible to summarize and impossible to forget, it has no real plot. It's just a series of sketches exploring loneliness, miscommunication and sexual humiliation through the yowlingly cracked lens of Ishii's mind. A pair of comedians playing for an audience of clones scream at each other, make faces and pretend to be warring robots. A little girl fires telekinetic projectiles at an otherworldly blob. A young man's dream girl repeatedly commands him, "Show me your dancing!" He does, for 20 minutes. A dog has its mind read by a psychic to find out the shot list for the anime the

Ski Jumping Pairs: Road to Torina 2006





A Bittersweet Life



Funky Forest: The First Contact



SPEAKING OF ONE-OF-A-KIND, THE FESTIVAL'S MOST UNPREDICTABLE SUCCESS STORY WAS THE CULTISH ADORATION AND SHEER BAFFLEMENT THAT GREETED KATSUSHITO ISHII'S SUPERSIZED OMNIBUS OF ODD, *FUNKY FOREST: THE FIRST CONTACT*. HENDRIX SAID THAT ONE CRITIC APPROACHED HIM AFTER A VIEWING, ALMOST IN TEARS, BEGGING TO KNOW WHAT IT ALL MEANT. BY THREE MINUTES INTO THE FILM, IT'S EASY TO SEE WHY.

dog is 'directing'. Two bizarrely dressed schoolboys implore a schoolgirl to power their television (a huge anus with steampipes) by plugging it into her navel. If that sounds like too much for you, then it probably is. If you've got the moxie, it's the year's most rewarding cinema experience so far, a film so endlessly rewatchable that it might burn your DVD player to a crisp. Right along with your mind.

More on the Japanese pictures next time, but one might get the idea that action fans were ill-served. Not so. South Korea stepped into the breach with Kim Jee-woon's *A Bittersweet Life*, probably 2005's finest and most beautifully made bruiser. The story of a mob enforcer (the outlandishly charismatic Lee Byung-heon) who begins to grow a conscience, it's a slow burn, but stay with it. After a stunning early burst of violence, Kim takes his time laying the bricks of his gangster tragedy. Lee is assigned to look after his boss's young girlfriend. If it turns out she has a boyfriend, he is instructed, kill them both. He discovers an affair, but he makes a surprising decision that dooms him completely. How he pays for his trespass, and how he extracts himself from his fate, dovetail into a scene of such shocking, brutally choreographed mayhem that the audience was left reeling. And once it starts, it just doesn't let up. Some have accused the picture of a stylish hollowness, of nihilism. This is wrong. It's not only a great genre film, it's a cumulatively devastating portrait of a man glimpsing a world better and bigger than his own and putting himself through hell to defend it. *A Bittersweet Life* is heads-down no-nonsense boogie with a poetic soul, and it cannot be missed.

Is it any wonder the festival's lasted this long? Is it any wonder audiences keep coming back? Up until right before this year's kickoff, no sponsors had come forth to help fund the event, raising the grim thought that this couldn't continue forever. The notion was sobering. It would leave a gaping hole in the city's cultural landscape. No one in New York has so effectively championed current pan-Asian popular art. At the last minute, McDonald's, Bud Light, Kirin Beer (the official drink of *The Great Yokai War*) and Chivas Regal stepped up to lend their good names to the fest, inspiring Grady to dub them "the four major food groups." Sure, they'll kill you, but for the fans they represented life support.

Not so long into the festival, people were starting to recognize each other from other screenings. Some people had made friends at previous festivals, reuniting in this year's edition. It's a sense of bonhomie and togetherness you just can't manufacture. This wasn't some apathetic multiplex crowd testing out ringtones and heckling, these were audiences who fell in love at the movies. The *New York Asian Film Festival* is a happy invitation to fall in love all over again.

Plus, they had superninjas. But more on that next time.

ABE GOLDFARB

A Bittersweet Life



Funky Forest: The First Contact

