



WEEKEND Arts MOVIES PERFORMANCES

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Core Studios

Ha Ji-won in "Duelist," a film by the South Korean director Lee Myung-Se being shown at the New York Asian Film Festival, which begins today.

For Fans of Asian Films, Two Weeks of Brash Bliss

By MANOHLA DARGIS

"Hollywood is so over. And Subway Cinema is proud to do its part to spread the word." That was 2002, and the founders of the New York Asian Film Festival had thrown down the gauntlet. Calling themselves the Subway Cinema collective, five Asian-film freaks entered the festival scene that year on a mission from God or, more accurately, the gods of cinema: entertainment or die! Uninterested in the kind of auteurist fare slated for art houses and uptown festivals, they wanted to showcase the audience-pleasing films they loved, the kind with monsters, tears and belly laughs. Art wasn't anathema, but neither was it a fetish.

Now in its fifth year, the New York Asian Film Festival (today through July 1) has evolved from the little festival that could into one of the city's most valuable events. Last year an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 film aficionados trekked to the Anthology Film Archives in the East Village, which has served as the festival's base since the beginning, to watch films from the internationally acclaimed likes of Park Chanwook and Takashi Miike. Also on tap last year was the North American premiere of the Japanese master Seijun Suzuki's delirious "Princess Raccoon," which had screened at Cannes just the month before. It was a coup for the festival programmers and because, like so many foreign-language films, "Princess Raccoon" remains without an American distributor, it was a gift to local cinephiles.

In 1999 the Subway Cinema col-

The New York Asian Film Festival runs from tonight through June 25 at the Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Avenue, at Second Street, East Village, (212) 505-5181; and from June 22 to July 1 at the ImaginAsian Theater, 239 East 59th Street, Manhattan. (212) 371-6682. Information: subwaycinema.com.

lective — Paul Kazee, Brian Naas, Goran Topalovic, Nat Olson and Grady Hendrix, later joined by Dan Craft — combined forces after the shuttering of the Music Palace movie theater. Located on the Bowery, that legendary Chinese-language cinema showcase had been a near high holy temple, the place where dedicated moviegoers could discover, amid curlicues of cigarette smoke and vapors from what sometimes seemed like an entire dim sum brunch, the joys of Hong Kong cinema.

It was where some New Yorkers saw their first John Woo movies and others discovered "Raped by an Angel 4." It was a place for epiphanies both majestic and sordid.

Speaking by telephone from his

Monsters, crime, epics and occasionally a fingernail as a garnish.

home in Manhattan, Mr. Hendrix, 33, explained that while they couldn't keep the Music Palace alive, he and his fellow enthusiasts wanted to keep their movie love burning. So, after kicking in \$1,000 each, they began spreading the word, initially by mounting retrospectives dedicated to Hong Kong virtuosos like Johnnie To and Tsui Hark.

The collective began crossing borders shortly thereafter, screening 11 films from five different countries for its first festival. As in 2002, most of the films in this year's edition are from Japan, which has a robust and, in the United States, criminally neglected national cinema. Also showing are films from Korea (seven), India (five) and Thailand, Malaysia and China (one apiece).

The crisis in foreign-language film distribution in the United States is a

point of obsessive concern for those who believe the movie of the moment isn't "The Break-Up" but the Romanian social satire "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu." Still, despite the grim tidings — the shrinking theatrical audience, the shuttered distributors — showcases like the New York Asian Film Festival suggest all may not be lost. And Mr. Hendrix, for one, remains uncharacteristically hopeful for someone in this business.

"Kids who read manga and watch anime," he said, "they're into movies with female protagonists, they're into romance and comedy. They make it a point to seek out animes with subtitles. And at some point someone in the U.S. is going to realize that is an audience that should be served."

Over the next two weeks the festival will play 29 films, including a short, "Hair," from the South Korean director Jang Jun-Hwan, whose "Save the Green Planet" received a limited American release last year. As usual, the selections encompass a range of genres, from hardcore horror to softhearted melodrama, and include multiple premieres. Some of the films arrive laden with accolades, like the epic-size Chinese family drama "Peacock" (2005), which won a significant prize at last year's Berlin Film Festival. Directed by Gu Changwei, a cinematographer who has shot films for Chen Kaige and Robert Altman, "Peacock" follows three adult children who, beginning in the 1970's, are trying to find their way in a country not yet in the grip of Louis Vuitton knockoffs and ennui.

The hushed naturalism and unhurried rhythms of "Peacock" could not be more different from the go-go frenzy of a film like "Gangster" (2005), the festival's sole selection from Malaysia. Directed by Bade Haji Azmi, this cinematic pileup — think "Amores Perros" by way of "The Fast and the Furious" and every Roger Corman cheapie you can think of — is as irredeemably absurd as it is watchable. The film offers a

glimmer of social commentary tucked between its throbbing musical-and-storybook beats, but what it mostly has to offer are slick surfaces, spinning wheels and a young cast who — whether hanging off one another curbside or bouncing in the local nightclub — unintentionally provide further evidence of pop culture's homogenizing effects.

Those looking to satisfy their craving for Asian extreme cinema will find relief in "Art of the Devil 2" (2005), a sporadically amusing, gore-soaked Thai horror flick that proves you should never eat anything you haven't cooked yourself. (Oops, is that a blue lacquered fingernail in my soup?)

Far more satisfying, aesthetically if not nutritionally, is the slick, fast-moving gangster film "Company" (2002), from the well-regarded Indian director and producer Ram Gopal Varma. A sweeping, self-consciously cynical crime story about a cartel that spreads its violent tentacles from Bollywood to Hong Kong ("Yes, it stinks, but it's business"), the film is playing as part of a four-title tribute to Mr. Varma titled "No Singing, No Dancing, No Mercy."

Given the festival's commitment to genre cinema it's instructive that two of the best films I've seen from this year's lineup push the limits of form almost to the breaking point. In the diverting "Cromartie High School" (2005), the Japanese director Yudai Yamaguchi, working with an economy of means and a bountiful imagination, tracks the supremely unhinged adventures of a group of very unusual high school students. Much like the swoon-worthy South Korean period story "Duelist" (2005), from Lee Myung-Se, this parody of juvenile delinquent films takes a satisfyingly heretical approach to traditional narrative. In "Duelist," a film that bridges the musical and the action movie with abandon, brandished swords lead not only to some wonderfully riotous fight scenes, but also to an awfully fine romance.