

SCHOOLHOUSE ROCK
Four students turn it up to 11 in *Linda, Linda, Linda*.



robots—and Katsuhito Ishii's singular mind-melt *Funky Forest: The First Contact*. For fanboys, there's the requisite "Asia Extreme" entry (Thailand's bloody horror flick *Art of the Devil 2*) and not one but three films in which crime pays for gun-toting gangsters.

Despite the festival's dedication to importing big, dumb fun, this year's standouts walk the fine line between multiplex fish and art-house fowl. You could mistake Korean director Kim Jee-woon's *A Bittersweet Life* for just another slick look at the art of bad-assitude, as Lee Byung-heon's mob enforcer keeps his Armani suit immaculate while dispatching hoods. But the movie gilds its *Le Samurai* cool with a melancholic edge, never skipping on the adrenaline; expect Quentin Tarantino to borrow the bravura gun-assembling sequence for some future endeavor.

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Likewise, Japanese filmmaker Ryuichi Hiroki (*Vibrator*) subverts expectations with *It's Only Talk*, the story of a manic-depressive woman struggling to maintain a normal life amid her emotional peaks and valleys. What sounds like Oscar bait becomes an intimate, carefully measured character study, thanks to Hiroki's ability to convey empathy without gross sentimentality.

The fest's winner by a J-pop long shot, however, is Nobuhiro Yamashita's *Linda, Linda, Linda*, a po-faced chronicle of three Japanese schoolgirls (and a Korean exchange student) who decide to play one rock song in the year-end talent show. Following the quartet's midnight sessions as they rehearse the title track—an '80s hit for Tokyo's The Blue Hearts—the film's deliberate pace ups the deadpan factor into the double digits. Imagine downing Jarmusch and Kaurismäki's entire output in one sugary gulp, and you'll get an idea of what bliss awaits you. Currently without distribution, the movie is a prime example of why the NYAFF is a gift to those who hunger for great foreign-film fixes. Like the rest of the festival, it's simply too good to go unnoticed.

The New York Asian Film Festival runs Friday 16 through July 1. See Art-house & indie cinema.

Continental drift

Killer robots and girl rockers rule the NYAFF. **By David Fear**

By this point, most New Yorkers who frequent movie theaters and video stores have seen at least one film that falls within the broad spectrum of "Asian cinema." Maybe they've sought out the Korean revenge thriller that left their friends reeling, or sat transfixed by those lavish Chinese martial-arts spectacles that have invaded the multiplexes. Or, thanks to the glut of J-horror remakes that have permeated the mainstream (even your grand-mother is familiar with the rules of engagement for lank-haired *Grudge/Ring* ghosts), they've decided to delve into the genre's back catalog, now widely available at the local Blockbuster.

But for every subcategory that crosses over, there's a huge amount of Asian fare—slapstick farces,

pulpy yakuza or Triad potboilers—that isn't granted a single Gotham screen. "It's mostly art films that get distribution in New York," says Subway Cinema co-founder Grady Hendrix (a former *TONY* contributor). "Films like Kim Ki-duk's *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring* are marketed like exotica; the movie was sold as if it were a Tibetan prayer rug! After the Music Palace in Chinatown closed down in 1999, there was no place to see the sappy romances or action movies that my friends and I loved. That was when a group of us formed Subway and thought, How about a festival?"

Thus was born the New York Asian Film Festival, Subway's annual event devoted to bringing the continent's pop cinema to Anthology Film Archives and midtown's ImaginAsian theater. Formerly titled "Asian Films Are Go!," the series emphasized the more delirious output from Japan, Hong Kong and

India. The fest, now in its fifth year, has managed to broaden its scope with an even more eclectic mix of audience-friendly popcorn movies, oddball psychotronics, and the occasional ballet of ballistics and clanging blades. "There aren't any particular criteria for what gets chosen," festival director Brian Naas admits. "If three of the five programmers like a film, we try to pick it up. Since we all have varied tastes, that usually means that most bases are covered."

For cinephiles, the lineup is indeed a grab bag: A feel-good blockbuster such as South Korea's *Welcome to Dongmakgol* may play next to a Japanese comedy (*Cromartie High School*) or a Bollywood extravaganza (*Company*, whose musical credits rival anything in *Liza with a "Z"*). Several big names return with new work, such as Takashi Miike's *The Great Yokai War*—his skewed take on *The NeverEnding Story*, with cow-fetus prophets and killer