



GO! SUPERNINJA

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 GOLDFARB BRINGS US PART 2 OF HIS FESTIVAL COVERAGE...

Consider, if you will, the superninja. Raised in a valley hidden away in the mountains, the superninja, bred exclusively to kill, develops such useful household skills as, say, breathing poison, moving faster than light, or pulverizing every bone and internal organ you've got with laser eyes. Well, that's life. Such contemplation has not escaped Ten Shimoyama, his film on the subject, *Shinobi*, making its North American premiere at the New York Asian Film Festival. Is gangbusters entertainment in a grand style. Doing away with all the carelessly written padding most blockbuster action films drown in, Shimoyama has delivered a pared down, exciting, visually sumptuous, curiously moving piece of work. The story couldn't be simpler if it tried: Oboro (the gorgeous Yuki Nakama) and Gennosuke (*Princess Raccoon's* Joe Odagiri) are very much in love. Oboro, however, is from Iga, and Gennosuke is from Koga. These two superninja clans have been holding a tenuous peace for a good long while, but hostilities are such that the young romance can never be allowed. When the Shogun lifts the ban on inter-clan warfare as a way of settling who will succeed him (and, unbeknownst to the clan leaders, getting rid of the strongest of both villages), all hell breaks loose. Oboro and Gennosuke find themselves leading



opposing killing parties. It's essentially *Romeo and Juliet: The Mortal Kombat Years*.

It's easy to imagine Ryuhei Kitamura delivering a slam-bang comic book take on this, but Shimoyama's interested in doing exactly three things. First, he wants to ask the question Lee Myung-se posed with *Duelist*: if a young person has been raised to be a killer, how do they ever work through or even understand their own purer, more humane urges? If the question is posed literally a few too many times, credit



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FROM SLEEVE-TENDRILS OF DEATH TO FLIGHT TO FACE-STEALING TO BUTTERFLY FORCE FIELDS, SHINOBI SEIZES ON ITS PREMISE WITH ECONOMY AND NUTZOID WIT, AND NO ONE COULD COMPLAIN ABOUT BEING SHORTCHANGED IN THE ACTION DEPARTMENT. THE CAST IS EXCELLENT (NICE TO SEE TAK SAKAGUCHI IN THERE), THE EFFECTS ARE WAY ABOVE PAR...

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is due for making an action film that dares to posit an inquiry into violence (and dares again to admit that there is no justification). Second, he wants to deliver a heart-crushing romantic tragedy. This he does with aplomb, and the outcome isn't anywhere near what you'd expect. The festival audience was audibly whimpering as Gennosuke and Oboro concluded their final meeting on a windswept beach. Third, Shimoyama desires to scorch your eyes with lightning fast bouts of superninja-on-superninja violence. Done and done. From sleeve-tendrils of death to flight to face-stealing to butterfly force fields, Shinobi seizes on its premise with economy and nutzoid wit, and no one could complain about being shortchanged in the action department. The cast is excellent (nice to see Tak Sakaguchi in there), the effects are way above par, Taro Iwashiro's score is wonderfully effective and the Masasai Ikashori cinematography deserves special mention for its evocative, autumnal flavour. This is blue chip stuff all the way, and a Western release would not be impossible to imagine. Still, do megaplex moviegoers have the stomach for an action movie so despairing? One hopes so. It may be the feel-bad superninja throwdown of the year, but the craft and genuine feeling in the thing make it more uplifting than a dozen romantic comedies.

The festival gifted horror fans with the appalling grisly *Art of the Devil 2*, a Thai screamer that answers the age-old question, "if someone had their teeth pulled out and their legs blowtorched, would it really, REALLY hurt?" (short answer: oh, God, yes) It may be no more than a series of meticulously arranged gore

tableaux, but it flirts with major psycho-gender questions that most horror films stop short of. The female villain is as much a victim as an aggressor, though neither of which in the exact way you'd imagine. Fish-hooks, power drills and pliers feature as well, if that's your sort of thing... The midnight crowd went crazy for it.

The Japanese melodrama *Always* walked off with the audience prize, but it's more likable than great. Set in a digitally recreated post-war Tokyo, it's very sweet, very visually accomplished and just a little bit calculated. Far more captivating was the less celebrated *Pacchigi!*, a bracing tale of friction between Japanese youth and transplanted South Korean families. It's rough around the edges, performed with more enthusiasm than expertise and it never says something once when three times would do just as well, but it's the genuine article. Gang fights, teen pregnancy, star-crossed lovers and one hell of a musical number feature in this one, and it comes by every laugh and choked-up sob honestly.

Another unexpected delight was *Linda, Linda, Linda*, Nobuhiro Yamashita's unassuming deadpan punk-rock oddity. It's about a few girls who decide that for their school's Korean-Japanese cultural festival, they'd like to form a band. They learn three songs and play them. And that's it. The film accumulates weird details as it goes, ranging from the quietly amusing to the laugh-out-loud hysterical (a clumsy phonetic-Korean confession of love is the comic highpoint). By the end, as the film ambles to its climax, you realize it's as rock and roll as movies get. It sneaks up on you, like the absurd comic perfection of Bae Doo-na's portrayal of an inscrutable Korean student, but once it has you, you're a goner.

The Subway Cinema crew were especially proud of their selection of Bollywood films this year, and justifiably so. Their crown jewel was a four-flick sampler of the Indian director-producer supremo Ram Gopal Varma. Dispensing with most of the clichéd hallmarks of Bollywood cinema (he's not actually from the Bollywood region or system), Varma specializes in



tough, sharp jabs of *noir* that leave bruises when they've finished. Most notable among the presented works was his organized crime epic *Company*. A whirligig of gunplay, tense phone calls and whiplash plot turnabouts, *Company* takes the *Goodfellas* template and drops it into the grimy thick of the Mumbai underworld. Mallik (Ajay Devgan), a kid from the slums desperate for a break, hooks up with Chandu (Vivek Oberoi), a cool customer with friends in bad, bad places. Together, they ascend to the status of crime royalty. Wouldn't you know it, though, venality and vanity rear their ugly heads and Mallik finds himself in hot water. The

Facing page: All images from *Shinobi*.

This page...

Top 1: The disturbing Thai horror, *Art Of The Devil 2*.

Top 2: Japanese post war drama, *Always*.

Top 3: *Linda, Linda, Linda*, the ultimate band movie?

Right: *Pacchigi!*



Krish

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ROSHAN IS A ONE MAN BAND. HE'S IN NEARLY EVERY FRAME OF *KRRISH*, AND HE DOES SOMETHING THAT MOST FILM STARS HAVE FORGOTTEN HOW TO DO. HE MAKES SINCERITY SEXY. IT WOULD BE ALL TOO EASY TO SEND UP A FILM AS EXCESSIVE AS THIS ONE, BUT ROSHAN, TRUE BLUE AS HE IS, REFUSES TO WINK. HRITHIK ROSHAN SOMEHOW MANAGES TO MAKE THIS SEEM INDESCRIBABLY COOL.

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Ek Hasina Thi

outline is ordinary, but the particulars are where it's at. Varma likes to keep an audience on edge, and it's never clear who's catching the next bullet. There's genuine shock value in Varma's cruel game, and the heavy runtime (the film was shown, uncharacteristically for Indian films, without an intermission) gives enough time to all the primary and secondary characters that no one is obviously dispensable.

Ram Gopal Varma



Most interesting is Varma's technique. After a very typical (though beautifully wrought) opening musical number, Varma dials down the style and cranks up the naturalism. There are very few colour filters or visual tricks. His snap-snap editing and vertiginous hand-held camerawork disorient even as they draw you in. Everything feels captured, rather than staged. This is particularly true of a scene involving Mallik's second thoughts about an imminent assassination.



The Company

Through a series of frenzied phone calls and clumsy moral agonizing, Varma makes you sweat without pulling a single gun (very reminiscent, though not superficially, of Johnny To's work on *Election*).

The other Varma keeper was one he produced, a brutal, psychotically paced woman-wronged thriller called *Ek Hasina Thi*. Leading lady Urmila Matondkar's fierce transformation from harried single girl to avenging angel is one for the books, though they're the sort of books you'd keep well away from the kids. Director Sriram Raghavan has a keen eye for widescreen composition and a great touch with actors. Given the lightning-fast turnaround rate in Indian cinema, it's a surprise that he's been dormant since this, his first feature, debuted in 2004. He may have been working in the Varma house style, but Raghavan's got a juice all his own. More, please.

Bollywood's more old fashioned elements (song and dance, outrageous tonal swerves, performances that wouldn't be out of place in an animated film) made an auspicious appearance in *Krish*. Playing mix and match with genres in a way that could technically be described as 'mental', *Krish* gives us the world's first sci-fi superhero romantic action comedy tearjerker musical. Though it is billed as a sequel to *Koi...Mil Gaya*, a



Bollywood *E.T.* rip-off, no familiarity with the prior film is necessary to be any less (or any more) bewildered by Rakesh Roshan's relentless three-hour happy machine. With locations ranging from Mumbai to Singapore and action deliriously choreographed by Hong Kong legend Ching Siu-Tung, the sheer scale of the thing is never in question, but the film succeeds largely on the charm of its leading man.

You won't have heard of Hrithik Roshan, but then, you're not every single movie fan in India. The object of 30,000 marriage proposals upon playing his first leading role in 2000, he inspires the kind of mass hysteria Tom Cruise did before he decided to pick a fight with the mental health profession. One glance at Roshan's performance in *Krrish* is enough to explain it. With a chiseled face, eyes like hot ice and a surprising flair for breakdancing, Roshan is a one man band. He's in nearly every frame of *Krrish*, and he does something that most film stars have forgotten how to do. He makes sincerity sexy. It would be all too easy to send up a film as excessive as this one, but Roshan, true blue as he is, refuses to wink. Plus, he's got two thumbs on his right hand. Hrithik Roshan somehow manages to make this seem indescribably cool.

Oh, sorry, plot? It's your basic rural superhero meets city girl, pretends to be a ghost as a joke, goes back to civilization, improvises secret identity, saves children from a burning circus tent, reunites with his father and defeats evil futuristic supervillain technology story. You know, that old canard. Somewhere around the two hour mark, following a smashing song and dance sequence with Singapore circus performers, the energy starts to flag, but the film rallies itself for a climax that only a true grinch could hate. *Krrish* is the big, dumb Golden Retriever of summer movies, lovable, shaggy, endearing and only concerned with making you happy. Would that Hollywood execs would start taking notes. This is a crowd-pleaser, and it's got nary a cynical bone in its body.

The duds in the fest were few and far between (*Beetle the Horn King*, a leaden wrestling spoof, was the closest to a complete non-starter). If favourites absolutely must be picked, though, I'd have to go with South Korean director Song Il-gon's extraordinary *The Magicians*. Expanded from his short film of the same name, Song's digital feature is one unbroken hour and a half long take. To reduce it to its most obvious gimmick, though, does it a disservice, though once seen it's impossible to imagine the story being told any other way. It details the melancholy reunion of a fractured rock band on one chilly New Year's Eve, weaving flashbacks (signaled, wonderfully, by the characters changing clothes and make-up on camera) with rueful reminiscing. Through every scene, the spectral incarnation of a dead friend pops up and teasingly disappears, sometimes playing herself alive in flashback.

"[THE FINALE OF THE MAGICIANS IS] A BLAST OF KEENING CATHARSIS UNLIKE ANYTHING IN THE MOVIES THIS YEAR. I WAS SHAKING AT THE END, AND I WASN'T ALONE. PERHAPS THAT'S THE FILM'S MOST VALUABLE LESSON: NO ONE IS..."

The effect is hypnotic. A theatre has, surely, never been as hushed and attentive as the Imaginasian's audience was at the quietest, saddest moments in *The Magicians*. There is laughter, too, and wisdom (both at once when a snowboarding Buddhist monk decides to pay a visit). As the full picture of why the band split reveals itself, you wonder how on earth Song is going to wrap it up, how he could possibly find an ending satisfying enough and in keeping with the rest of this delicate little film. He does, and it's a blast of keening catharsis unlike anything in the movies this year. I was shaking at the end, and I wasn't alone. Perhaps that's the film's most valuable lesson: no one is...

It's also the lesson of the festival, in many ways. As a concluding chapter to this year's triumphant fest, the Subway Cinema gents (Daniel Craft, Grady Hendrix, Paul Kazee, Brian Naas and Goran Topalovic) presented a day of Hong Kong action movies salvaged from the basement of the legendary Music Palace, a long-defunct and soon-to-be-demolished Chinese language movie theatre. The prints were in terrible shape, but the small crowd that huddled together in the dark that Sunday, munching on Korean snack foods, drinking forbidden beer and cheering as the films unfolded, were in a state of mass joy. Old women in jumpers, young men in Ramones t-shirts, bespectacled geekettes and lager-guzzling dudes in baseball caps were all united, if just for that one day. It was bizarre and it was very touching.

Such is the power of the *New York Asian Film Festival*. Got bliss? No? Then this is the only game in town. Come and get some.

ABE GOLDFARB

Beetle: The Horned King



The Subway Cinema Collective



The Magicians