

FILM

TimeOut
New York

Overview

Return of the dragons

Subway Cinema keeps alive the spirit of Chinatown's shuttered movie theaters **By Steve Erickson**

Chinatown's last operating movie theater, the Music Palace, showed its final program on June 30—a double feature of Wong Jing's *City Hunter*, starring Jackie Chan, and *Liu Jai—Home for the Intimate Ghosts*. When the screen went dark, a result of the popularity of home videos and changing immigration patterns, New Yorkers lost a valuable resource. The Music Palace may have had its faults—half the seats seemed to be broken, and the management tolerated smoking inside—but it had one thing most New York theaters lack: personality. (What other concession stand offers soy milk and dried squid?) Attracting a mostly Chinese audience, with a sprinkling of white hipsters, it exhibited Hong Kong films within weeks of their overseas release, months or even years before they showed up north of Houston Street (if they ever did). And the \$6 double bills, ranging from the *Raped by an Angel* series to Chow Yun-Fat star vehicles like *God of Gamblers*, changed each week.

Fortunately, a new organization called Subway Cinema is doing its best to ensure that it will still be possible to see Cantonese-language cinema on the big screen in New York. The group's first program, a weekend retrospective of seven acclaimed films from the production company Milkyway Films, debuts at Anthology Film Archives on Friday, and Subway also served as a consultant on a fall festival of Hong Kong movies scheduled to run at Cinema Village October 6–20. (In a case of programming serendipity, the Screening Room is also celebrating Asian film this fall with "Hong Kong Midnights," a late-night retro-

spective playing Fridays and Saturdays through November 25.)

Subway Cinema, named on a whim after founders rejected a long list of more esoteric monikers, rose directly from the ashes of the Music Palace. "The idea for it came about ten minutes after the FOR SALE sign went up on the theater," says member Paul Kazee. "I began contacting friends, suggesting that we should try to see what we could do to keep the Music Palace from closing. Once we realized that we weren't going to find somebody easily to preserve the theater, we thought about what else we could do to preserve interest in Hong Kong films."

Part of the problem may be that much of the American cult audience drawn by John Woo's over-the-top action movies viewed them as unintentional comedies, a response that can be confirmed by anyone who attended Cinema Village's annual Hong Kong festival in the early '90s. "This year, there are going to be people who are convinced they're cooler than the films are, and that's

not going to change," says Kazee. "I've seen people laugh at *Men Behind the Sun*, which is about the torture and murder of Chinese and Russians by the Japanese military during World War II. If someone can find humor there, what can you say?" However, Subway Cinema aims to break down this condescension by showcasing the region's entire range of cinema, including art films, romances and comedies. "If our programs don't wake people up to the variety of Hong Kong film, nothing will," Kazee says.

Lawrence Ah Mon's *Spacked Out*, a teen drama far closer to the gritty, realistic work of Erick Zonca and the Dardenne brothers than to Woo or Chan, may be the most un-

a lot of tension and quiet moments." On the Cinema Village program, he cites Tsui Hark's *The Blade* (1995) as both a standout and a particularly influential film.

So far, the attention showered on Hong Kong cinema by American distributors has been a mixed blessing. In particular, Miramax has acquired quite a few Hong Kong films, only to keep them out of release for years or put them out only in dubbed, heavily edited form. One might think that smaller distributors would be attracted to Milkyway productions like the Kieslowski-cum-Tarantino gangster saga *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*.

But Kazee suggests that such films have fallen through the cracks of the American distribution system because they are too genre-oriented for art houses and too quirky and culturally specific for multiplexes.

While the success of the Milkyway festival may determine how ambitious Subway Cinema's future programming can get, the group is already planning the next few series. "With two theaters," says Kazee, "we're discussing the possibility of doing a Hong Kong horror series in October and a series of



HONG KONG FIRECRACKERS
A criminal showdown in *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*, above; Maggie Poon, right, plays a disaffected teen in *Spacked Out*.



usual selection in the Milkyway program. "It's a fascinating film in that it's so different from what most people think of as a Hong Kong movie," says Kazee. "It's basically a social-problem film, taking a look at the lives of girls who are latching onto anything they can find because life seems to be happening somewhere else." Kazee also praises *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* ("I would be very surprised to hear that the makers of *Run Lola Run* haven't seen it," he says) and Johnnie To's *The Mission*: "It's a very powerful film that works both as an action movie, full of gunplay, and a more cerebral film, with

classic Hong Kong films through January." The ghosts at the Music Palace must be smiling at the prospect, even if there's no dried squid at the concession stand.

"Expect the Unexpected: Masterpieces of Contemporary Urban Cinema from Hong Kong's Milkyway Productions" runs Friday through Sunday at Anthology Film Archives. The Hong Kong Film Festival runs October 6–20 at Cinema Village. "Hong Kong Midnights" is playing Fridays and Saturdays at the Screening Room through November 25.