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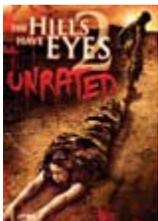
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Fantasia 2007 Report: Part Three

By MICHAEL GINGOLD

After the emphasis on European and American films in the earlier part of my [Fantasia](#) trip this year (see previous reports [here](#) and [here](#)), Wednesday evening at the Hall Theater sees a plunge into the Far East fare that originally gave the festival its name. THE KING AND THE CLOWN, directed by Lee Jun-ik, became the biggest Korean hit in history upon its release last year, and won a passel of awards to boot. It's not hard to see why, as Lee and screenwriters Choi Seok-hwan and Kim Tae-wung shrewdly blend crowdpleasing humor and pathos with gentle social commentary in their story of 16th-century street performers Jang-seng (Kam Woo-seong) and Gong-il (Lee Jun-gi). When the former's defense of the effeminate latter's dignity leads them to flee the small town they've been working, the pair wind up in Seoul, where they first compete and then team up with a local troupe. Their mockery of the king earns the ruler's scorn, forcing them to literally perform for their lives—and that's just the beginning of a story that will see both humor and relationships spring from unexpected sources.

The handling of the latter is as chaste as can be, with quietly moving moments interspersed among the much bawdier moments of broad humor. Even as it works as entertainment, THE KING AND THE CLOWN is just as successful as a celebration of the performing spirit, and the

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Millennium that I behold the consummation of my efforts...

ability to express through humor what might otherwise go unsaid. It also addresses the importance of satirists and parodists to counterbalance the status quo, and (not surprisingly) sticks up for them; the king's line "They're jesters, and so they jest" is the most succinct imaginable defense for any entertainer risking censure by thumbing their nose at the status quo.

With Shinya Tsukamoto at the helm, it's no surprise that NIGHTMARE DETECTIVE marks a 180-degree turn from KING. Yet this is, for the first half anyway, one of the TETSUO madman's most linear narratives, centering on Kyoichi (Ryuhei Matsuda), who uses his psychic talents to enter people's dreams for therapeutic purposes. Putting the minds of others at ease does little for his own sanity, however, and it is with great reluctance that he joins detective Keiko Kirishima (Japanese pop star Hitomi) in her investigation of a series of deaths.

That sounds like the synopsis of many a cheesy cable or DVD thriller, but since we're in Tsukamoto territory, the details are bizarre from the start. These particular demises seem to observers like suicides, but are actually brought on by a horrific presence that invades the victims' sleep and drives them to their self-inflicted atrocities. The movie's second half goes full-tilt crazy as it becomes unclear, in the best way, where reality leaves off and nocturnal fantasies begin. The plot gets left behind along the way, which doesn't really matter in the face of the powerful and often gory imagery Tsukamoto conjures up, and the quietly intense performances by Matsuda and Hitomi help keep the proceedings grounded. The Weinstein Company is already planning a U.S. remake, but do you even need to be told to stick with the original when it (hopefully) receives general Stateside release?

I have no idea what ROCKET SCIENCE, my first movie at the Hall on Thursday, is doing in Fantasia, as this oddball youth comedy has to do with high-school debating, not space travel. But I'm very glad it's here; this is, to quote a couple of fellow Fantasians, the sort of quietly eccentric and exceedingly charming film Wes Anderson used to make before he lost his bearings in recent years. Young female lead Anna Kendrick previously stood out in the ensemble of CAMP, and she's marvelous here as Ginny, a driven, fast-talking student who recruits socially awkward stutterer Hal Hefner (Reece Daniel Thompson) to partner with her on the debate team. No one like Ginny has even paid this kind of attention to Hal before, and he inevitably falls for her, with ramifications that neither he nor the audience can see coming.

The terrific and distinctive lead performances by Thompson and Kendrick are surrounded by a wealth of distinctive supporting characters and details, among them some of the more unique instrumental song covers you'll ever here. Writer/director Jeremy Blitz previously explored the precocious intellectualism of youth in his hit documentary SPELLBOUND, and here he draws on his own teen past—as a debater *and* stutterer—to create a world and a scenario that seem wholly fresh. Check ROCKET SCIENCE out when Picturehouse opens it theatrically next month. The feature is preceded by LA MINE, a blackly amusing short by French filmmaker Sébastien Le Gallo about a young man who gets an unexpected and potentially deadly surprise when he goes for a walk in the woods.

A much darker story of youth is presented in JACK KETCHUM'S THE GIRL NEXT DOOR, so monikered to both distinguish this film from the same-titled teen sex comedy of a few years back and register the source author's approval of this adaptation. I haven't read Ketchum's celebrated/notorious book, but certainly the movie doesn't seem to have watered much of the disturbing content down. Set in 1958 and based on a real case (one given a direct dramatization in the upcoming AN AMERICAN CRIME), GIRL stars Daniel Manche as 12-year-old David, who befriends Meg (Blythe Auffarth), the pretty, newly moved-in teen cousin of three brothers who live in a neighboring house. Any hope of a blissful first summer romance is dashed when Meg's aunt Ruth (Blanche Baker) develops a pathological dislike for her, expressed first in humiliation and then in physical punishment, which the brothers and other local kids join in on with shocking enthusiasm. David becomes an increasingly terrified and helpless witness as Meg is imprisoned in a basement and tortured, his innocence destroyed as surely as her body.

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR is an easier movie to review objectively than subjectively; I can't say I enjoyed it, but there's no denying its power. Director Gregory Wilson and scripters Daniel Farrands and Fango scribe Philip Nutman take a matter-of-fact approach to the story, and the directness of the filmmaking makes a couple of scenes of brutality near-impossible to watch. The question arises as to whether the extremity of this violence is necessary to make the point—and I can answer no, having seen AMERICAN CRIME, which achieves heartbreaking effect without overdoing the sadism. GIRL NEXT DOOR's greatest strength is the naturalism and sympathy of Manche and Auffarth's performances and their onscreen relationship (a late scene between them is especially strong), and Baker's quietly ferocious turn as the merciless Ruth. The actress creates an indelible portrait of a woman whose lifetime of bad choices and regret curdles into hatred of Meg's budding, innocent sexuality, transforming her into a frightening human monster. An equally impressive *tour de force* is on view in ELLIE, Matthew Garrett's half-hour short shown before GIRL, in which Darcy Miller memorably plays a self-destructive teenaged girl.

More femme-centric thrills of a less effective kind are showcased in the Colombian chiller AL FINAL DEL ESPECTRO (pictured on homepage), my first Friday flick in the D.B. Clarke. Director Juan Felipe Orozco, who scripted with Carlos Esteban Orozco (the latter also composed the score), spins the very familiar story of Vega (Noëlle Schonwald), who attempts to deal with a tragedy in her life by moving into a new apartment. For some reason, the building where she chooses to mentally recuperate is a gloomy place suffused with a trendy bluish tint, where her neighbors include a creepy guy with Peter Lorre eyes and an unstable Parker Posey lookalike. Worse yet, she starts to experience odd, unexplained disturbances and eventually begins catching glimpses of—you guessed it—a spooky female presence with long, dark hair. Is she being haunted, or just going crazy? And haven't Roman Polanski and Hideo Nakata already thoroughly covered this territory?

The movie is proficiently put together on a technical level, but the material is secondhand from start to finish. A change in the spoken language isn't enough to distinguish this from the countless Asian films in whose footsteps it follows; it's enough to make you wish for *un final de películas de espectros*. Somehow, it's not surprising that it's already slated for a U.S. redux by its original director, with none other than Nicole

Kidman said to be starring. This feature is accompanied by AKAI, a Brazilian short by Carlos G. Gananian about a bloodthirsty yet melancholic vampire that similarly applies gobs of atmosphere to a dramatically remote story.

Next up in the same room is SEDUCTION OF EVIL, a 45-minute take on the Dracula legend from several of my Montreal pals, including writer/director Andre Dubois and producer/star Isabelle Stephen. The former also stars as a man who encounters his long-lost love (Stephen), who hasn't aged in the two decades since he last saw her—thanks to the fact that she's now a vampire in thrall to the Count (Daniel Brown, who created his own Christopher Lee-esque wardrobe at great expense). Stephen and co-star Kerri Taylor provide plenty of sex appeal and while the very low budget shows, there are enough clever touches in Dubois' filmmaking to make SEDUCTION a fang above the typical sexy-bloodsucker shot-on-video fare.

As I await the start of THE DEVIL DARED ME TO upstairs outside the Hall, unfortunate reality intrudes in the form of a bomb threat that forces the evacuation of not just the adjacent Concordia buildings hosting Fantasia, but another campus site across town. The packed house watching the Asian sensation CITY OF VIOLENCE have to leave 15 minutes before the ending, but fortunately, it isn't too long before re-entry is allowed, VIOLENCE wraps up and DEVIL is given its due. The brainchild of New Zealand madmen Chris Stapp and Matt Heath, it plays like a Will Ferrell movie with balls (literally in a couple of scenes), chronicling the rise and lots of falls of stuntman Randy Campbell (Stapp) as he tries to do his daredevil family legacy proud. His road to triumph is littered with barriers, not to mention the broken, mangled, bloodied and burned casualties of stunts gone wrong, but Randy's chief obstacle is would-be mentor and eventual enemy Dick Johansonson (Heath).

The filmmaking duo throw gags and gore at the screen with abandon, and their gonzo enthusiasm both on camera and behind the scenes makes THE DEVIL DARED ME TO a crowdpleasing riot. They'll do anything for a laugh, including subjecting themselves to all manner of physical abuse, albeit in the service of characters and a (loose) storyline that sets them apart from the JACKASS crowd to which they have frequently been compared. Sadly, producer and frequent past Fantasia attendee Ant Timpson (who has a funny cameo in DEVIL) can't make the showing, but Stapp and Heath are on hand and prove to be just as much fun to hang out with as they are to watch on screen.

The same can also be said of director Jeremy Kasten and producer Daniel Griffiths, on hand to present THE WIZARD OF GORE (pictured above) at the Hall. A remake of Herschell Gordon Lewis' 1970 gruefest, WIZARD surprises by not simply replicating the previous plot with higher production values, but instead takes a noir tack as amateur detective/self-styled tabloid publisher Edmond Bigalow (Kip Pardue) turns his investigative attentions to magician Montag the Magnificent (Crispin Glover). The illusionist's stage shows consist of remarkably authentic-looking murder scenarios enacted upon selected female audience members, who then reappear at the end of the act good as new. Only later do they turn up dead for real, their corpses reflecting the manner of their on-stage demises. Bigalow's attempts to get to the bottom of the carnage lead him into the city's dark underbelly, not to mention encounters with genre vets Brad Dourif and an unrecognizably hirsute

Jeffrey Combs.

There's a hallucinatory quality to many of the scenes that suggests Bigalow's own reality is being altered, and the fact that Montag is never seen outside his venue hints that perhaps he exists only in the wannabe sleuth's mind. The narrative becomes fuzzy at times and Pardue could have been more demonstrative in his role, but there are several pleasures to be had: Kasten's shadowy/heightened visuals, abundant nudity from the Suicide Girls who portray the victims and, most of all, the performance of the perfectly cast Glover, who steals the movie as the demented Montag; he's a creepy hoot. WIZARD is paired with Richard Gale's short CRITICIZED, about a film reviewer who writes a devastating festival critique of an independent horror flick that ruins its chances of success. Soon the filmmaker comes calling, intent on exacting torturous revenge for that panning. This movie is, of course, a masterpiece, and reveals Gale to be one of the most brilliant cinematic minds of the modern day... All kidding aside, this is a sharp and squirm-inducing piece of work, with fine performances by John Lynd as the critic and especially Brian Rohan as the disgruntled director.

What better way to close out my Fantasia jaunt than with a pair of Uwe Boll films, one on Saturday and one on Sunday? What's that? You could think of lots of better ones? Well, as it turns out, the experience isn't a total loss. After catching the deliciously demented MURDER PARTY (which I'll review at greater length soon), I join a packed house in the Hall (they're even sitting on the stairs) to see Boll's highly anticipated POSTAL. This not-really-an-adaptation of the controversial video game courts the same notoriety from the very first scene, in which a pair of 9/11 hijackers discuss the virgins that await them in paradise and become disgruntled to learn that perhaps they won't receive as many as they were originally promised. This scene is clearly beyond tasteless, but these few minutes are also unavoidably funny, because they do what good satire does: they wring humor from the humanity beneath its outrageous situation.

The rest of POSTAL is a cartoon, and an increasingly desperate one at that. The storyline has something to do with a stash of rare Krotchy dolls (phallic plush toys) coveted by both Islamic maniacs who want to use them in a terrorist plot and a self-styled guru/charlatan (Dave Foley) who wants to purloin and sell them to keep the taxman at bay, assisted by his trailer park-dwelling nephew (Zack Ward). It's a frail skeleton on which Boll hangs any number of jokes that thumb their noses at political correctness, but in an obvious manner that forgoes cleverness and wit in favor of a lowest-common-denominator approach. Those who believe it would be amusing to see Foley exposing his schlong and Boll himself shot in that same general area are welcome to POSTAL, but any 10 minutes of SOUTH PARK or THE SIMPSONS are both funnier and more trenchant in their commentary on the modern age than this overlong, undercooked spoof.

I should report, however, that the Hall audience eats it up, and that Boll himself proves (as he did at our recent East Coast *Weekend of Horrors* convention) to be a pretty funny guy who really knows how to work a crowd. A few of us are also witness to his humanitarian side after the POSTAL screening when, on the way to a late dinner, we come upon the filmmaker helping out a clearly drunken man who has fallen and cut his head on the sidewalk—bandaging the man's injury, calling an ambulance

and staying with him until the M.D.s arrive!

Sunday, my last day of a trip that has proven to be both exhilarating and exhausting in the best way, starts with a rare 35mm screening of the Shaw Brothers martial-arts epic *14 AMAZONS*. A huge hit upon its Hong Kong release in 1972, it has gone unseen since then, but the new print has recently played at no less than the Cannes Film Festival and wows the crowd in its Fantasia berth. Directed by Cheng Kang and featuring early fight choreography by his son Ching Siu-Tung (who would later direct the *CHINESE GHOST STORY* films and stage action sequences for *HERO*, *HOUSE OF FLYING DAGGERS* and many more), this is the exciting, sometimes moving and funny story of the legendary Yang family of ancient China, and how 14 of its female members set out to avenge the betrayal and slaughter of their warrior kin. It's chock full of great hand-to-hand and stick combat, plus the justly famous "human bridge" setpiece in which the femme fighters and their followers use their own bodies to cross a chasm.

Ching also lent his mastery to *IN THE NAME OF THE KING: A DUNGEON SIEGE TALE*, the second Boll feature here, which once again packs the Hall. The director, who has to leave midfilm for a flight, does his Q&A before the screening, engaging the audience with tales of working with the movie's eclectic ensemble. He reports his initial misgivings about casting Burt Reynolds as the king and *SCREAM*'s Matthew Lillard as a duplicitous duke, and as it turns out, he was right the first time. Both actors—especially Lillard, as well as Ray Liotta as a sorcerer villain—seem truly out of place in the medieval setting, and their florid dialogue results in big laughs that likely weren't intended. The surprise is that overall, *IN THE NAME OF THE KING* ain't half bad, and stands as easily Boll's best movie yet.

The plot is nothing special: a simple farmer (actually named Farmer, and played with his usual intensity by Jason Statham) sets out to avenge the death of his son and reclaim his wife (Claire Forlani) from the clutches of the evil Liotta. Meanwhile, Liotta schemes to grab power via his manipulation of Lillard's duke and the seduction of the daughter (Leelee Sobieski) of the king's mage (John Rhys-Davies). It all leads to swordplay and magical CGI combat aplenty, and if the talking scenes fall flat as often as they inspire, Boll and Ching deliver plenty of hearty battle sequences, making frequent use of powerful overhead shots. Technically, in fact, this is the filmmaker's most accomplished movie yet, with great use of picturesque locations, and entertains in the manner of the sword-and-sorcery flicks of the '80s. Boll's storytelling may need work, but here, at least, he proves he knows how to put on a show. And also how to make an exit: At a quiet point in the film, he rises, calls out, "See you next year" and departs out a side exit, to the applause of the crowd. I know I'll be right back with him when *Fantasia 2008* rolls around...



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