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Entertainment

Asian-American film fest kicks off 25th year



(Courtesy photo)

Kelly Hu and Ken Leung star in *Shanghai Kiss*, a world-premiere romantic comedy.

Janos Gereben, The Examiner

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SAN FRANCISCO -

The 25th annual San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival opens today with well-advertised major offerings, such as "Dark Matter" and "Mistress of Spices." Here are just four recommendations from among the other 124 films being screened during the festival's 11 days. (Screenings are in Berkeley and San Jose as well as San Francisco.)

"King and the Clown," from Korea, is directed by Lee Jun-ik, whose films include "Kid Cop" and "Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield." It is a wild, colorful 16th-century story of suspense and surprise about a troupe of minstrels who mock Yeonsangun, an infamous 16th-century king, who employs them as court clowns, and falls in love with one of them. No matter how gritty, vulgar, and violent, the film is remarkable for its storytelling, direction and the appealing performances from the large cast. Try not to pay attention to the incongruously Western portions of the music score. (Screens at 2:45 p.m. Sunday at the Castro Theatre, 429 Castro St., San Francisco)

A contemporary, Vietnamese-based variation on Coney Island's "Little Fugitive" — a child alone in the world — "The Owl and the Sparrow" is a genuinely heartwarming film; its excessively sentimental turns are easy to forgive. It's about an unforgettable 10-year-old girl, played by Pham Thi Han, a runaway from the country to the dizzying whirlwind of Saigon. The city is obviously sanitized, a small price to pay for the government permission to make the film. This is the first feature for the director, Stephane Gauger — born in Saigon, raised in Orange County — who participated in the making of the Bui Brothers' memorable "Three Seasons." (Screens at 4:45 p.m. Sunday and 6:45 p.m. Tuesday at AMC Van Ness, 1000 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco)

"Shanghai Kiss," a world premiere at the festival, follows its young Chinese-American hero (Ken Leung) from Los Angeles, and a rich friendship with a precocious 16-year-old Caucasian girl (Hayden Panettiere, a budding actress going to places) to Shanghai, and an unconvincing love affair with a "real Chinese girl." Unfortunately, that role is played by Kelly Hu, a fashion model from Hawaii (beloved in Japan for her Philadelphia cream cheese ads). Except for this apparent lack of Chinese actresses in China (maybe they all joined the "Geisha" cast?), "Shanghai Kiss" has a lot to offer. David Ren and Kern Konwiser are the directors, Ren also wrote the clever script that frequently wanders into sit-com language. (Screens at 6 p.m. Saturday at the Castro Theatre.)

It was a small episode in the horror-filled story of 20th century genocides — at the hands of Hitler, Stalin and (the still largely unexposed) Mao Tse-tung — but a matter of life and death for thousands of innocent people. The 1930s Soviet ethnic cleansing uprooted 180,000 Koreans and forced them to relocate 3,700 miles away, in the uninhabitable steppes of Central Asia. There, what is known as Kazakhstan today, Stalin set up an enormous concentration camp for many "unwanted" ethnic groups from throughout the Soviet Union. Y. David Chung's startling and powerful "Koryo Saram: The Unreliable People" traces the history of the exiled Koreans, who have maintained some of their culture and identity through seven decades of dislocation and persecution. (Screens at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Opera Plaza, 601 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco, and 7 p.m. Thursday at AMC Van Ness.)

Tickets for most films are \$11 general, \$9 for seniors and students. For more information and the complete schedule, call (415) 865-1588 or visit www.asianamericanfilmfestival.org.

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