

Bangkok 2003

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Spring 2003 Issue of KINEMA

BANGKOK INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2003

Last October, festival founder Brian Bennett attempted to mount what should have been the festival's 5th edition but this was not to be due to lack of funds. This year's edition has been taken over by main sponsor and organiser, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), and was simply called the 2003 Bangkok International Film Festival (10-21 January 2003). Interestingly, the presidency of the BKKIFF went to the governor of the cash-rich TAT, Juthamas Siriwan. Patrick de Bokay served as the festival's executive director and Kriengsak "Vic" Silakong, the festival's programme director. The country's number one English daily, *The Nation*, handled the festival operations.

The declared aim of the organisers was to establish their first BKKIFF as a regional and international hub for film buffs as well as for potential film investors and those in the film trade. Its other equally important objective was to present some of the quirky, new Thai films which have been enjoying success at home and on the international film circuit. These works have been emerging since the late 1990s, and are mostly the products of a group of overseas-trained local filmmakers and those working for post-production houses or MTV.

Injected with a massive US\$5 million budget (according to reliable sources), this Bangkok festival which aspires to become the "Cannes of the East" exuded glamour and pomp with some 150 films and attracted some 200,000 people. However, with few small indie films, that intangible thing called passion looked like it had been hijacked. Hollywood and Hong Kong celebrities as well as Thailand's own cinematic idols provided the star power.

The festival's unofficial opening film on 10th January was Thai indie director Apichatpong Weerasethaku's *Blissfully Yours*, an idiosyncratic, non-commercial story of a love affair between an older woman and her illegal Burmese immigrant lover (it later had a limited theatrical release). The BKKIFF's highly publicised official opening took place only halfway through the festival on 17th January at the Scala Theatre. The prestigious curtain raiser was the much-hyped biopic of controversial Mexican artist Frida Khalo, *Frida* (played by the diminutive Salma Hayek). The closing film on 21st January at the same venue was the well-made Muay Thai boxing film *Ong Bak* directed by Prachaya Pinkaew. The authentic martial artist and lead actor Panom Yeerum delivers the stunts with flair, without Jackie Chan's body doubles. In fact, the original closer was supposed to be Zhang Yimou's acclaimed *Hero* but it was "lost" due to some acquisition problem.

One big criticism aimed at the organisers was for allowing three heavyweight films compete for the festival's Golden Kinnaree Awards: these were *The Quiet American* by Phillip Noyce, *The Man Without a Past* by Finland's Aki Kaurismäki and the Spanish entry *Talk To Her* by Pedro Almodóvar. The critics' concerns were duly justified in the face of the competition's weaker entries such as David Caesar's *Dirty Deeds*, the Aussie hoods and molls story; the Hollywoodish *Frida*; the predictable French Thai boxing film on kin ties and revenge, *Rage* by Karim Dridi; Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Zanussi's love story of a hesitant youth and a girl student, *Supplement*; and the five Asian films including Takeshi Kitano's fantastical tales of romance *Dolls*; Amos Gita's European immigrants' story, *Kedma*; Filipino Gil M. Portes's inspiring underdog story, *Small Voices*; Thai Jira Maligool's *Mekong Full Moon Party*, a mythical story about Naga the Serpent's fireballs and the Indian *A Tale of a Naughty Girl* by Buddhadeb Dasgupta about a young girl who defies her mother's order to become an older man's mistress. Predictably, the three "big" films collected all the major prizes, with the two European entries getting the lion's share of the awards.

The festival's saving grace, was its "Masters To Present" programme, a play with words that could mean cinema masters presenting their works of art or past and present filmmakers who are "masters" in their own right. In any case, the theme was an appropriate one for the festival's tribute to French cinema's Agnès Varda. Her documentary masterpieces, *The Gleaners and I* (2000) and *The Gleaners and I - Two Years Later* (2002) were shown in tandem. Also screened were Varda's seminal works like *Cleo from 5 to 7* and *Vagabond*.

Among the festival's selection were number of classics but most were not well attended except for Federico Fellini's *8 1/2*. Others included Ritwik Ghatak's *Golden Threads*, Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* and Jiří Menzel's 1966 Oscar winner *Closely Watched Trains*. Kudos also to the programming of the charming 1967 musical *The Young Girls of Rochefort*, directed by Varda's husband Jacques Demy, featuring the beautiful red-headed sister of Catherine Deneuve, Françoise Dorléac, who nearly outshone her - one wonders what French cinema would be like if the latter had not been tragically killed in a car accident.

Two surprising discoveries came from Asian. Egyptian master Youssef Chahine's *Silence.. We're Rolling* (2002) is a delightful tale about how a rich song and screen star, Malak, is nearly conned by a wily social climber who also tries to seduce her daughter. Singaporean Jonathan Foo, an MTV producer-turned-director, collaborated with Vietnamese Nguyen Phan Quang Binh to direct their first feature *Song of the Stork* (2001) about the Vietnam war from the perspective of the Vietnamese. Based on actual stories, the film's events are recounted by an army cameraman who describes the experiences of four comrades.

On the other hand, Japanese veteran filmmaker Takeshi Kitano's *Dolls* (2002) was a disappointment. The film links three stories about love's obsession and its inevitably tragic consequences including a couple who wanders around aimlessly; an aging *yakuza* who pines for his long-lost girlfriend, and a fan of a disfigured pop singer who blinds himself to keep her pristine image in his mind's eye.

Two Asian children's films, however, impressed with their sincerity. Director-actor Huang Hong's *Father with his 25 Children* (China, 2002) touches on the kindness and generosity of a poor orphan, now a wealthy farmer, who donates his money to an orphanage. Another crowd-pleaser was Filipino director Gil M. Portes' *Small Voices* (2002), based on a true story of an idealistic young teacher in a poor provincial village who tries to help the students form a choir for a choral contest.

Korea's period film master, Im Kwon-taek, awed with *Chihwaseon (Strokes of Fire)*. This lavish biopic of the legendary Korean painter Jang Seung-ub or Ohwon, who mixed his artistic genius with a love of women and drinking, shared the Best Director award with Paul Thomas Anderson for *Punch Drunk Love* at Cannes in 2002. Veteran actor Choi Min-sik plays the suffering artist with powerful conviction.

The two entries from Hongkong - Edmond Pang's black comedy, *You Shoot, I Shoot* (2001) and Fruit Chan's *Public Toilet* (2002) were radically different in quality. First-timer Pang entertained with his tale of two hitmen, one, a rich assassin who blackmails a drug-dealing movie director into filming his murders, commissioned by bored wives and mistresses. The celebrated Fruit Chan, however, slipped in his rather convoluted and uninspiring tale of a baby boy found in a public toilet by an old woman who raises him as his grandson. When she is diagnosed with cancer, he travels to various Asian cities in search of a cure.

Thailand's showcase of old and new films was more impressive. In particular, new Thai films from 1997 onwards such as Wisit Sasanatieng's *Tears of the Black Tiger*, *Bangkok Dangerous* by Oxide and Danny Pang, and *Goal Club* by Kittikorn Liewsirikul, prove that these works are not only enjoyed by Thais but can also charm audiences abroad. Among these rising talents, Pen-ek Ratanaruang has pursued a steadfast career of quality films, an example of which is the musical melodrama, *Monrak Transistor* (2002), about a country bumpkin with a penchant for singing and for landing himself in one sort of trouble after another.

Also of note was Thai master of action, Thanit Jitnukul, whose violent films shown in the Thai Cinemas section included: *Crime King* (1998), *Kunpan* (2001) and *Bangrajan* (2002), the latter a diverting war epic about the legendary courage of a group of villagers who took up arms against the Burmese army in 1765. These three major commercial films revolve around the themes of honour and brotherhood, machismo and homo-erotic bonding

Concurrent with the festival was a five-day (11- 15 Jan) animation event called Thai Anima 2003 showing the best of Thai animation and cartoons from UNICEF. There was also a homage to local "anima" master, Payut Ngaokrachang and the late Japanese animator Renzo Kinoshita (1936-1997).

Overall, this year's BKKIFF seemed to be more inclined towards Hollywood-type movies compared to previous editions of the festival which favoured the programming of independent films from America, Europe and Asia. This change in direction was emphasized by the glitz and glamour of high-spending events such as the concert conducted by Oscar-winning French composer Maurice Jarre with the Bangkok Philharmonic

Orchestra, the Stunt Show at the Outdoor Siam Discovery Centre, the James Moody Concert at the Debut Cafe and the Celebrity Golf Tournament for the festival's VIP guests. As Thailand's film talents and industry gain increasing recognition abroad, it would seem in the interest of the BKKIFF to have a stronger local and Asian programme.

References

AWARDS

NETPAC (Network for Promotion of Asian Cinema) Award for Best Asian Film

Mondo Meyer Upakhyun (A Tale of a Naughty Girl, India, 2002) directed by Buddhadeb Dasgupta

Guinness Movie World of Records (Film)

At 64 hours 58 mins, won by a group of 16 marathorn viewers

Golden Kinnaree Awards

Best Feature Film

Habla con Ella (Talk To Her, Spain, 2002, dir. Pedro Almodovar)

Best Director : Pedro Almodóvar

Best Actor

Michael Caine (*The Quiet American, Australia/USA, 2002, dir. Phillip Noyce*)

Best Actress

Kati Outinen, *Mies vailla menneisytt (The Man Without a Past, Finland/ Germany/ France, 2002, dir. Aki Kaurismäki)*

Best Script

Mies vailla menneisytt (The Man Without a Past, Finland/ Germany/ France, 2002, dir. Aki Kaurismäki)

Lifetime Achievement Award

Agnès Varda (France)

Author Information

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