

Bangkok 2004

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BANGKOK INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2004

According to official figures, over 50,000 tickets were sold at the 1st Bangkok International Film Festival in 2003. This year, only some 30,000 seats were taken, a sizable drop despite the massive budget of US\$5 million, an improved film programme and a change of management: Craig Prater is now Executive Director and Jennifer Stark is Programme Director. Altogether, some 150 Thai and international films and digital videos from more than 24 countries were presented. The Festival (22 Jan to 2 Feb 2004), also saw the 1st Bangkok Film Market amidst the festival's glam, glitz, pomp and star-gazing.

The opening film honour went to *The Siam Renaissance* by former experimental filmmaker Surapong Pini-jkhar (*Tawipop*, Thailand, 2003). This stylish and fantastical blending of *The Double Life of Veronique* and *Frequency* stars the exotically pretty Florence Vanida F. as a Paris-based archivist who moves back in time to a Siam of a hundred years ago after reading a mysterious document. The feature is adapted from the classic Thai novel *Tawipop* by Tamayanti.

David Mamet's *Spartan*, was shown as the prestigious closing film but without Thai subtitles! Just marginally better than the usual Hollywood conspiracy theory thriller, this is about a senior secret service agent (Val Kilmer) on a mission to rescue the President's missing daughter, held in a white slave brothel somewhere in the Middle East. A more appropriate closing film would have been *The Overture* (*Homrong*, Thailand, 2003) by Ilthisoonthon Vichailak about the clash between tradition and modernity through the story of an unorthodox bamboo xylophone player who challenges his old music master and who later struggles to keep Thai music alive.

In Ferzan Ozpetek's *Facing Windows* (*La finestra di fronte*, 2003), Giovanna Mezzogiorno gives an accomplished performance as a book-keeper who comes to understand her womanhood and desires more fully when her husband suddenly takes in an old amnesiac Davide, and when she becomes romantically entangled with her neighbour Lorenzo.

The newly created Windows on the World is a comprehensive selection of global, Asian and Asian American films - in all, a total of 95 features and documentaries.

Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (UK/ France/ Italy, 2003) pays homage to past movie masters, from Chaplin to Bresson, in a diverting story of three youths in their hermetic world of sexual liaisons in 1968 Paris, as passionate about sex as they are about the left-wing politics of confrontation and violence. Another homage to the old film masters is Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (*Bu San*, Taiwan, 2003), a haunting requiem for the death of classical Chinese cinema that also provides wry commentary on the changes in contemporary Taiwanese society.

Arguably, the best Asian American film to come out in years, *Face* (USA, 2003) by Bertha Baysa Pan is about the coming-of-age of a mother and daughter, set in the 1970s and 1990s' Queens borough in New York City. Based on a short of the same name, this incisive feature explores inter-generational conflict on sexual mores and the search for one's identity.

Fresh from the Golden Globe's Best Foreign Film triumph, Afghanistan's *Osama* by Siddiq Barmak, raised the crowd's interest in this movie about a 12-year old girl forced to cut her hair to pass off as a boy so that she can find work to support her mother and grandmother.

Jim Sheridan's *In America* is an understated and moving study of the trials and tribulations of an Irish immigrant family struggling to make ends meet in a sordid New York tenement. The semi-autobiographical film, supported by an excellent cast with a voiceover narrative by Christy, the family's elder daughter, won Sheridan the Golden Kinnaree for Best Director.

Canada's top rebel filmmaker, Denys Arcand, created a sequel of sorts to his seminal *Decline of the American Empire* with *The Barbarian Invasions* (Canada/France, 2003) which deservedly won the Golden Kinnaree for Best Film. The film reunites the key characters from the former film through the last days of the sensual leftist academic, Remy, who is dying from liver cancer. This powerful humanist tract is arguably Arcand's greatest film to date.

Blind Shaft (China, 2003), deftly directed by first-timer Li Yang, is based on a true story about two miners who concoct a murderous scheme to get the 30,000 yuan in compensation money via the apparent accidental death of their 'relative'.

A most impressive contribution to the Windows section was the Canadian *Love That Boy* (2003). Originally shot on mini DV, this indie feature about the coming-of-age of an immature 14-year old boy and his sophisticated neighbour girlfriend is directed by Andrea Dorfman and shows that a small film can evoke as much admiration as films by more prominent directors such as Arcand's *The Barbarian Invasions*.

Two new inclusions, the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) competition and the Asian Short and Documentary Competition, expanded the coverage of Asian cinema for the first time. Six out of ten Asean nations including Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia presented a total of 13 fictional features and one docudrama, (Amir Muhammad's *The Big Durian*), for Best ASEAN Film.

Thailand alone submitted five entries, including last year's top-grossing sleeper hit, *My Girl* (*Fan Chan*, 2003), a nostalgic return to childhood made by six unknown filmmakers. The winner, however, went to Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Last Life in the Universe*, in which a suicidal Japanese library clerk living in Thailand meets his match in a working girl from Pattaya. Like his earlier *Sixty-nine* (1999), the protagonists in both films accidentally kill some mafia guys and are on the run. Japan's *Broken Blossom* by Matsuoka Naomi truly deserved the Best Documentary prize for its 30-minute treatment about the director's own miscarriage.

Mekong Interior (France/ Cambodia, 2003) by Vanessa Ly, focussing on the tension between a couple on a visit to Cambodia, won overall Short Film. Vietnamese-American Ham Tran won the Live Action prize with *The Anniversary* (Vietnam/ USA, 2003), shot on 35mm film, about a Buddhist monk haunted by the guilt of his betrayal of his brother on the anniversary of the latter's death.

The Best Animation award went to Singapore's *3 Feet Apart* by Jason Lai, a quirky tale about the impossibility of love between a boy born with a mobile phone in his head and a girl with speakers in her ears and a small TV set in her right palm!

With the exception of Thanit Jitnukul's 17th century epic *Sema, The Warrior of Ayodhya*, the other seven features which comprised the Thai Panorama was a mish-mash of generally weak films made for the mass market. The politically incorrect comedy *The Adventures of Iron Pussy* (*Hua Jai To Ra Nong*, 2003), co-directed by maverick filmmaker Apichatong Weerasethakul and Michael Shaowanasai was withdrawn from the line-up at the very last moment on the excuse that it was shot on DV.

What is perhaps more alarming is the apparent neglect to feature the upcoming new generation of Thai film directors whose films often display an overseas sensibility, such as Yuthlert Sippapak's *February* (2003), a love drama shot mostly in New York City and Smith Thimsawat's *Province 77* (2002), a gangland thriller set in Los Angeles.

The rise in the number of films made in recent years attest to the growing strength of Thai cinema, both in quantity and quality. On record, 53 films were made in 2003 compared to 25 in 2002 while more than 60 films are anticipated in 2004.

References

AWARDS

International Competition : 4 Awards

Best Film - *The Barbarian Invasions* (Canada/ France, Denys Arcand, 2003)

Best Director - Jim Sheridan for *In America* (Ireland/ United Kingdom, 2002)

Best Actor - Shared by Li Yixiang, Wang Shungbao, Wang Baoqing (Li Yang, China, 2003)

Best Actress - Giovanna Mezzogiorno in *Facing Windows* (Ferzan Ostepek, Italy/ United Kingdom/ Turkey/ Portugal, 2003)

FIPRESCI Award - Best Asean Film:

Last Life In The Universe (Penek Ratanaruang, Thailand/ Singapore, 2003)

Asian Short Films - Four Categories:

Best Documentary - *Broken Blossom* (Matsuaoka Naomi, Japan/ USA, 2003)

Best Live Action - *The Anniversary* (Ham Tran, Vietnam/ USA, 2003)

Best Short/Jameson Short Film - *Mekong Interior* (Vanessa Ly, 2003)

Best Animation - *3 Feet Apart* (Jason Lai, Singapore, 2002)

Honorary Kinnaree Award for Career Achievement - American filmmaker Oliver Stone

"In Tribute" Honorary Kinnaree Awards - to the Late British Director John Schlesinger and Thailand's 1970s film icon, Ratana Pestanji

Crystal Lens Award for Excellence in Cinematography - This new award went to the young cinematographer Christopher Doyle

Author Information

TOH Hai Leong is a Singapore-based freelance film critic and filmmaker (*Zombie Dogs*, 2005) who writes for independent film publications such as *Screen International* and *World Paper*. He has covered the Hong Kong International Film Festival since 1985 and specializes in the cinemas of Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Korea and Japan.