

Toronto 2014

By Brandon Wee

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2014

Although Toronto raised the stakes in the bloodsport of festival politics by saving its prime opening weekend slots only for world premieres, it's still early to tell if it can be kingmaker of the US awards season. Ironically, interest in the opening weekend haul of its 39th edition (4 - 14 September 2014) was muted, while films tipped as derby favourites had premiered elsewhere. In this game of give-and-take, a win for Toronto's ego can mean less exposure to important films. Away from Hollywood buzz, several directors returned with new works for the second year running: Peter Chan, Lav Diaz, Hong Sang-soo, Sono Sion, Johnnie To and Tsai Ming-liang (for Hong and Sono, it's their third year running). And for its sixth 'City to City' program, Toronto chose Seoul with eight titles spanning the genre variety that has sustained South Korean cinema's vigour more than a decade on. Ten noteworthy titles were:

Confession (Lee Do-yun, South Korea 2014)

The bond between three childhood buddies is tested mercilessly in Lee Do-yun's moving debut feature, cloaked as an engrossing crime thriller. Unknown to the trio's stolid leader and firefighter Hyun-tae (Ji Sung), insurance shark In-chul (Ju Ji-hoon) and day labourer Min-soo (Lee Kwang-soo) parlay a risky venture by agreeing to help his mother liquidate her casino business fraudulently so she may reconcile with her scrupulous son. Charismatic turns from the leads drive this tragedy, but the revelation is Lee, a seasoned comedic performer who plays against type in the story's most sympathetic role. The film's Korean name means 'Good Friends'.

Flapping in the Middle of the Nowhere (Nguyen Hoang Diep, France /Germany /Norway /Vietnam 2014)

A teenage couple's plan to abort their child lies at the heart of Nguyen Hoang Diep's woolly but intriguing feature debut. College student Huyn (Nguyen Thuy Anh) and civic worker Tung (Ha Hoang) agree to share costs, but the boy soon absconds with the proceeds to settle his gambling debts. At the urging of her devious friend (Pham Tran Than Duy), the girl meets a platonic trick (Tran Bad Son) whose fetish for her belly bump poses an interesting dilemma for her. Although an inviting look at itinerant lives in Hanoi, Nguyen's flighty third act derails her story's dramatic purpose.

The Look of Silence (Joshua Oppenheimer, Denmark /Finland /Indonesia /Norway /UK 2014)

Departing from his fixation on the culprits, Joshua Oppenheimer's pivotal companion piece to 2012's *The Act of Killing* now honours their victims: trained on one still-grieving Sumatran family whose son's sadistic butchering by paramilitaries during Indonesia's 1965 anti-communist purge is widely recalled. Despite being born after the event, younger son Adi Rukun wears the vicarious indignation of his ailing parents as he listens to the league of scot-free killers justifying their actions - while receiving his optical care to treat their waning visions. At the curtain of the film's first screening, the audience stood in solidarity to receive Oppenheimer and Rukun.

Men Who Save the World (Liew Seng Tat, France /Germany /Malaysia /Netherlands 2014)

Liew Seng Tat's second feature is a comedy of errors set in a rural village. As a wedding gift to his daughter, elder Pak Kwang (Wan Hanafi Su) enlists local men to transport an abandoned hut from the jungle - only, a fugitive Nigerian huckster (Khalid Mboyelwa Hussein) has made the dwelling his refuge, and whose sightings are easily mistaken for the mythical Orang Minyak (Oily Man), a lecherous ghost covered in black crude. Nabbing the intruder involves much farcical drag and racial humour, but these are in fact nuanced political swipes to cast the superstitious villagers as objects of ridicule.

Red Amnesia (Wang Xiaoshuai, China 2014)

Dressed as a spectral thriller, Wang Xiaoshuai's latest film is in fact a powerful examination of China's recent history that is fast being forgotten as she courts modernity. A crusty grandmother's chronic receipt of silent prank calls arouses in her a profound sense of guilt for fateful decisions made in her youth. A thematic

companion to Wang's *Shanghai Dreams* (2005), and the third in a trilogy about the scars of the Cultural Revolution following this and *11 Flowers* (2011), it also bears a striking resemblance to Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005). The film's Chinese name has a more complex ring: 'Intruder'.

Sway (Rooth Tang, France /Thailand /USA 2014)

Bangkok-born and Los Angeles-raised Rooth Tang's curio gallivants between Bangkok, Los Angeles and Paris, espying a triptych of unrelated tales about moody hipster couples figuring themselves in life. It's a nice window to the impulses of global bourgeois mobility, with each entry time stamped by various current affairs milestones. Los Angeles offers the most engaging slice, in which the demure American wife (Kris Wood-Bell) of a detached Japanese widower (Nishimura Kazuhiko) struggles in her new role as stepmother to his sulky American daughter. Cinematographers Lyn Moncrief and Vasco Lucas Nunes shot on 16mm, resulting in the film's sad, ethereal vibe.

Tokyo Fiancée (Stefan Liberski, Belgium /Canada /France, 2014)

Japan-born but Belgium-raised Amélie (Pauline Étienne) thinks she will become Japanese by moving to Tokyo, but is soon stared down by the island's immutable cultural codes. Much of her alienation arises from her affair with Rinri (Inoue Taichi), a young Japanese man whose brand of Francophilia matches her Japanophilia for youthful candour. Although sketched as a romantic comedy, the cultural clash plot line feels tacky, while the leads lack sparks between them. Stefan Liberski adapts Belgian Amélie Nothomb's 2007 novel *Neither Adam Nor Eve*, but updates it to reference the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami as a crucial plot point.

Unlucky Plaza (Ken Kwek, Singapore 2014)

Ken Kwek's debut feature is an uneven but respectable crack at the crime caper genre virtually unseen in Singaporean cinema, in which the desperate lives of debtors and creditors cross. When a Filipino immigrant (Epy Quizon) reasons that a conman and his wife (Adrian Pang and Judee Tan) are scamming him, he takes them and their unwitting associates hostage. Although a black humoured escapade, the story invokes the tense relationship between Singaporeans and foreigners now on a rolling boil in the city-state. The film's title references the name of a downtown mall in Singapore called Lucky Plaza, a Filipino haunt.

Where I Am King (Carlos Siguion-Reyna, The Philippines 2014)

To cut his losses, a Manila magnate (Robert Arevalo) and his two adult grandchildren relocate to his childhood home in Tondo's slums where he still owns a tenement, but is soon scorned by its residents for his foul-weather ways. While they struggle from riches to rags, the estranged second generation plots to woo the trio back from a life they think is beneath them. This is literally a warmhearted family comedy: Siguion-Reyna's wife Bibeth Orteza is the film's screenwriter, producer and co-lyricist of its original songs, while their son Rafa Siguion-Reyna and niece Cris Villonco are, like their characters, cousins.

The World of Kanako (Nakashima Tetsuya, Japan 2014)

Gamely adapting Fukamachi Akio's 2004 mystery novel *Endless Thirst*, Nakashima Tetsuya styles a routine tale about a brutish father (Yakusho Kōji) searching for his teenage daughter (Komatsu Nana) as a restless showpiece of aural and visual aplomb. Through accounts from the girl's misfit friends, the ex-detective pieces a horrific composite of his child, in a narrative redolent of Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011). A weak ending mars an otherwise engaging story about flawed adults trying to understand juvenile minds, but like Nakashima's previous film, 2010's hit *Confessions*, a gorgeous musical medley escorts his visceral cinematic escapade.

Author Information

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