

Hana-bi

By Toh, Hai Leong

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HANA-BI (*Fireworks*, 1997). Japan. Dir: Takeshi Kitano. Cast: Takeshi Kitano, Kayoko Kishimoto, Ren Osugi, Susumu Terajima, Tetsu Watanabe, Hakuryu Minato-ku.

After winning the Golden Lion at last year's Venice Film Festival, the elegiac and violent yakuza-cop film *Hana-Bi* (*Fireworks*) by Japanese director (Beat) Takeshi Kitano drew a full crowd at its preview at the Academy Theatre on a frosty morning in Pusan last October.

The full house testified to the power of a Kitano film which now commands a loyal following verging on the fanatical. In fact, his films attract far more viewers than the cult films of Quentin Tarantino such as *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*.

Kitano's films are characterised by his uncanny ability to create, like in the eye of a storm, a quiet beginning which is suddenly whipped into a ferocious chain of events. However, they have none of the sadness of Hou Hsiao-hsien's landmark gangster film, *Goodbye South, Goodbye*. Kitano's brand of violence is what most women would stir clear off -- heavy doses of lyrical yet unsettling quiet followed by explosions of violence, then back to dead calm.

A multi-talented director who is also a stand-up comic and actor, Kitano is quoted as saying this style of violence stems from his childhood experiences as a reluctant observer of this reality from which he was prevented from participating by his father,. It was more than a year ago that he nearly lost his life after his motorbike crashed and he has the scars to prove it. "I even laughed at myself, covered in blood, after my motorbike crash," he said nonchalantly.

In *Hana-Bi*, Kitano's universe is dictated by violence and, strangely, peace, coexisting side by side. In the overview of the 2nd Pusan International Film Festival in the Spring 1998 issue of Kinema, the film was considered as the most outstanding and intriguing and arguably, most poetic and violent of its genre at the festival. The film's title is subtly evocative and richly textured -- "fireworks" in the film's context is more than the explosion of gun powder in the pitch-black night skies. It is an excellent study of an out-of-work detective, Nishi (Kitano) and the final days he spends with his dying wife in her snowbound homeland, running away from loan sharks, ex-colleagues, and the trauma of a shooting incident which left his best friend, Horibe, crippled and another dead. This time, Kitano mixes brutal violence with a poetic elegy never before seen in his earlier films like *Violent Cop*, *Boiling Point*, and *Sonatine*.

When his family leaves him, Horibe, now confined to a wheelchair and feeling a sense of worthlessness, thinks of suicide. Although obsessed with death and suicide, Horibe chooses life through his new-found hobby, painting (Kitano supplied his own artwork for this film). Ironically, Nishi, who was decommissioned for robbing a bank, rediscovers the meaning of life but chooses to die with his wife. Nishi finally comes to realise the true value of love, happiness, sharing and sacrifice -- qualities that eluded him when he was too busy fighting crime with no time for his wife. When the tragic hero's romantic side unfolds, there is a sense of *déjà vu*. And when his wife utters the final two words, "Thank you", the film reaches a strangely uplifting climax.

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With the Golden Lion feather in his cap for *Hana-Bi* which was also screened as the prestigious opener of the 11th Singapore International Film Festival this year, Kitano shows he is as capable of tenderness and romance as he is famed for his portrayal of blood and gore. A film not to be missed.

Author Information

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