

# Singapore 2001

By Toh, Hai Leong

Fall 2001 Issue of KINEMA

## SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2001

The 14<sup>th</sup> SIFF, with over 350 films, was centred this year at Golden Village's plush six-screen multiplex GV Grand and the Alliance Française. The Goethe Institut was host once again to the Festival Fringe which started a few days earlier (7 to 22 April 2001), screening the documentaries which were this year's focus. Although more films were sold out this year than the last (47 full houses), there were in fact only 45,000 admissions compared to 60,000 in 2000. One probable reason for the number of full houses is that the GV Grand's audience capacity was considerably smaller than those of the festival venues in 2000. However, the decline in ticket sales could partly be attributed to the plunge in the high tech stocks and shares market which seemed to have affected the spending power of the young urban professionals who make up the usual festival audience.

Here, the much-lauded festival opener, Edward Yang's *Yi Yi (A One and a Two)*, Taiwan-Japan 2000), a probing and engaging look at the socio-economic tribulations of a bourgeois Taiwanese family on the verge of breakdown, reflected instinctively the current situation. Incidentally, Yang's powerful work was also the closing film of this year's Hong Kong International Film Festival (6 - 21 April 2001).

Shinji Aoyama's sepia-tinted *Eureka* (Japan, 2000), a three-and-a-half-hour epic about the psychological trauma of three bus hijack survivors, closed the festival to a full house. The film, which won the International Critics (FIPRESCI) Prize at Cannes last year, received the Silver Screen Award for Best Film. It won the jury over strong contenders like Jia Zhang-ke's *Platform* (China-Taiwan, 2000) which chronicles from 1979 to the late 80s, the changes an amateur dance and theatre troupe undergoes, from dour Maoist routines to soulless Western-influenced performances.

Other equally deserving films in competition included Im Kwon-taek's Pansori-inspired *Chunhyang* (South Korea, 2000), a historical epic based on a folk tale about a young woman who triumphs over adversity to be united with her beloved, and Jafar Panahi's focus on oppressed womanhood in his brilliantly structured *The Circle* (Iran, 2000).

A special pre-opening gala event (6 - 7 April) of this year's festival was the screening of Sergei Eisenstein's 1938 classic, *Alexander Nevsky*, to live performances of Sergei Prokofiev's score for the film. The music was played by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Lim Yau, with the participation of the Latvian Choir from Riga and China's mezzo-soprano Yang Jie. Held at the National University of Singapore's Cultural Centre, attendances were above average -- at 60%.

This year's focus, "Stranger than Fiction - the Documentary Film" celebrated the works of directors such as the German "guerilla" filmmaker, Harun Farocki, the French cinema essayist and audio-visual poet, Chris Marker and British documentarist Kim Longinotto, objective observer and chronicler of a well-known series on women in Japan in films such as *Dream Girls*, *Shinjuku Boys* and *Gaea Girls*. The festival also featured a collection of half-hour documentaries by Errol Morris, whose films about people in bizarre situations deal with philosophical issues of death, identity, obsession and society. Among those screened were *The Kingdom of the Unabomber* (USA, 2000).

The theme of war and "man's inhumanity to man" were borne out in films like Sophie Barry's *Viva Timor Lorosae*, Tom Zubrychi's *The Diplomat* (both Australia, 2000), the acclaimed Indonesian director Garin Nugroho's *A Poet* (1999), and Nazir H. Keshvani's *Holidays in Hell: Didong and Democracy* (Singapore, 2001), about frontline reports on trouble spots in East Asia with focus on Indonesia. The film also featured interviews with various artists and filmmakers including Nugroho. Nugroho's *A Poet* is based on the true-life story of *didong* ( a style of poetic ballad from Gayo, Central Aceh) poet Ibrahim Kadir who was incarcerated by the country's brutal military regime in 1965 and who witnessed the massacre of thousands of suspected communists. According to estimates, between 500,000 and two million people were killed.

'Focus on Asia-Europe Documentaries' tackled a whole gamut of themes -- from street children in Indonesia, for example, *Street Children: Medi* (1999) to bio-pics of filmmakers such as the great Japanese film legend, Nagisa Oshima, in *Oshima '99* (Japan, 1999) directed by Naoe Gozu. The documentary follows the controversial director during the filming of his samurai film, *Gohatto*, with his famous protégé Takeshi Kitano. Meanwhile, in a twelve-chapter documentary, British film critic Tony Rayns paints an intimate portrait of maverick South Korean director Jang Sun-woo and his working method in *The Jang Sun-woo Variations* (South Korea, 2000). Also featured were *The Gleaners and I* (France, 2000) by French New Wave director Agnès Varda, an eccentrically charming, diverting look at the joys of gleaning leftover produce and an astute homage to surrealist master, Luís Buñuel in *Regarding Buñuel* (Spain, 2000) by José Luis López-Linares and Javier Ríoyo.

Two retrospectives were given to Asian directors this year. One highlighted the underrated work of the Filipino scriptwriter, actor and director Mario O'Hara in a series of four films, introduced and championed by one of Philippines' leading critics, Noel Vera.

Vera gave an interesting and revealing mini thesis on O'Hara's importance both behind and in front of the camera. As a director, he made films such as *Flowers of the City Jail* (1984) about a pregnant young woman in prison and the transcendent *Demons aka Hope of the Heart* which shocked viewers with scenes of sodomy, incest and necrophilia set in October 1983 during the martial law period in Negros. The film made its world premiere at the 14<sup>th</sup> SIFF. O' Hara is a versatile talent. For instance, he wrote the screenplay for the late Lino Brocka's *Insiang* (1976) as well as *You were Weighed and Found Wanting* (1974), in which he also acted. He is a major player who bridges the gap that separates the old and new Filipino cinema.

The other Asian retrospective was that of Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, featuring eight experimental shorts, including the more accessible *Malee and the Boy* (1999). The films were not well-attended, perhaps due to their experimental nature and to the fact that director is regarded as somewhat of an outsider, having been called "The Filmmaker from Outer Space". Nevertheless, this young independent director, who works within a minuscule budget, is a force to be reckoned with. It is to the credit of SIFF programmer Philip Cheah that lesser known Asian talents such as Weerasethakul are given prominence outside their homeland.

Malaysia was represented by three films this year. Osman Ali's *Bukak Api* (2000) is about Kuala Lumpur's sex workers in the Chow Kit red light area. The literal translation of the title in English is "Open Fire", meaning to engage in sex with a client. Amir Muhammad's *Lips to Lips* (2000), is a digital film comedy involving four stories also set in Kuala Lumpur. Teck Tan's commercial-art film *Spinning Gasing* (2000) is Malaysia's first film in English. Pronounced "Gar-sing", the film means "Spinning Top", a reference to both traditional culture and the pace of modernisation in the country. The film enthralled festival audiences with its well-structured story of the overseas-educated Harry Lee and his musical band in Kuala Lumpur on the run from loan sharks. In terms of thematic treatment and film style, these three cinematic gems are revolutionary in the country's national cinema, and may even signal the start of a Malaysian New Wave.

Singapore's digital video-to-35mm film, *Return to Pontianak* (2000) by Djinn, is a *Blair Witch*-like homage to the traditional Malay female vampire film. Long in gestation after more than a year and a half in the making, the film, made in English with a smattering of Malay, proved it could draw the crowds. Although grainy and dark when projected onto the giant screen, the effect was in fact more atmospheric and haunting.

From South Korea came films that were concerned with corruption in the country's academic institutions. This theme was evident in Song Neung-han's *Segimal* (1999) and Bong Joon-ho's brilliant debut, *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000), a black comedy in which the male protagonist tries to bribe his way to professorship.

Japan, on the other hand, impressed with a diversity of themes in films by a younger generation of New Wavers, most of them first timers. The already mentioned Shinji Aoyama is one of the best examples of the relatively youthful directors to have made their mark. Watanabe Kazushi's first film *19* (2000) is a road movie which carries teen ennui to extremes. In this story, a tertiary student who is taken hostage by his bored abductor almost becomes their accomplice. Also shown was the elegiac road movie *Kaza-Hana* (2000) by veteran director Shinji Somai, about two alienated young people in search of grace and redemption in the face of death. Ryuichi Hiroki's uneven *Tokyo Trash Baby* (2000) explores a part-time waitress' fixation on a

musician as she obsessively rummages through his trash. More shocking was Takashi Miike's *Audition* (1999), a lurid portrayal of decapitation and limb amputation by thin wire, exhibiting the new-found sensibility of some of Japan's younger filmmakers.

Alienated relationships in Japanese films were also aplenty at this year's festival. These included the self-taught Japanese veteran Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Barren Illusion* (Japan, 1999), about a dreamy post-office girl and her bored music producer-boyfriend who are both into drugs and theft. In her first feature *Love/ Juice* (2000), Kaze Shindô explores the shifting power balance in the relationship of two young women. Masahiro Kobayashi's *Koroshi* (*Film Noir*, 2000), is a philosophical tale about a jobless man who, through a sheer twist of fate, becomes a professional assassin leading to his Dantesque descent into hell.

From the 14<sup>th</sup> SIFF, it is clear that digital video films are here to stay with a significant number coming from Asia. Other than *Return to Pontianak* (Singapore) and *Lips to Lips* (Malaysia), the others included *Tokyo Trash Baby* (Japan), *A Poet* (Indonesia) and *Teenage Hooker Became Killing Machine in Daehakroh* (South Korea). What is needed for better viewing is a state-of-the-art video projector which can show reasonably sharp images.

## Notes

Note: Colin Goh's deserving win, in Singlish and Hokkien, is a tongue-in-cheek spoof of the marriage between traditional loan-sharks and the precarious world of high tech dot.com companies. The festival jury did not give out the other major prizes in the Short Film category as it felt the contenders were not up to mark. However, this writer begs to differs. Goddess of the Neon City by Ho Choon Hiong, a parody of the surreal, neon-lit world of songstresses who mime their singing to pre-recorded music tapes, should have been given at least a Special Jury Award.

## References

### THE 2001 SILVER SCREEN AWARDS:

**Best film:** *Eureka* (Japan, Shinji Aoyama, 2000)

**Best Director:** *Chunhyang* (South Korea, Im Kwon-taek, 2000)

**Best Actor:** Ibrahim Kadir in *A Poet* (Indonesia, Garin Nugroho, 1999)

**Best Actress:** Nguyen Lan Huong in *House of Guavas* (Vietnam, Dang Nhat Minh, 2001)

Singapore Film Commission's **Young Cinema Award**-NetPac-FIPRESCI Special - *This Is My Moon* (Sri Lanka, Asoka Handagama, 2000)

**NETPAC/FIPRESCI award:** *A Poet* (Indonesia, Garin Nugroho, 1999)

**Special Achievement Award** (Short film): eAhlomg.com (Singapore, Colin Goh, 2000)

## 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.