

Bangkok 2000

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Spring 2001 Issue of KINEMA

THE 3rd EDITION OF THE BANGKOK FILM FESTIVAL (BKKFF) took off with 60 feature films and some amazing shorts (local and international) from the 21st to 30th September 2000, now an important cultural event for film lovers. The official trailer shows a roll of 35mm celluloid being stir-fried, eaten and finally defecated with the one-liner "food for film lovers." Unconventional and a little bizarre, this is what the BKKFF is all about -- a well-chosen, eclectic assortment of mostly independently-made films, from countries such as Iran and South Korea to Canada and America, and as many others.

The festival programme included the "Golden Elephant Competition Film Section", "International Feature Films Around the World", "Three Best Video Shorts", "Best 35mm Shorts", "Directors in Focus" featuring up-and-coming American independent filmmakers such as Andrew Shea and Matthew Harrison, and Hong Kong's celebrated veteran director Manshih Yonfan with his best "alternative lifestyle" film to date, the acclaimed *Beauty* (*Bishonen*, 1998) and whose newly restored and digitally remastered *Lost Romance* (1987) was the festival's prestigious opening film.

Veteran Thai filmmaker Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol was honoured with the Lifetime Achievement Award. Festival audiences were treated to a sneak preview of his biggest and most eagerly awaited epic *Suriyothai*, reportedly on the scale of David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*. At the same time, a retrospective of his popular and socially concerned films, including *The Elephant Keeper*, (*Khan Liang Chang*, 1989) was screened.

The competitive section for Thai short films received many fine entries among a total of 26 shorts. Young director Pakpoom Wongpoom won the Best Thai Short Film for his 8-min *Luang Ta* about a lad who finds "an unbelievable thing in a temple". The Best Cinematography Award went to Noppadal Maitrejit's *Mom's Present*, a tale of a mother who waits for her child during the Lunar New Year. The Vision of Life Prize was won by Aditya Assarat's *Motorcycle*, about the funeral preparations of a peasant's son, who was killed in a motorcycle accident. Four films competed for the Documentary Award in the section "Life Through the Lenses". The prize was given to Kim-Chi Tyler for *Chac*, a lyrical tale about her journey home and what she discovered about the deaths of her Vietnamese mother and American father in the Mekong Delta.

For the fiction feature competition, Iran came out tops with the social realist film, *Willow and Wind* (1999). Directed by Mohammad-Ali Talebi, the film portrays the adventure a boy goes through in order to get a broken window in his class fixed. Simply told with all the right tensions built up over 77 minutes, the boy struggles against rough terrain, strong winds and heavy rain. In the process, he wins the hearts of both audiences and the jury. A close second was the existential Japanese film, *Charisma*, Kiyoshi Kurosawa's humane, "cryptic" film about a jaded policeman which won the Silver Elephant. The French director, Leon Deslozeaux, a veteran of some 100 documentaries, was awarded the Jade Elephant for *Chittagong, Last Stopover* about a decommissioned French ship captain, Paul whose increasing attraction to a widow, Alima, is set amidst Bangladesh's worst monsoon flood in 50 years.

The Best Short Film Award was captured by Farhad Yawari's *Dolphins* (Germany-USA, 1999), an elegiac poem about a pretty female mental patient, Lara, with a penchant for goldfish and who dreams of the blue sea and cavorting with a dolphin in the nude. The tenacious prostitute, Jin-ah is also obsessed with goldfish in Kim Ki-duk's *Birdcage Inn* (South Korea 1999). Director Kim, who was trained as an artist-painter, infuses his female protagonist with the sensitive eye of an artist and a free spirit.

Whether or not a coincidence, a considerable number of the films shown this year had gay and lesbian themes. Thai director Yongyooth Thangkongthun's *Iron Ladies* (*Satree Lex*) is a hilarious comedy about a volleyball team made up mostly of transvestites who, against the odds, proceed to win the Thai male volleyball championship. Yonfan's *Beauty*, a superbly acted and crafted film, arguably surpasses Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together*. Like the latter, it's not a gay film per se -- the three characters involved in the menage-a-trois could easily be one man and two women or two men and a woman. From Germany, Rosa

von Praunheim's *The Einstein of Sex (Der Einstein Des Sex, 1999)* is about the travails of the homosexual Jewish sexologist, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld's in his homeland and in exile in Los Angeles, where he earned his reputation as the genius of sex. *Aimée & Jaguar*, a debut feature by Max Farberbock is set in 1943-44 Berlin. Amidst the bombings and Jewish persecution, a love affair develops between a mother of four and a Jewish woman who is an underground organisation member. Jamie Babbit's *But I'm A Cheerleader* satirizes American prejudices of lesbian love in a comical story about Megan, a cheerleader who finds herself falling for one of her mates in a rehabilitation camp for homosexuals.

Brian O'Hara's underrated *Rock 'N Roll Frankenstein (USA, 1999)* thoroughly inverts the classic tale of Frankenstein. While attempting to steal Jim Morrison's genitalia, Iggy, a grave robber, swipes Liberace's in a panic. As a result, the Elvis Presley-Head Monster, made of various rock stars' parts, finds itself at war with Liberace's insatiable penis which has clearly homosexual tendencies. Among other things, the film attacks Catholicism's homophobia, showing at one point, a gay priest being impaled with a cross.

Im Kwon-taek, Korea's legendary master of some 90 films, used the traditional form of the Pansori to narrate *Chunhyang*, about a virtuous young woman who refuses to submit to the advances of the corrupt new Governor Byun when she is already secretly married to the ex-governor's handsome son, Mongryong. The film strikes a cord with viewers who are impressed with the director's masterful handling of an allegorical tale which touches on political corruption and steadfast love. In *Chunhyang*, Im once again highlights the largely ignored pansori art which he championed to perfection in his 1993 masterpiece *Sopyonje*.

Author Information

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