

*Impact* welcomes a new scribe this month. Writing from the East coast of the USA, Abe Goldfarb reports from the *New York Asian Film Festival*...



Outwardly, the Anthology Film Archives is a pretty unremarkable building, consisting mainly of plain red brick and a handful of small movie posters stuck unassumingly on its side. It sits inconspicuously on a street corner in Manhattan's East Village, and has developed a reputation as a good revival house through its intelligent programming of independent, foreign and silent films. It is tasteful, useful for the discerning film lover, and generally agreed to be a 'Good Thing'. But since 2002, drive by it in mid-June and you'll see a mile-long line consisting of, in no particular order, spotty teenagers, 20-something intellectuals, middle-aged sweater jockeys, freaks, geeks and what can only be described as 'other', clutching frayed ticket stubs, tapping their feet, buzzing impatiently to gain entrance. What brings these odd bedfellows together is the New York Asian Film Festival, the fevered brainchild of the Subway Cinema Collective.

In its birth among friends, in its swift growth, in its financial foolhardiness, the NYAFF most resembles a dare. The Collective (Paul Kazee, Brian Naas, Goran Topalovic, Daniel Craft and Grady Hendrix) are ardent fans who, notwithstanding small contributions from such corporate sponsors as Tiger Beer and New York's Kitano hotel, pay the festival's astronomical bill out of pocket. Upon pitching tent in 2002, they had eleven films to show for their bruised credit limits. In the ensuing three years, bolstered by evangelical grassroots marketing and a florid website, [www.subwaycinema.com](http://www.subwaycinema.com), they acquired serious media presence (they've even been namechecked in *Time Magazine*) and a devoted grassroots following.







This year, they had thirty-one films, over half of which were North American premieres.

"I hate going to the movies!" says Hendrix, whose every sentence seems to be an exclamation. "Like, you go and everyone's f\*\*kin' rude... From the person who sells you your ticket to the person who tears it. You're going to sit in, like, this giant refrigerated room and basically watch TV with a bunch of strangers... Even if it's just for two weeks a year, people wanna go out and have fun and go to a little geek party." Indeed, the festival hums with a communal, anything-goes atmosphere; screenings are preceded by tacky/brilliant prize giveaways (I walked away with an Anita Mui CD myself; others found themselves with Shaw Brothers' playing cards and *Infernal Affairs III* coffee mugs) and revved-up sugar-smack introductory speeches, usually delivered by Hendrix himself.

This year's event hit a lunatic pitch from the start. Hendrix leapt onstage and introduced Seijun Suzuki's *Princess Raccoon* (its first showing out of Cannes and a major coup for the festival): "The Earth is spinning towards the sun at 50,000 miles per hour, and this is your in-flight movie!" Believe it. *Princess Raccoon* is, if you let it burrow its odd way into your head, this year's supreme masterpiece. Suzuki's proximity to mortality (he's getting on in years and his health hasn't been at its rudest) certainly hasn't forced him into introspection. He has other, naughtier things in mind, like song, dance, slapstick, wacky reversals and the slightest intimation of bestiality. This does not, let us say, feel like the work of an octogenarian.

The story concerns the overly handsome Prince Amechiyo (Jo Odagiri), banished by his father for being handsomer than he (the king discovers this from an oracle that seems to be a bowl of soup). Amechiyo falls in love with Princess Tanuki (a ravishing Zhang Ziyi, who is proving a far more adventurous actor than we might have guessed), leader of a community of woodland sprites (the tanuki are lecherous, drunken, fun-loving raccoon dogs). The Princess, for reasons best known to Suzuki, speaks Mandarin Chinese, while everyone else speaks Japanese. No matter, Amechiyo understands her and love blooms instantly.

The Bhuddist Tanuki kingdom, meanwhile, has come under threat from the Catholic human realm. From there, the plot follows a classically mythic trajectory but few myths have a *deus ex machina* called the Frog of Paradise.

The film is kitted out with Suzuki's usual tricks and felicities, dating back to *Branded to Kill* and beyond: unpredictable cuts, deceptive camera moves, a violent rejection of realism and a healthy ignorance of physics. This, though, is unlike anything else you've ever seen and a real comeback for the director after the gorgeously composed, dramatically inert *Pistol Opera*. It's also his first musical, a problem he tackles by throwing everything, from opera to pop, from glam rock to hip hop, into a blender and hitting 'orgy'. This simply should not work but it does... *Princess Raccoon* is perfectly, jaw-droppingly insane, but it's also beautiful, tuneful, hilarious and sweetly lacking even the barest trace of cynicism. It is, in short, a celebration. It's likely some people won't know what to make of it (the reaction of the sold-out house was alternately ecstatic and bewildered), yet in Japan, the pre-orders for this film outnumbered those for *Spiderman 2*. I'm not sure what that means but whatever they're having, I'll take two.

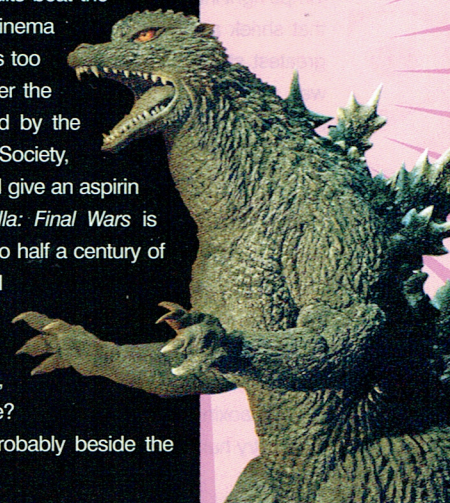
Sometimes, though, after experiencing a deathless masterwork, one really needs to watch men in rubber suits beat the mortal hell out of each other. Subway Cinema thoughtfully provided for that eventuality. It's too long by half, borderline (and sometimes over the borderline) incoherent, appears to be acted by the Okinawa Kaiju Enthusiast's Weekend Drama Society, and CHRIST, the punishing sound mix would give an aspirin a headache, but Ryuhei Kitamura's *Godzilla: Final Wars* is shamefully fun stuff, a great big blown kiss to half a century of monstrous mayhem and serious collateral damage... It's *Godzilla* meets *Versus* meets *X-Men* meets *The Matrix* meets *V* meets *Care Bears* meets, I don't know, cake, probably. And who doesn't like cake? Whether it's any good is debatable and probably beside the point.



“

Sometimes, however, after experiencing a deathless masterwork, one really needs to watch men in rubber suits beat the mortal hell out of each other.

”







Incidentally, the campaign starts here to initiate a citizen's write-in campaign for Don Frye as Best Supporting Actor. His performance as Captain Gordon, a mustachioed American s\*\*tkicker from planet redneck, sent the house into paroxysms of laughter and wonder. A choice line, spoken to the chief baddie: "There's two things you didn't know about Earth. One's me. The other (slightly awkward pause) is Godzilla." He's the kind of guy who doesn't just eat steak; he looks like he IS steak. He's the kind of guy who, faced with the awesomely huge Godzilla, grunts and brandishes his sword. He is, in other words, the greatest dramatic creation since Horatio. And Frye, ultimate fighting champion, rises to the challenge with an exquisitely meat-like performance. It must be seen to be believed. He is matched, swagger for mince, by Kazuaki Kitamura, playing the leader of the evil extraterrestrials who figure in the film's plot, the gayest, most Japanese alien overlord since a certain politically incorrect Ming of notably little mercy. He and Frye should have a sitcom together.

The plot is, essentially, an excuse to get almost every single monster with whom Godzilla has ever brawled back into action for one big jamboree of kaiju carnage (Mothra gets a particularly crowd-pleasing encore). It involves aliens, I think, and mutants. These things clearly concern Kitamura even less than they concern me. This movie's really about clapping for men in suits. It's about cheering the real Godzilla as he kicks his 'useless, tuna eating' American counterpart's ass into the Sydney Opera House. It's about having good time with a room full of like-minded people in the dark. On that score, Kitamura delivers like a musclebound midwife. He's still not a great director, and frequently a demonstrably awful one, but there are stretches of this film that are virtually indistinguishable from a '70s Godzilla movie (Kitamura cheerfully rejects Godzilla's origin as a symbol of nuclear destruction and jumps right into his campiest era), rubber-suited smash-ups that shriek and crash, and that demonstrates Kitamura's greatest strength: he loves his monster and knows him well. It's indefensibly stupid, but that doesn't mean I didn't clap until my hands bled.

As the festival drew to a close, *Princess Raccoon* was looking like a sure bet for best in show, but Ryu Seung-Wan's closing-night feature *Crying Fist* knocked all such predictions into a cocked hat and affirmed Ryu as one of the most exciting directors in the new South Korean cinema. Ron Howard should be tied to a plank and forced to watch this. Meaty, vivid and reeking of sweaty urgency, this is a boxing drama. *Cinderella Man*? Russell Crowe should try hurling a phone at Choi Min-Sik and see what happens.

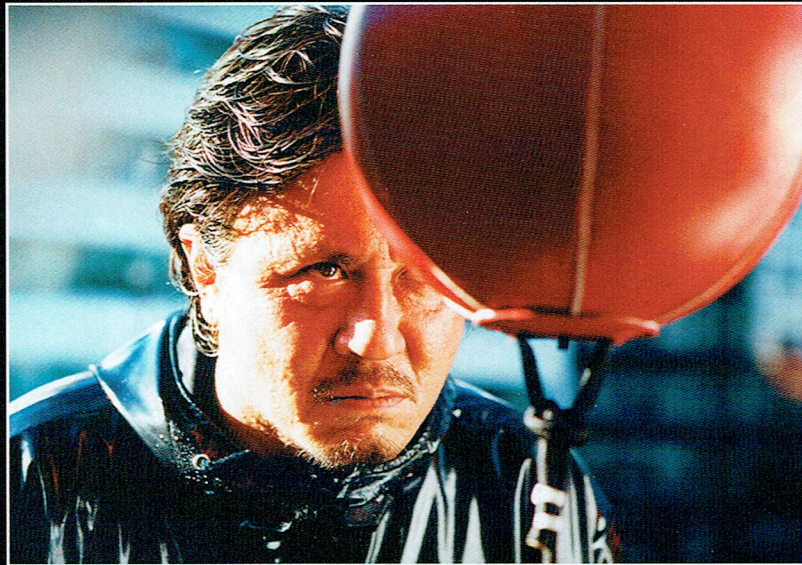




“

Ryu's tough, humanist storytelling (and his unmistakable flair for action, shown in a handful of brutal single-take fight scenes) would go for nothing if not for his two stars' performances, which rise to the bloody occasion. Unflinchingly, Choi and the younger Ryu paint twin portraits of grime-flecked misery, etched in knotted muscle. Indelible moments are caught, the camera refusing to swerve away when other films would feint:

”



*Crying Fist* is a killer blow, an emotional wrecking ball that left the festival crowd sobbing, exhausted, on their feet for the director, who gave a charming (if brief) Q and A afterwards and joked that the film's unimpressive Korean box office could be blamed on the release date's lovely weather. Actually, it's not hard to guess the reason it undershot; unlike Ryu's previous film, the hilarious, fight-happy Taoist action picture *Arahan*, *Crying Fist* is an examination not only of violence, but of masculinity, desperation and loss. It does not, needless to say, go down easy with a Coke. The story, or rather stories, seem familiar. Gang Tae Shik (Choi, the scorched heart of *Oldboy*) is a former silver medallist for Korea, and has deteriorated into a drunken, wife-beating mess. Suddenly homeless, he takes to hiring himself out as a punching bag, asking a very reasonable 10,000 Won. Elsewhere, petty thief Yu Sang-Hwan (played by the director's younger brother, Ryu Seung-Bum), raging and miserable, kills a man for money he doesn't have. He is sent to prison, where he learns to box. The two men, who do not know each other and have never met, set about bettering themselves, but not before suffering for their respective sins.

It's not hard to see where this is going; when a Super-Lightweight championship is announced, anyone who does not predict our two protagonists going head to head should be escorted out of the theater and scolded for seeing such a violent film at their age. That Ryu could make us root for both men is, however, less foreseeable. By not making his men immediately noble, or even obviously likeable, he forces us into equal allegiance with both. Come the inevitable fight, it is painful to watch them face off and Ryu knows it. He drags the match out cruelly, a master of tension and release. Where in *Arahan* his manipulations were playful, here they're agonizing, in the best possible way. The climax is genuinely surprising, bruisingly emotional and very satisfying indeed.

Ryu's tough, humanist storytelling (and his unmistakable flair for action, shown in a handful of Jesus-did-I-just-see-that? single-take fight scenes) would go for nothing if his two stars' performances didn't rise to the bloody occasion.

Unflinchingly, Choi and the younger Ryu paint twin portraits of grime-flecked misery, etched in knotted muscle. Indelible moments are caught, the camera refusing to swerve away when other films would feint: Yu's awful solitary dance of self-hatred following his first defeat in the ring; Gang's pathetic, vomituous assertions of self-belief. These actors, and their director, are beyond embarrassment. Thank God, because this was the second classic in as many weeks at the NYAFF.

The Collective deserves special praise for alternating thrill-pop treats with art-house tricks. This is definitely the only festival in which you'd see, side-by-side, *Gagamboy* (a sort of cheap-and-cheerful Filipino *Spider-man*) and *Late Bloomer* (a harrowing, assaultive Japanese video feature about physical disability and terrible revenge). The NYAFF, though, was a mad banquet of such contradictory, oddly complementary experiences. Things like Katsushito Ishii's improbable Tex Avery/Yasujiro Ozu mash-up, *The Taste of Tea*, this year's Audience Award champ and a film so funny it made my face ache; the jet-black satire of Tetsuo Shinohara's *Karaoke Terror* and James Yuen's overlooked HK gem, *Crazy N' The City* (featuring a simply cracking Francis Ng performance). Programming this bold and eclectic is what will establish the NYAFF as an institution.

After the last show, after the last Q and A, a strange, sweet fatigue fell over the crowd assembled outside the cinema. It was immediately recognizable as the sort of feeling you get after a really good night at the movies, only this one had lasted for two whole weeks. How, after having our minds reprogrammed in a blast of beauty, innovation and gonzoid ridiculousness, could we possibly be satisfied with Hollywood boilerplate? For those of us hooked on the big screen Asian film experience, Hendrix offers words of hope: "Just f\*\*king do it! If five complete morons in New York can put on a film festival without any huge, major sponsorship, with absolutely no experience...we're all ugly, some of us are really difficult to get along with...and if we can do it, anyone can do it. The more film festivals the better!" It's a rallying cry that cuts straight to the heart of Subway Cinema's appeal. It's a dare.

ABE GOLDFARB

