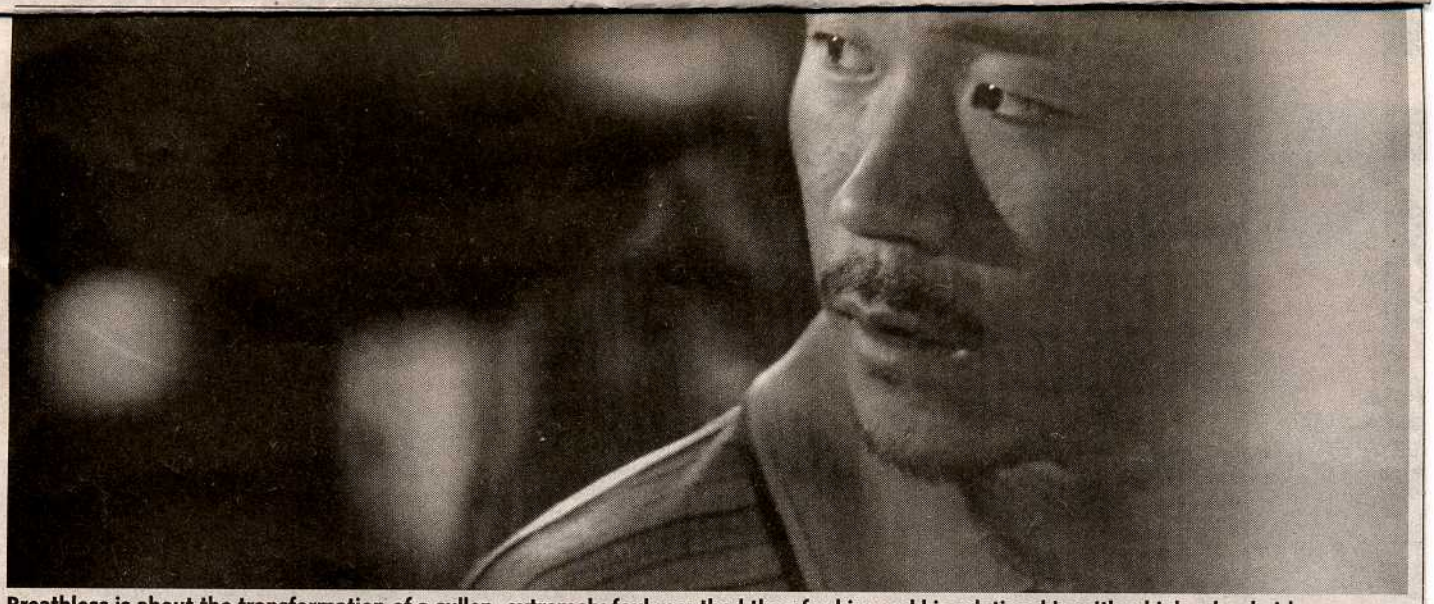
FILM » 13TH ANNUAL REEL ASIAN FESTIVAL



Breathless is about the transformation of a sullen, extremely foul-mouthed thug-for-hire and his relationship with a high-school girl.

'A great year for Asian cinema'

BY JENNIE PUNTER

Recent Korean films that have opened theatrically on this side of the Pacific lean toward the horror genre – like the immensely entertaining monster-action movie *The Host* or the psychological vampire drama *Thirst*. But in *Breathless*, which marks the directing debut of Korean actor Yan Ik-June, the horror is all too human.

The riveting film, which receives its Toronto premiere at the closing-night gala of Reel Asian, snapped up Rotterdam's Tiger Award and several other prizes for directing and performance on its journey here. Not for the faint of heart, *Breathless* follows the transformation of a sullen, extremely foul-mouthed and volatile thug-for-hire who takes a swing at just about everyone he encounters – including a passing high-school girl who challenges him when he casually spits at her. The two form an oddly touching relationship, rooted in their shared experience of domestic violence.

Breathless and the 12 other Reel Asian features (the festival, which begins Wednesday, also includes shorts programs and visual-art presentations) not only offers a balanced cross-section of international and North American Asian film, but also gives audiences a chance to see cinematic achievement beyond the genres and directors typically associated with the represented countries.

"This has been a great year for Asian cinema, which made my job easy," says Reel Asian international programmer Raymond Phathanavirangoon, who also programs for the Toronto International Film Festival. "A lot of these countries have seen a recent explosion of film activity because of digital technology, which has revived their independent sectors." Phathanavirangoon points to the recent output from the Philippines, with Richard Somes's folkloric horror movie *Yanggaw* as an example. "There is a running theme among the younger filmmakers to tell stories, whether they be crime or family dramas, that reveal the poverty and corruption going on in their country."

Thailand has seen a boom in marital-arts action films, sparked by the international success of Ong Bak, but Reel Asian takes viewers into a rural village and its crop fields with *Agrarian Utopia*. The poetic, award-winning drama is a compelling ground-level perspective of the impact of modern agriculture on the working poor. "The film is not just pretty pictures but looks at a family that farms by hand and how hard it is for them to sell their crops with prices so low," Phathanavirangoon explains. "And their neighbour is a professor who decides to buy land and farm as a way to subsist – not everybody has that luxury. So the film beautifully tackles these various dichotomies."

On the home front, Reel Asian presents the world premiere of Keith Lock's *The Ache*, co-written with well-known Toronto poet and sex columnist Louis Bak, in which a young Chinese-Canadian woman, who secretly works in an fetish shop, unravels the mystery behind a family curse.

While there are no new films from China on this year's slate, the fest is a cinephile's must-see with the Canadian premiere of *Red Heroine*, the only surviving episode of the 13-part silent martial-arts series shot in 1929. Live music is provided by the Boston-based multi-instrumental trio Devil Music Ensemble, which is currently on an international tour with the film.

» *The 13th annual Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival runs Nov. 11-15. Screenings at the Bloor Cinema (506 Bloor St. W.), Innis Town Hall (2 Sussex Ave.), NFB (150 John St.) and the Royal Theatre (608 College St.). Tickets are $12 (regular), $15 (centrepiece, closing night), $20 (opening night) with discount prices for students/seniors. Available from the fest website until today at midnight or during the fest at the Innis College lobby and venues. Pass, event and schedule information at www.reelasian.com.*

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> Raymond Phathanavirangoon, Reel Asian