

RED HEROINE: AN ECHO FROM 1929

GET YOUR ASI-ON

Way out East

Toronto Reel Asian fest digs up an old gem to go with the new discoveries

REEL ASIAN IS BACK to prove once again that East is best. The film festival's 13th annual edition runs to Nov. 15 in various venues. On offer is a generous serving of cinematic sensations from 14 countries in East and Southeast Asia, as well as the wares of diasporan filmmakers on our continent, too. Must-sees include the centrepiece presentation of *Red Heroine*, a 1929 martial-arts thriller that's accompanied by a live score by the Devil Music Ensemble at The Royal on Friday (Nov. 13) at 8pm, and *Breathless*, the crackling, Korean-crime-drama closer by actor and first-time feature director Yang Ik-June.

Toronto Reel Asian Int'l Film Festival

Running to Nov 15 at various venues. Go to www.reelasian.com for complete lineup and ticket information.

Agrarian Utopia ★★★★

Dir Uruphong Raksasad. 120 min. Nov 14, 2pm, Innis Town Hall (2 Sussex).

Devotees of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's beguiling head-scratchers should not miss this quietly wondrous Thai curio. Shot by director Uruphong Raksasad in a rural community with real farmers as actors, *Agrarian Utopia* functions equally well as a seemingly bucolic and visually sumptuous ode to country life and as a cunning piece of agitprop about the harsh realities of modern agriculture. In other words, what all these long, languid scenes of rice harvesters at work and kids at play may really document is the death of a way of life. The film's serene beauty takes some of the sting out of that sad fact.

» JASON ANDERSON

Blind Pig Who Wants to Fly ★★★

Dir Edwin. 77 min. Nov 15, 3:30pm, Innis.

This Indonesian movie may or may not make sense, but who cares? First-time feature director Edwin applies a so-weird-it-works sensibility to this desultory exploration of the aftermath of the 1998 riots in Indonesia, vacillating between charming humour and jarring shock value. Impromptu Stevie Wonder karaoke routines hold the whole lovely mess (very, very loosely) together.

» ELENI DEACON

Breathless ★★★★

Dir Yang Ik-June. 130 min. Nov 15, 8pm, The Royal (608 College).

Heads get smacked and ribs get cracked with alarming frequency in Reel Asian's closer, a brutal but extremely compelling drama from Korean actor-turned-director Yang Ik-June. He plays a small-time hood who delivers beatings for a living; everybody else in the movie apparently does it for free. A confrontation with an equally hot-tempered schoolgirl leads to a surprising friendship and a chance for both to deal with the traumas that fuel their very, very bad moods. Like his characters, Yang sometimes doesn't know when enough is enough but his movie still rates as one of the year's boldest and most thrilling debut features. » JA

Fruit Fly ★★

Dir HP Mendoza. 94 min. Nov 12, 7:30pm, Innis.

Total Streisand H.P. Mendoza (*Colma: The Musical*) directs, edits, scores and acts in this feature about a Philippine-born aspiring performance artist who moves to San Francisco to locate not only her birth mother, but also all manner of gay stereotypes with which to surround herself. The embarrassingly literal score, complete with musical numbers that meld *Rent* with *Queer As Folk*, don't flesh out Mendoza's examination of the Asian gay experience. There's no poignancy to the overwrought drama, resulting in a film that's hilariously captivating for all the wrong reasons.

» CHANDLER LEVACK

Red Heroine ★★★★

Dir Wen Yimin. 94 min. Nov 13, 8pm, The Royal. Features a live performance by the Devil Music Ensemble.

Not to short-change Boston collective the Devil Music Ensemble's score — a keenly and playfully interpretive piece built on electric guitar, synth, percussion and Chinese erthu — but this dazzling thriller has a singular energy that's rarefied further by the fact that it's an 80-year-old silent *wuxia* — the oldest of its kind in existence. For a movie made just four years after Eisenstein revolutionized editing with *Potemkin*, *Red Heroine* has a weirdly dreamlike yet modern feel — all balletic combat, and forlorn concubines set alongside its eponymous female warrior against a pastoral, feudal setting. A treat.

» KIERAN GRANT

When The Full Moon Rises ★★★

Dir Mamat Khalid. Nov 13, 10:30pm, Innis.

Functioning somewhere between a Stephen Chow comedy and a gangster moll period piece, Malaysian director Mamat Khalid has created an absurd slice of life. Steamy black-and-white cinematography conveys the faux-horror story about a mysterious demon who snatches up grown men, leaving a reporter to combat the affections of three amorous women. Come for the art direction, stay for the crypto-Nazi, creature-feature subplots. » CL

White on Rice ★★

Dir Dave Boyle. 85 min. Nov 14, 5pm, Innis.

There's not much going on below the surface of Dave Boyle's brisk comedy about Jimmy, a dull-witted Japanese immigrant (Hiroshi Watanabe) struggling to overcome loserdom, though it's tempting to read into it as a love letter to nonconformists and a playful poke at the old country's high standards of success and propriety. Watanabe's routine — clowning haplessly like *Dumb and Dumber*'s missing third stooge — is disconcerting, but a strong cast, namely Japanese imports Nae and Miko Takada as Jimmy's put-upon sister and brother-in-law, apply a surprisingly delicate touch to the screwball material. There's something irrepressibly sweet and positive here that not only fills the time, it almost makes up for *White on Rice*'s paltry and cheap laughs. » KG

Yanggaw ★★

Dir Richard Somes. 98 min. Nov 12, 10pm, Innis.

With a sexy beast as its central character, this meditation on a woman's journey from human form to werewolf-like, mythological *aswang* has hit potential, but writer-director Richard Somes mishandles his attempt at making a thriller. The film's subplot is intriguing in its insightful exploration of the dynamics of a small town. Yet the action scenes are generic — overlaid with rapid drumbeats, heavy breathing and squeals. Somes could've ditched the horror outright and made a better family drama. » ERIN CAUCHI

COMING SOON TO A THEATRE IN YOUR POCKET

Mobifest '09

Thirty-five films in less than an hour, screening Nov. 17, 7pm at the Revue Cinema (400 Roncesvalles; www.mobifest.net). Find out more about Toronto's cell phone-camera film fest, along with our own handy viewing tips, at EYEWEEKLY.com.