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Reel Asian Standouts

Promising flicks from the festival's 2011 lineup, including three dour but distinguished debuts and an odd-couple indie romance

By Julian Carrington



Piercing I, China's first independently financed animated feature, is an intriguing countercultural export.

Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival

Multiple venues (Festival Venue Guide)

November 8–19, various times
Single tickets $12–$20, festival pass $80

Fifteen years on from its humble beginnings as a three-day affair, the Toronto Reel Asian Film Festival has become one of the city's premiere cinematic showpieces. The 2011 edition boasts 11 days of programming and a series of screenings in Richmond Hill, as well as a full slate of selections at the festival's traditional downtown venues, including the Royal Cinema and Innis Town Hall. This year's incarnation features more than 55 films and videos from 12 countries and opens tonight with a gala presentation of *Lover's Discourse*, co-directed by Hong Kong filmmakers Jimmy Wan and former U of T student Derek Tsang.

On November 12, the Royal will host three of *Torontoist*'s top picks, led by ***Piercing I***, the award-winning first feature from Nanjing artist Liu Jian. His hand-drawn debut is a biting indictment of greed and petty corruption in contemporary China, rendered in grimy, *Beavis and Butthead*–like strokes. Remarkably, *Piercing I* also evokes the neo-noir masterpieces of Joel and Ethan Coen (*Blood Simple*, *Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men*), and writer-director Jian isn't unduly flattered by the comparison. *Piercing*'s protagonist is the hapless Zhang, a college grad who loses his factory job at the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008 and subsequently becomes a reluctant conspirator in a Coen-esque web of schemes gone awry. His would-be mark is the wealthy Mr. Yu, an underhanded businessman with local police officials at his beck and call. While it would be worthy of a recommendation in any context, Jian's film is particularly timely in its infuriating but illuminating echoes of the tragic recent hit-and-run death of Yueyue, which make it a Reel Asian must-see.



Park Jung-bum's bowl cut is a beacon to the unscrupulous element in hardscrabble Seoul.

Also highly recommended is Park Jung-bum's ***The Journals of Musan***, which, though a significant stylistic departure from *Piercing I*, shares many of its themes. Park, like Jian, is a first-time writer-director, and if he's indebted to a fraternal filmmaking duo, it's Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. He certainly bears the influence of celebrated humanist compatriot Lee Chang-dong, whom he assisted on 2010′s masterful *Poetry*. Here, Park himself plays Jeong Seung-chul, a principled but naive North Korean refugee, relegated to Seoul's physical and socioeconomic margins. Though his flatmate, Kyung-chul (Jin Yong-Ok), is a fellow defector, the two have little in common beyond the cramped confines of their dilapidated tenement. Kyun-chul's street smarts serve him well in the aggressively capitalist South, but Seong-chul struggles as his meek demeanor and bumpkin's bowl cut seemingly invite exploitation. Park's screenplay isn't subtle (symbols of imperiled innocence don't come more stark than adopted stray puppies), but he displays the compassion and composure to suggest he may one day assume his mentor's mantle.



Lee Je-hun and Park Jung-Min as bitter frenemies in Yoon Sung-Hyun's *Bleak Night*.

Bleak Night, our third selection, rounds out a slate of dour but distinguished debuts. Yoon Sung-Hyun's exceptionally assured and precociously polished film school graduation feature examines the turbulent, ill-fated friendship between a trio of South Korean teens. Framed as the investigation of a grieving father into the apparent suicide of his son, Ki-Tae (Lee Je-hun), Yoon's non-linear narrative deftly elucidates the surprisingly complex dynamics of Ki-Tae's relationship to his closest classmates, Dong-Yoon (Seo Jun-Young), and Hee-Joon (Park Jung-Min), and suggests an equally convoluted distribution of culpability. Yoon presents elliptical snatches of playful banter and mock antagonism, which become increasingly genuine as Ki-Tae moves to assert his primacy. The three performers alternately share a convincing rapport and an authentic antipathy, but Lee stands out in a superb portrayal of a young man concealing his insecurities behind an antagonistic, alpha veneer.



Real-life musician Goh Nakamura pines for a fictional flame in *Surrogate Valentine*.

Doing just the opposite is easy-going, slightly doughy San Franciscan singer-songwriter Goh Nakamura, who plays himself in Dave Boyle's ***Surrogate Valentine***. A distinct change of pace, if not of venue, Boyle's black-and-white indie romance plays the Royal on November 13. The odd-couple premise sees the quietly charismatic Goh tasked with tutoring an irksome, overbearing actor named Danny (Chadd Stoops), who's preparing for a role. Thinking he's signed on strictly to teach Danny some guitar, Goh discovers that Danny construes the arrangement as a deep-immersion method workshop and intends to follow him on tour. The pair proceed to Seattle and Los Angeles, where Goh re-encounters Rachel (Lynn Chen), a high-school crush for whom he continues to carry a torch. Previously lacking the self-assurance to declare his feelings, Danny's influence inspires him to make a move. Stoops, as Danny, is a little too broad, and ditto Parry Shen as Rachel's Bluetooth-wearing douche of a boyfriend. But Goh, in his first screen role, carries the film with his laid-back charm and shares a genuine chemistry with Rachel. At 75 minutes, *Surrogate Valentine* is short as well as sweet, and is a welcome respite from some of Reel Asian's heavier offerings, excellent though they may be.
Images courtesy of Reel Asian. For tickets and a full schedule of the festivals screenings, exhibitions, and events, visit reelasian.com.