

FILM REVIEW



Clockwise from above: Norihiro Koizum's *Gachi Boy: Wrestling With a Memory*; Miike Takashi's *Sukiyaki Western Django*; *Chak De!* by Indian director Shimit Amin; *Genius Party*, a collection of seven animation shorts by celebrated Japanese directors; and *Astropia* by Gunnar Gudmundsson of Iceland.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KFF



Sports cinema under the spotlight

Along with a heavy emphasis on manga-influenced Japanese films, this year's Kaohsiung Film Festival also features a new sports film category to greet the upcoming World Games 2009

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

After last year focusing on art-house genre movies, the Kaohsiung Film Festival (KFF, 高雄電影節) returns today with a popular lineup of flicks about music, manga, fantasy, science fiction, action and a new addition, sports, which was included to welcome the World Games 2009 that are scheduled to begin on July 16 of next year in the country's second city.

The festival's Action Zone — Athletic Fighters segment, one of eight thematic sections, focuses on dreams, passion and athletic courage and will premiere *Running the Sahara*, which follows Taiwan's ultra-marathon star Kevin Lin's (林義傑) collaboration with Canadian runner Ray Zahab and Charlie Engle of the US on a 6,920km-long expedition that took them through six countries and across the Sahara Desert.

Slick, fast-paced and packed with pretty-faced leads, Bollywood sports movie *Chak De! India* tracks a group of female athletes' quests for self-fulfillment and was made with production values on a par with those of Hollywood.

Gachi Boy: Wrestling With a Memory,

one of the festival's opening films, is about manga-style wrestling. The story follows the amnesiac bookworm Igarashi who turns to wrestling to remember the past and deal with the present, to seek respect and uncover the meaning of life. Director Norihiro Koizum is scheduled to hold a question-and-answer session after the screening.

For table tennis enthusiasts, documentary filmmaker and Oscar-winner Jessica Yu's debut feature, *Ping Pong Playa*, blends elements of comedy, hip-hop, sports and manga to explore ethnic issues in the US.

More genre-bending flicks are to be found in the World Fantastic Cinema category. Adept at making horror, action and erotic films, Japanese director Miike Takashi turned his hand to westerns with *Sukiyaki Western Django*, which features a cast of Japan's A-list stars in a story that follows the trials and tribulations of two rival samurai clans.

Takashi's *Zeburaman* is a campy rendition of the superhero tradition, which centers on Shinichi, a cuckolded elementary school teacher whose daughter sells sex and whose son is bullied in school. The film's protagonist

seeks comforts by dressing up as Zeburaman, his black-and-white costumed alter-ego.

The virtual and the non-virtual realms are interchangeable in French director Nic Balthazar's *Ben X* in which an autistic teenage boy only feels alive through his online gaming obsession.

The cosplay subculture finds a Western translation in *Mister Lonely*, which centers on a Michael Jackson impersonator who is led by a Marilyn Monroe look-alike to a hippie commune inhabited by impersonators who include a priest played by German director Werner Herzog.

Best known for co-directing *Delicatessen* (1991) and *The City of Lost Children* (1995) with Jean-Pierre Jeunet, French director Marc Caro flies solo in *Dante 01*. The sci-fi flick puts the ugliness of humanity in the spotlight when a mutiny breaks out aboard a prison ship.

To attract younger audiences, festival organizers have accorded a pronounced presence in this year's lineup to manga-influenced Japanese films, often hilarious and led by big-name stars. Examples can be found in the cinematic world of Satoshi

Miki, one of two directors that take center stage at this year's festival, who finds humor in the most trivial and odd situations.

In *Damejin*, Miki's wacky characters are three good-for-nothing guys who save up for a trip to India after being told by an alien that a visit to the subcontinent is the only way to save mankind from annihilation.

Miki's *Adrift in Tokyo* tells the tale of law student Takemura, who is promised a handsome fee for walking through Tokyo with a debt collector. The seemingly innocent outing turns into a bumpy ride in this so-called "walk movie."

FESTIVAL NOTES:

WHAT: Kaohsiung Film Festival 2008 (高雄電影節)
WHEN: Today through Nov. 6
WHERE: Kaohsiung Film Archive (高雄電影圖書館) and Kaohsiung Vieshow Cinemas (高雄威秀影城)
TICKETS: NT\$120 per screening, available through NTCH ticket outlets or at www.artsticket.com.tw
ON THE NET: www.kff.tw

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Saw V

Gruesome, moralistic game player Jigsaw (Tobin Bell) is back for more torture tests, even if he's been dead since Part III. His cop acolyte Hoffman (Costas Mandylor) now carries the flag for giving deadly lessons in ethics, but he has to be careful because seemingly every investigator in the state is on his tail — those that aren't dead, at any rate. No previews were available for this entry, and it doesn't need them, because it's going to make another killing. Part VI is on the way.



Scar

In a classic example of predatory programming, the management of the Scholar theater complex jumped at the release of *Saw V* to slot in this similarly titled horror flick (especially in Chinese) with the added gimmick of 3D. A woman travels back to her hometown in Colorado to visit family and before long the killing begins. Problem is, the deaths resemble a macabre incident that prompted her to leave town many years before. There's torture, too, but Jigsaw devotees are unlikely to get their fix.



Death Race

The *Saw* series is fundamentally about body abuse and serpentine plots, so car chases have not featured prominently. Those who prefer the latter while preserving a body count would be better off seeing this loose remake. Jason Statham stars as an unjustly imprisoned man whose jail runs *Rollerball*-like contests, except with souped-up cars, novelty weapons and a lucrative online following. Has all of the action and aggression of Paul Bartel's 1975 original, but by most accounts none of the smarts. Directed by Paul W.S. Anderson (*Event Horizon*, *Resident Evil*), whose frenetic films lobotomize interesting actors — in this case Joan Allen, who plays the evil head of the prison.



High School Musical 3: Senior Year

This is the first theatrical entry in the Disney stage and screen franchise that started on cable TV and is now a favorite among tweens and pre-tweens the world over. Typically American offering of high school cliques and sports worship makes up for the clichés with solid dance sequences and tunes for the younger set. The kids are as pure as the driven snow, and hardly remind one of the high schools that most of us attended. Hard to know where Part 4 might go ... *High School Musical 4: The Repeat Students*, perhaps?



The Lazarus Project

The writer of *Eagle Eye* debuts as director in this leisurely paced mystery about an ex-con (Paul Walker from *The Fast and the Furious* and *Eight Below*) whose latest robbery turns into a bloodbath. He is caught and apparently executed — only to wake up in an asylum with a head full of doubts about what is real and what is not. This Taiwanese-financed film more or less went to DVD in the US after some screenings at festivals. Happily, Paul Walker completists now have a chance to see him on the big screen here with this well-received if greatly under-exposed effort.



The Feelings Factory

A professional woman makes new acquaintances at a speed dating function. One of the men turns out to be fine for a time, while another turns out to be a little more than she expected. The audience discovers some mortal secrets about her, and from there things only get more complicated. This French film about growing alienation from natural expression of feelings impressed reviewers, with special regard for lead actor Elsa Zylberstein.



Down Under, Outback and beyond

Forget Victoria Bitter, cork hats, crocodiles and Charlene Mitchell from 'Neighbours,' cross-cultural pollination is this year's theme at the Australian Film Showcase

BY MARTIN WILLIAMS
STAFF REPORTER

The poster for this retrospective of Aussie films from the last decade is eye-catching. Two Caucasian girls jump in the air in a desert vista. The sand is red, the sky is clear and blue and tufts of plant-life punctuate a scene roasting under the desert sun. In front of the girls is an arrangement of rocks spelling "Australia."

The image is ironic because the films in the lineup are far removed from the eternally marketable myth; that Australian identity was forged in the Outback.

Had the festival's focus been to explore that theme to its most sinister limit, the Australian Commerce and Industry Office might have screened two of the finest white-men-in-the-Outback sagas: *Wolf Creek* and *Wake in Fright*. But presenting such unflatteringly violent films might have led to a reshuffle of consular

staff, so let's not be picky.

What we have instead are seven films that have had little or no exposure in Taiwan. And unlike the message of the poster, most touch on the surprising, and possibly accidental, theme of immigration and migrants.

Of the most potential interest to local audiences is last year's *The Home Song Stories*, an autobiographical family tale. It stars the excellent Joan Chen (陳沖) as Rose, a Shanghai nightclub entertainer who moves to Australia with her children but cannot find peace in her relationships or herself and gradually unravels. The film digs deeper into the present and past than comfort might allow for the characters; many Taiwanese will know of similar stories from family experience.

Romulus My Father, also from last year, stars Eric Bana as a rural-based Yugoslav immigrant in the 1960s whose German wife takes on



The Australian Film Showcase lineup includes, from left to right, *Romulus My Father*, *Peaches* and *The Home Song Stories*, starring Joan Chen.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUSTRALIAN COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY OFFICE

a lover and bears a second child. Like Rose, she unravels and the consequences are profound.

Clubland (2007, released in the US as *Introducing the Dwigts*) has proved more divisive among critics. The *Village Voice* called it a "sitcom-grade embarrassment," but the film, which chronicles the misadventures of a Sydney family whose British immigrant matriarch/stand-up comedian (Brenda Blethyn) manipulates her children, has its champions. This



Hugo Weaving, Jacqueline McKenzie, Emma Lung

is another film in which migration generates deep-seated regret in its main character, who then punishes those in her care, though the film is more wry and sardonic than bleak.

Peaches (2004) focuses on the life of Steph, the daughter of a Vietnamese immigrant, whose rural cannery boss (Hugo Weaving from



V for Vendetta and *The Matrix* trilogy) was close to her deceased mother. Steph starts a relationship with him as she reads her mother's diary. South Australia has featured in some of Australia's best films over the decades, and this one just might belong on the list.

The Wog Boy (2000) offers much more fun and laughs than the other entries. Star Nick Giannopoulos, who plays an unemployed young man ridiculed on the national stage as a "dole

bludger," makes use of years of experience in TV and stage shows — such as *Acropolis Now*; that mined comedy from a Greek-Australian perspective, though a lot of the jokes and the flavor of the accents will be lost in the subtitles.

For the kids is *Hildegard* (2001). Not concerned with migration (except, perhaps, the travels of the title duck at the hand of "ducknappers"), this film about children in a single-parent family embarking on an odyssey to save their pet and a bunch of other birdlife makes for an interesting comparison with the Taiwanese feature *A Piggy Tale* from many years ago.

The only film to be set in remote Australia is possibly the most interesting, *Yolngu Boy* (2001) is a tale of three Aboriginal youths in the Northern Territory who for reasons both heroic and grim find themselves lured to the city. Largely acted by

amateurs and unafraid to depict the hopelessness in so many indigenous communities, this is not the picture of modern Aboriginal people that Taiwanese people would be accustomed to in fleeting media coverage, nor one that tourism officials would offer up enthusiastically. Its inclusion in the festival is commendable.

All in all, the films offer a strange mix of identity crises in which happier protagonists accept the strange turns in their lives and move on, while the rest suffer as least they can. Local audiences might just find something of value in that.

The Changchun theater (172 Changchun Rd, Taipei City, 台北市長春路172號) hosts the festival until Sunday next week. Tickets are NT\$260, with a book of six available for NT\$960.

Session times are on the Net: lefoo.com.tw/todaysmovie/movie/2008movies.asp.