

F I L M R E V I E W

# Dying to get rich?

'Invitation Only' is Taiwan's answer to torture porn films like 'Saw' and 'Hostel'

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER



Film Notes

INVITATION ONLY (絕命派對)

DIRECTED BY: KEVIN KO (柯孟融)

STARRING: BRYANT CHANG (張睿家) AS WADE,  
JERRY HUANG (黃志瑋) AS PRESIDENT YANG,  
JULIANNE (朱蕾安) AS HITOMI, MARIA OZAWA AS DANA

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME: 95 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

The debut feature by 25-year-old director Kevin Ko (柯孟融), *Invitation Only* (絕命派對) is Taiwan's answer to the genre of horror films made popular by the *Saw* and *Hostel* film series. With a cast of pretty idols and sexy models, the film is a 90-minute ride of guilty thrills that combines graphic violence, repulsive torture and sexually suggestive imagery with bitter commentary on a wealth-obsessed society.

Promising actor Bryant Chang (張睿家) plays Wade, an ordinary guy who makes his living by running errands and chauffeuring around his wealthy young boss, known as President Yang (Jerry Huang, 黃志瑋). When Yang asks him to attend a private party by passing as a cousin, Wade is thrilled by the invitation to join the world of the rich, young and fabulous.

It turns out to be the best party ever. Wade wins big at gambling, enjoys a casual fling with supermodel Dana (Maria Ozawa) and makes new friends who include Hitomi (Julianne, 朱蕾安), Lin (Ma Kuo-hsien, 馬國賢) and Holly (He Chia-wen, 何嘉文).

The debauchery becomes a nightmare when the group finds pianist Robert brutally murdered. Hunted down one by one by a masked killer, Wade and his friends soon realize they are prey for a sadistic, high-society audience with a taste for the spectacle of torture and slaughter.

The invitees now have to fight back if they want to survive this killing game of the rich.

At its best, *Invitation Only* smartly plays with society's obsession with the wealthy and the sense of unease over the widening gap between the elite and everybody else. The film effectively uses model Liz and Japanese AV idol Ozawa as disposable playthings and male model Huang as a young and powerful man of pedigree with a hint of menace.

Director Ko caught the attention of local film circles with his 2004 short horror flick *The Print* (鬼印), which circulated widely on the Internet while he was still a college student. In his debut feature, Ko follows the trend sparked by *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005) and conjures up visceral and frightful experiences through graphic portrayals of gore and violence. The narration is, however, carried out in a plain and sometimes uninspired manner that kills the suspense in the first third of the film.

The story picks up when the psychopathic killer begins to hack his way through his victims. With a stomach-churning shot in which Wade cuts off his own thumb and an extended torture scene where Holly is mutilated by a knife, this slasher film is guaranteed to make audiences fidget in their seats.

Spiced up with local zest, *Invitation Only* is a competent first effort that aims to cultivate an audience for a genre that is rarely tackled in Chinese-language cinema.

Sexy models, hot studs and an AV idol get hacked and slashed in *Invitation Only*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THREE DOTS ENTERTAINMENT



OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

2009 Taiwan Local Voice Film Festival

This inaugural festival showcases nine features and shorts about the environment, labor, indigenous affairs, identity and other issues. Select screenings include appearances by the directors. The festival starts its national tour in Taipei at the Taiwan Human Rights Memorial near Jingmei (景美) from today until Sunday, then visits Hsinchu, Kaohsiung, Taichung, Chiayi and Nantou. See [blog.roodo.com/localvoice](http://blog.roodo.com/localvoice) (in Chinese) for more information.



Crank: High Voltage

Jason Statham returns as put-upon hitman Chev Chelios in this frenetic, wickedly amusing and violent sequel. In the first film he had to keep his adrenaline high to stay alive after being poisoned; in Part 2 he sets off in search of his "indestructible heart" stolen by a triad boss. Co-stars David Carradine, Dwight Yoakam and Bai Ling (白靈). From the same directors as the original, this is a big, beefy slab of testosterone that doesn't give a s%?# what the critics think — and features one of the more profane official Web sites of recent times.



I.O.U.S.A.

"Fiscal cancer" is the expression used in this creative, user-friendly documentary to describe the US' financial plight, though it was released more than a year ago, so the most brutal developments in the global economic crisis were yet to transpire. All the more prescient, then, for this film to reflect on the inability of Americans — individuals, corporations and governments — to spend within their means. Taiwanese audiences might be especially interested in the coda of the film, which muses on China's financial influence over a traumatized US economy.



The Horsemen

Swedish director Jonas Akerlund is a respected music video director with clips for U2, Metallica and Madonna under his belt; his most notorious work was the video for *Smack My Bitch Up* by The Prodigy. This, a horror film with Dennis Quaid and Zhang Ziyi (章子怡), should have been a step up for him, but it was sparsely released in the US last month after taking years to complete. Quaid is a detective who discovers that deaths at the hands of a serial killer — possibly Zhang — link him to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. "Come and see" is the tagline, though some might find the grisly content unwatchable, if not the biblical mumbo jumbo.



Nomad

The most expensive film ever made in Kazakhstan is an historical epic that sets the scene for the formation of the modern Kazakh state, but the story focuses more on the rivalries, loves and conflicts of national hero Ablai Khan than court intrigue. This is a strange mixture of tired epic structure, international casting and excellent production values. *Variety* awarded the film a pass mark for being "compelling by dint of old-school sincerity and sheer spectacle." Also known as *Nomad: The Warrior*.



Magique!

There's a lot of nasty violence throughout this week's releases, so parents desperate for kid-friendly fare could do a lot worse than pick this one. The young son of lonely single mother and honey farmer Marie Gillain thinks up a remedy for her sadness: convince her to lend their land to a traveling circus and its wacky and colorful performers.



Gaping Abyss

Yet another made-for-TV effort from Germany makes it onto Taiwanese screens, and the delicate English title tells the tale. An intrepid geologist investigates when sinkholes start appearing all over a German metropolis, threatening lives and property, and it just so happens that her brother died in a mine accident that may be linked to the subterranean threat. The writers just couldn't resist starting with a romantic nude swim that turns fatal (*Dante's Peak*, anyone?). Showing at the Scholar complex in Taipei and Wonderful Cinemas in Taichung. German title: *Der Abgrund: Eine Stadt stürzt ein*.



In Salah

Korean mega-celebrity Lee Yeong-ae, who starred in the well-received *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, paid some of her dues in this, her first feature role. She plays a student on holiday in the Sahara who is detained on suspicion of smuggling ... but secures help from an unlikely compatriot. In the Internet era, it takes something very special to drag people to a theater just to see the lead actress semi-naked — especially in a film that's 12 years old. But this is the main attraction if you believe the Taiwanese promo. Showing at the Baixue theater in Ximending.



# 'Fast & Furious' can't get out of first gear

BY MICK LASALLE

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SAN FRANCISCO

If you're an action director, and someone hands you Vin Diesel, that's gold. Diesel is his own genre: hyper-real, fantastic, romantic. You can show him driving underneath a tumbling, exploding gasoline truck, and coming out the other side, and the audience will believe it. Or maybe they won't, but at least they'll think, "If anybody could survive, it would be that guy."

Yet in the entire 107 minutes of *Fast & Furious*, Taiwan-born director Justin Lin (林詣彬) only once shows he has any conception of what to do with Diesel. It's a single shot. Diesel is on a hill overlooking a cemetery, and Lin places him in the lower right side of the frame. Behind Diesel, an oil derrick goes up and down, and somehow this juxtaposition reinforces and helps define

Film Notes

FAST & FURIOUS

DIRECTED BY: JUSTIN LIN

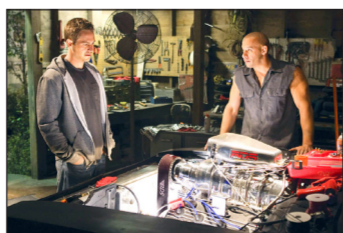
STARRING: VIN DIESEL (DOMINIC),  
PAUL WALKER (BRIAN), MICHELLE  
RODRIGUEZ (LETTY), JORDANA  
BREWSTER (MIA)

RUNNING TIME: 107 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: CURRENTLY  
SHOWING

Diesel's essence: muscular, steady, powerful and relentless.

The rest of the time Diesel is on his own, and he can handle himself, though he'd be better off in the hands of Rob Cohen, who directed him in his two breakthrough films, *The Fast and the Furious* and *XXX*. *Fast & Furious*,



Though *Fast & Furious* is ridiculous, and only partially fun, Vin Diesel's presence makes it worth seeing.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES

in fact, is a sequel to Cohen's 2001 picture, the new title implying that everyone who was fast in the first film is now also furious, and everyone who was furious last time out is now also fast. It's not true.

Brian (Paul Walker) is back at the FBI, and though Walker is a bona fide action star, it must be said: In a blue suit, he looks like he could be the third Darren on *Bewitched*. Meanwhile, Dominic (Diesel), king of the underground



racing circuit, feels the law's hot breath on his neck. He has spent the last seven years racing cars and pulling off epic crimes (that involve fast driving), but he's beginning to worry that he might get caught.

This is a dull place at which to begin a story. It doesn't matter that the movie itself begins with a spectacular chase, culminating in a massive gasoline explosion — that's just to get the adrenaline pumping. The actual story begins with screenwriter Chris Morgan boxing himself in by shifting all the characters into neutral. Having done so, he needs something huge to break them out of their emotional lethargy. Unfortunately, he turns to the worst, most undramatic motivator there is — revenge.

There are two things wrong with revenge as a motivator. The first is that there's no urgency about revenge. Revenge can be dished out now or later. It makes no difference if the worst has already happened. ("It's already too late," Dominic tells his sister, when she tries to get him to calm down. He's right.) The second is that it usually places an action hero in a state of mourning. A revenge plot is a sure way to sap the energy out of any protagonist.

But here I am talking seriously about a screenplay that was probably written in crayon. The movie is ridiculous. The question is whether it's ridiculous fun or not fun. In the Ridiculous Fun category: The FBI is after Dominic, but he keeps showing up at his sister's house, and no one thinks to look there. And this one: Dominic is hiding out. He's trying to be invisible. So does he

drive a Ford Escort? No, he drives a jacked-up sports car that turns heads and that people can hear rumbling two blocks away.

In the Ridiculous Not Fun category: The action choreography is hyped up, fast-moving — and lousy. Aside from the opening sequence, there's nothing imaginative about it, and the actual filming is routine shaky-quick-cut stuff. Diesel should be working with Cohen — or with Zack Snyder, who made *Watchmen* — and not with Lin, who made *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*. He needs a setting that's not only kinetic but inspired.

And yet ... if you want to see a Vin Diesel movie, this is the one that's out there. On his own, Diesel, with his shiny head, growling bass voice and indefinable presence, is a reason to see something. In the case of *Fast & Furious*, he's the only reason.