

Reel Asian: Toronto toilets and Taipei teens

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JASON ANDERSON Special to the Star

There are many benefits to being a martial-arts hero but an old-age pension with quality medical care is not one of them.

That much is clear from the fate of the aging fighters in *Gallants*, a Hong Kong action comedy that serves as the opening-night gala for the 14th annual edition of the [Reel Asian International Film Festival](#).

Presenting features, shorts and documentaries from East and Southeast Asia along with new works by Canadian and American filmmakers of Asian descent, the festival runs Nov. 9 to 15 at a variety of downtown venues.

Once again, the program is remarkably diverse, with elegant arthouse dramas situated alongside anarchic animated shorts, issue-oriented docs and live mergers of film and music.

Reel Asian's gala slots are occupied by three very different kinds of crowd pleasers from Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan.

Making its Toronto premiere on Nov. 9 at the Bloor Cinema, *Gallants* is an unabashedly nostalgic throwback to the martial-arts movies churned out by the Shaw Brothers Studio in the 1970s.

Director Derek Kwok has gone so far as to cast his film with several of the era's original stars, including Siu-Lung Leung and Kuan Tai Chen. In *Gallants*, they play the rickety disciples of a martial-arts master who's been comatose for three decades. When trouble arrives in town, they must do their best to ignore their many aches and pains as they cope with their newly awakened (and very confused) master and deploy their old skills on younger, more able-bodied opponents.

As a gentle but spirited spoof of martial-arts-movie clichés, *Gallants* resembles a lower-budget version of Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle*, another class reunion for veterans of the Shaw Brothers' well-loved '70s output. Yet Kwok's movie has its own brand of charm thanks to its goofy humour, buoyant spirits and terrific fight choreography.

Another Toronto premiere at the Royal on Nov. 12, *Golden Slumber* is a swiftly paced and often ingenious thriller by Yoshihiro Nakamura, whose previous feature *Fish Story* won the audience award at last year's Reel Asian.

The Japanese director's latest is a savvy exercise in Hitchcockian suspense, complete with a baffled Everyman who must frantically evade capture after being framed for a crime. In this case, that crime is the assassination of the Japanese prime minister.

Well-connected villains serve up Aoyagi (Masato Sakai) to the media as "the next Lee Harvey Oswald." But the unfortunate deliveryman is not entirely on his own as he races through the streets and alleys of Sendai. New and old friends — including an oddly puckish serial killer — come to his aid.

While the ensuing plot twists are variously inspired and ludicrous, Nakamura and his cast carry them off with great energy and panache.

Likewise, Reel Asian's closing-night gala has no shortage of flair. A sweet and funny romantic comedy, *Au Revoir Taipei* follows an assortment of cops, gangsters and winsome youngsters through an eventful night in Taipei.

Director Arvin Chen borrows many of his moves from the French New Wave films of the 1960s, as well as Taiwanese cinema's own New Wave of the '80s and '90s. Nevertheless, there's plenty of freshness to be found in Chen's endearingly deadpan mix of caper movie and love story.

Chen's film is not the only international prizewinner at Reel Asian. Other well-honoured new arrivals include *Dear Doctor*, a Japanese comedy about an unusual smalltown physician, and *Bi, Don't Be Afraid*, a drama that marked a successful Cannes debut for the young Vietnamese director Phan Dang Di.

The second of Chinese indie filmmaker Jiayin Liu's extraordinary, long-take portraits of her parents, *Oxhide 2* also makes its Toronto premiere.

Though nominally Japanese in origin, *Toilet* was filmed in Toronto last fall with a largely local cast and crew. Director Naoko Oigami's second feature is a low-key dramedy about three very different siblings who must come together after the death of their mother.

Viewers seeking out more thoroughly Canadian fare at Reel Asian can try *Redress Remix*. Lesley Loksi Chan's documentary uses animation, musical sequences and interviews to create a startling context for its subject: responses to the Canadian government's official 2006 apology to the Chinese-Canadian community for the Head Tax of 1885 and the Exclusion Act of 1923.

An omnibus project by seven filmmakers living in the GTA, *Suite Suite Chinatown* boasts an equally diverse array of styles and approaches within a single work.

Asked to reflect on the concept of Chinatown, the filmmakers responded with everything from a gorgeous, neon-lit abstract piece to cheeky tutorials that instruct viewers how to say "I love Andy Lau" in both Mandarin and Cantonese.

In a special presentation at Reel Asian, *Suite Suite Chinatown* will be accompanied by a live score composed by Arthur Yeung and Theo Mathien and performed by the Mary Ward Catholic Secondary School stage band. Don't be surprised if the audience at the Royal on Nov. 12 follows the performance with a late-night dim sum excursion to Dundas and Spadina.

The Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival runs Nov. 9-15 at various venues.