



**Fantasia International Film Festival
Montreal, Quebec
July 19 - August 9, 2012**

by Dru Jeffries

2012 marked the sixteenth year for the Fantasia International Film Festival, a highlight of the filmgoing year for many of Montreal's most enthusiastic cinephiles and film journalists from around the world. Fantasia promises twenty-two days of blood, gore, oddities, and all-things Asian, and delivers in abundance. At more than twice the length of most other film festivals, though, Fantasia represents something of a double-edged sword: with only two main screening locations (both conveniently located for students at the downtown Concordia campus, plus supplemental screenings at the Cinémathèque québécoise) offering wall-to-wall screenings from noon to midnight, festivalgoers have the opportunity to see more of the films they want to see than at festivals that spread their programme across more locations in fewer days; but twenty-two days of Fantasia is simply exhausting (especially for those of us who have difficulty moderating our filmgoing!). After twenty-two days and thirty-six films, I felt that the good films were far outnumbered by the mediocre-to-terrible set, and I only saw one film that I found transcendent. I find myself wishing (especially come August 10, nursing a Fantasia hangover) that the programmers would do a better job separating the genre wheat from the chaff and pare their selections down to fit within a more manageable ten day frame.

Of the most buzzed about films offered at Fantasia in 2012, the ones that I caught all landed with thuds. One of the opening night films, Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* follow-up *The Tall Man* is one of these movies whose plot is complicated solely for

the sake of confusing and destabilizing the viewer. (There's a bit of voiceover that elucidates the situation in the last 30 seconds or so.) The film is about a small Washington town in which child abduction is incredibly common, and children routinely disappear without a trace; residents have invented a bogeyman figure, the titular "Tall Man," to explain the phenomenon. I predicted the closing twist a little less than halfway through the film, but was then caught off guard by a twist at the halfway point. Another big event this year was the premiere of *Sushi Girl*, which was exacerbated by the presence of most of the cast at the screening (including genre deities Tony "Candyman" Todd and Mark "Skywalker" Hamill). Essentially an extended riff on the infamous ear-cutting scene in *Reservoir Dogs*, *Sushi Girl* is almost entirely a one-room film in which a group of criminals re-assemble six years after a diamond heist to interrogate (read: torture) one of their own in order to finally recover their loot. The movie tries to coast on the charisma of its actors (though it successfully wastes Michael Biehn, Jeff Fahey, and Danny Trejo in bit parts), but it's not enough. A final twist is contrived and easy-to-predict, and the film ultimately fails to satisfy as anything more than a minor exercise in style. Speaking of actors, *Beverly Hills 90210* star AnnaLynne McCord received a special notice from the Fantasia jury for her performance in *Excision*. It's a button-pushing high school film that takes adolescent angst into bloodier territory than even *Carrie* (which is saying something -- let's just say that *Carrie* didn't enjoy her bloodbath nearly as much as McCord's Pauline does in *Excision*). The crowd ate it up, but I found the central character inconsistently sketched, which particularly bothered me in the film's shocking (but rather empty) finale. Lots of fun cameos, though, from the likes of Malcolm McDowell and John Waters (the latter as a priest!).

As usual, Japanese films were in good supply at Fantasia. Like last year, prolific filmmaker Takashi Miike brought two films to Montreal in 2012, but neither was particularly good. *For Love's Sake*, the opening night film in the larger Hall screening room, is a musical for people who hate musicals, a love story seemingly for people incapable of the feeling. After a brief and crudely animated prologue

(which confuses more effectively than it explains), the film opens with a garishly lit musical/fight scene that lays all of its cards out on the table: the film's songs will be deliberately bad, the dances deliberately stiff, and the violence deliberately ultra. The whole thing is played for laughs, except for a few moments of violence so jarring that they disrupt the film's light tone irrevocably. (You can always rely on a Fantasia audience to react to violence with unrestrained glee, however; I may have been alone in finding the film slightly distasteful at times.) The musical conceit is dropped about halfway through the film's two-hour-plus running time, only to return near the end in a particularly unnecessary song sung by a minor character. I found myself humming the film's final song on the way home from the theatre, but this is a minor compliment. Miike's other film, an adaptation of the Nintendo DS game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, was an improvement, but not a major one. The film's style is erratic: the characters have the wacky hairstyles from the video game, but they act more or less normally, as opposed to a live-action manga adaptation like *Detroit Metal City* that adapts the crazy acting style along with the crazy character designs; there are moments of video game inspired flourishes that recall something like *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, but Miike doesn't use them nearly as consistently as Edgar Wright, nor as effectively or originally. *The Warped Forest*, a sequel to 2005's *Funky Forest*, is one of those films that thinks being weird is the same thing as being provocative, but it's quite mistaken. There are moments of beauty here, but the whole exercise feels like it's trying too hard and as a result, it's quite a draining experience overall.

The Japanese comedies, however, were in fine form this year. *Wildman* director Noburo Iguchi, like Miike, brought two films to this year's festival (and like Miike, brought two last year as well); both were enjoyable, slight, and crude entertainments. The titles alone -- *Zombie Ass: Toilet of the Dead* and *Dead Sushi* -- should give you a sense of what you're in for with these. If you're interested in perverted feces-covered zombies, go with *Zombie Ass*, but if sentient killer sushi is more your speed, you're not going to do much better than *Dead Sushi*. While I make it a rule to leave before the Q&A starts at Fantasia (and most festival)

screenings -- I just find them intolerable -- I make an exception for Iguchi (who showed up to one of his screenings in a traditional sumo mawashi). *Love Strikes!* is a comedy that I also found deeply affecting. This is not a film that's trying to be particularly insightful, but it's harshly critical of a certain kind of fanatic devotion to love objects, and specifically of the kind of person who turns his or her crushes into love objects, which dehumanizes them in some way. It's similar thematically to *(500) Days of Summer*, but is a much better movie. No one gets off the hook here; everyone is held accountable for their bad behaviour, and I appreciated that. Two of my favourite films at Fantasia were also Japanese comedies: *Robo-G* and *A Boy and His Samurai*. The former is a comedy of errors about a group of incompetent robotic engineers (don't you need qualifications to get that kind of job?) who, in order to meet a tough deadline, fake a robot by putting an old man in a suit. It had me in stitches throughout. The latter is a film that I suspect we'll be hearing about for years to come. The story of *Samurai* is charming -- a single mother and her young boy stumble across a samurai from the Edo period who has accidentally travelled forward in time to present-day Tokyo -- and results in much fish-out-of-water fun. But where the film really shines is in its heart. I absolutely fell in love with all of the central characters, all of whom are incredibly likeable (even the kid, who could have easily come off as twee or grating). It's basically *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* with a samurai instead of an alien, but I'm going to say it: director Yoshihiro Nakamura (whose *Golden Slumbers* was my favourite film of Fantasia 2010) has handily outdone Spielberg's film (which, to be fair, was never a childhood favourite of mine). This is a future family classic, and easily my favourite film of Fantasia 2012.

Fantasia can always be counted on for some top-notch animation, but this year I didn't see too many, for whatever reason. Of the two Japanese animations I screened, *Children who Chase Lost Voices from Deep Below* is as contemplative and beautiful as its title suggests. The watercolour backgrounds are splendid throughout, enabled by the rich natural settings of rural Japan and a surprisingly sunny underworld called Agarthia. The narrative of the film deliberately recalls the

Orpheus myth, with a man venturing into the underworld to reclaim his passed wife for the land of the living. That's really the B-plot though, with the A-plot devoted to a neglected young girl, who travels to Agartha alongside the widowed man in search of something ineffable that would give her life meaning. My favourite element of the film was probably the creature designs, featuring an MVP performance by various Queztlal Coatl's, who wouldn't be at all out of place in a Miyazaki film like *Princess Mononoke* or *Spirited Away*. On the other end of the Japanese anime spectrum is *GYO: Tokyo Fish Attack*, which is about as ridiculous and full of gilled carnage as its title suggests. *Wrinkles*, based on the graphic novel by Paco Roca, is a kind of animated *Away from Her*. Narratives about Alzheimer's seem at home in the cinema, since it is a medium continuously in the present tense. It's a familiar enough story -- an old man gets placed in a care facility when he becomes too much for his family to handle on their own, where his mind slowly deteriorates -- but it's the warmth of the characters' interactions and the genuine humour and affection that render such harrowing subject matter not just tolerable, but even enjoyable. There is one set of minor characters who get a flashback that fills in a key bit of their backstory that gives the film its greatest emotional sucker-punch. It made me wish we got to see more of the lead characters' lives before the present; it's important to know what they had in order to appreciate how much they've lost or stand to lose.

Other festival highlights tended to err on the lighter side. *Black Pond*, a British mockudrama about a family's involvement with a local eccentric (and -- spoiler alert -- his death). A scene involving whether or not bananas, or rather "ba-nah-nahs!?!", are an appropriate night-time snack was particularly hilarious. *Turn Me On, Goddammit!* is a charming and humane Norwegian coming-of-age comedy about a young girl struggling with her awakening sexual desire. *Mon Ami* is a pitch black Canadian comedy about two bumbling best friends who endeavour to kidnap their boss's hot daughter in order to... well, their endgame doesn't really make a whole lot of sense, but it's rather fun (the kind of fun that you find yourself feeling bad for

having) to watch their plan, such as it is, fall apart bit by bit until a climactic confrontation that is almost as bloody as last year's *Cold Fish*.

Still I have only discussed fewer than half of the films I screened at Fantasia, which is itself a fraction of the 160+ films on the programme. Based on numbers alone, the Fantasia programmers clearly have a voracious appetite for these kinds of films, but I would encourage them to raise their standards a bit. When co-director of international programming Mitch Davis takes the stage before a movie (a not uncommon occurrence), prepare yourself for some high, hyperbolic praise. His enthusiasm can be contagious, but most of the time I just find myself wondering if we saw different movies entirely.