

Fantasia Festival 2005 Report: You Can Take the Girl out of Fantasia, But Can You Take Fantasia out of the Girl?

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I must begin by declaring my outsider status. Granted, such a declaration is one that any Fantasia-goer would probably be happy to sign his or her name to—this is, after all, the festival for oddballs, freaks, aficionados and iconoclasts. And I would guess that any of said denizens would wear such distinctions as badges of honour, right next to all those little round lapel pins with band names and peace signs and pictures of Optimus Prime or StrongBad. This pride goes beyond cinephilia into the realm of total lifestyle, into sub-sub-subculture affiliations and esoteric expertise, into devoted fandom and carefully cultivated societal alienation, into cosplay and MMPORGs and realms of die-hard specialized engagement that I can't even imagine. And while I am, natch, freaky in my own way, and nerdy enough to be way nerdier than I probably seem (if I do say so myself), I am firmly out of the loop of this whole trip that is called Fantasia.

For one, I study film, I really dig film, but Cinemaniac isn't a label I would own up to. Secondly, I am mystified by this love of "Asian film" declared by so many. I mean, that's a pretty massive and diverse body of work—I don't even know what it could mean to claim it all as an identifiable, cohesive object of devotion. (Saying that a majority of today's stand-out, exciting films are coming out of Asia is another claim altogether, and a highly tenable one.)

Nor could I pledge allegiance to any specific concept of what is very vaguely known as "genre film." In the case of Fantasia, this predominantly means fantasy/horror/exploitation. I have all sorts of dark spooky goth instincts still stirring inside me, left over from

my teenage years, but this doesn't mean that I want to expose them to an endless parade of movies that tend to trade in shock for its own sake, gore and more gore, and—that ole stalwart crowdpleaser—misogyny. Indulging in this sort of fare quickly makes me feel worn-out and tawdry. I don't need this kind of demoralization—whatever else my inner goth may be, she is no whore.

Nonetheless, even for the dubious, Fantasia does manage to spin a web of allure, wonky and inexplicable as it might be. Take the wide-ranging films programmed, which fall under the aforementioned, very broad aegis of genre and Asian films. Many a satisfying filmic experience is to be had, even if one wants to avoid the scary, the geeky, and the gross (and I'm not saying that I wanted to avoid anything per se—even if I'm not officially *into* something, it can be fun to go slumming from time to time). I depended on many a film fan friend to point me in the direction of gems expected and unexpected, and seldom did they point me wrong.

But festivals are never just about the films. Much of the fun of Fantasia is the large, eager, absolutely gung-ho audiences that it draws, the colorful folk you see loyally lined up—seemingly at all hours and in a state of continual waiting—outside of the Hall building and the De Seve theatre. The atmosphere can be positively carnivalesque. What is it about this sometimes unsavory but oddly dynamic mix of characters from characterville that can add up to such unexpected fun? Whenever I went on down to the site to catch a flick I ended up seeing another, and then another, and then heading out for drinks with some motley crew that I

had heretofore never hung out with, and then having a ridiculously good time and finally strolling home, feeling mellow and still wide awake, at five in the morning on a fine, muggy Montreal morn, rosy-fingered dawn setting the mountain aglow... But who can sleep in a Montreal heat wave, who can eat? What is there to do but watch movies and drink beer?

Yes, Fantasia made a party girl out of me. Sedate and hearth-loving though I am throughout the year, the combination of summer heat and weird folks hepped up on weird movies conspired to bring out my most dissolute self, and I had a helluva swell time. I also fell in with a dangerous crowd, the underappreciated, hardworking, hardpartying backbone of the festival: the projectionists (a.k.a. projos, to those in the know). Maybe it was the humidity, but I felt pretty damn cool tagging along with this group of bad boys. (It should be noted that the projo club isn't a boys' club: many women work as projectionists at Concordia—from whence the Fantasia crew are drawn—and from what I've seen they are smart and lovely every one. Too smart and lovely to bother sticking around Fantasia-land after their long and tedious shifts are over.) Anyway, after many a generously shared beer ticket and much clever and amusing conversation, I resolved to promote the mystique of the projectionist. They work long hours in alienating little rooms, and they get blamed for every mishap that is out of their control. So, thank you projo lads and lasses. I salute you. [Check out Anna Phelan's interview with Fantasia projectionist James Larden.]

But back to the audiences, those singularly enthusiastic Fantasia audiences. A telling anecdote comes from the opening film of the festival, *Ashura* (2005)—an epic, mythical-magical, loving/fighting, sparkly period extravaganza with Kabuki theater and demon-slaying (a film my friend deemed lacking heart, but I'm not exactly sure what heart has to do with it. Though perhaps here's where my neophyte status comes in: are you telling me they can stick all that stuff in a movie and still fit heart in there too?). Anyway, sometime in the first act, the hero defends the heroine from the bad guy who is hunting her down. She has killed our leader, baddy claims. She interjects, saying she doesn't even know who said leader is. "That's what the guilty always say," argues bad-guy. The hero responds, in a fell swoop of irrefutable logic, "So do the innocent!" At which point the audience erupts in whoopingly supportive cheers, as though they had collectively been waiting, for years now, just for this moment: for someone to finally make just such a case—this convincingly, this simply, this forcefully—for the wrongly accused, misunderstood,

and much-maligned innocent inside each one of them. The gusto of the response was baffling, and yet contagious. I found myself wishing I could believe like that, that I'd one day have the chance to clap and keep Tinkerbell alive.

A similar hyper-sympathetic reaction came during the first screening of the kinetically awesome teen-girl-friendship flick, *Kamikaze Girls* (2003). One super-cute Japanese schoolgirl (Momoko) is a Rococo devotee, the other (Ichiko) a tough, posturing outlaw-wannabe from an all-girl scooter gang. Both are stuck in the middle of nowhere, and both have their disparate ways of escaping the doldrums: the former malcontently biding her time with pretty costumes and pretty dreams, the latter snarling and spitting and inarticulately railing at the expected order of things. The sweet twist is that Momoko, obsessed with decadence, artifice and delicate femininity, is actually the strong self-contained one, whereas Ichiko is the needy hanger-on, flustered by men, overly-attached to her group identity, and driven to headbutting her could-be pal whenever her overtures of friendship are too roundly rebuffed. Best of all, the film suggests homoeroticism but doesn't go the cop-out lesbian route—it's too easy to get viewers to root for the idea of two hot young chicks getting it on. In terms of trying to undo, and redo, expected modes of representation, a devoted female-friendship narrative is more promising by far.

The two leads, Kyoko Fukada and Anna Tsuchiya—both J-pop princesses, apparently—are both damn adorable, and I was in a bit of a tizzy over all the lacy, frilly, ruffled pinafores and blouses and underskirts: ah, pink satin-ribbon rosette embroidery is my personal favorite too! I didn't really expect the Fantasia audience to be with me on that one, and yet when Momoko found that her white cotton bonnet had moth holes, the discovery elicited such an acute groan of distress from the crowd that I wondered if we weren't all frilly-bonnet wearers at heart. Is not that broken down bonnet a symbol of every glamorous, precious costume artifact that we ever grew out of, or that fell apart at the seams from love and over-use? (How many Halloweens did I think I could wear that homemade Cleopatra costume, anyway? And yet its slide into disrepair broke my young heart...)

And yet, there were times I felt quite the stranger in a strange land. Case in point, the word-of-mouth about *Ghost House* (2004): an amusing crowd-pleaser. This recommendation would seem to indicate comedy, and yet, nary a comic moment was to be found. That is

to say, I did recognize tropes of what could be called humour, flailing gestures and tough guys simpering broadly and demonic gobbling couches and underwear thrown around willy-nilly. I also registered rows of boys (of all cultures and creeds, it should be noted) laughing uproariously—with plenty of knee-slapping thrown in for good measure. But I failed to note anything vaguely resembling *funny*. And it is an alienating feeling to be watching something that moves you only to eye-rolls of annoyed disbelief, when all the signs of engagement and hilarity surround you. I felt like the natives in those apocryphal tales of tribe peoples' inability to understand the information conveyed by moving pictures. It was all incomprehensible shapes and blurs. About half an hour in, when a character in the film suggested that they go and get a drink, my friend and I simultaneously had an eureka moment. Instead of suffering through this we could be having a *drink* somewhere right now, somewhere *away from this!!!* And thus, with no regrets, we snuck out. The bold move inspired my friend's canny observation that the nice thing about Fantasia, with its endless offering of diverse films, is that you can always leave...

The worst moment, though, for wanting to shrink away into oblivion, was at *Lloyd Kaufman's* mini-seminar, *How To Make Your Own Damn Movie*, a condensed presentation of his books and DVD. Kaufman is equal parts winning and grating; he self-consciously trades on the old-school, huckster charm of a carny or Catskills comedian. Kaufman, of course, is the man behind Troma Films, famous for the cult classic *The Toxic Avenger* (1985). I haven't seen a Troma film, and I am comfortable with that. What I was not comfortable with was the long DVD clip riffing parodically on what kind of salacious and outrageous content is best to include in your movie in order to attract investors. Two Z-grade hotties awkwardly act out a fairly explicit "lesbian" sex scene; to make it more awkward, one of the participants (does it make me a culture elitist if I hesitate to use the word "actress"?!) is actually on hand—uh...as it were. Isabelle Stephen, official "Tromette" of August 2002, was appearing alongside Lloyd, cheerfully representing as dreambabe to a bunch of misfits and malcontents. These very same misfits and malcontents became disturbingly still and tense as the girl-on-girl sex romp went on. Their collective breath was held; then their collective breath got faster, and more ragged. It was impossible for my friend and I, sitting at the back of the room, not to be aware that before us a sea of pants was likely cresting, and it made us want to flee screaming. I've been at public screenings of porn-oriented material before, and never have I sensed the audience frothing

at the mouth so. It makes a girl want to bind her breasts and go undercover.

Not to worry—following this clip was a little something for the ladies. Some behind-the-scenes footage of a nervous but surprisingly game fellow, prolongedly running around Times Square, naked except for a plaster cast on his head. Naked Guy seemed a nice chap, but—terrifyingly—this pasty, red-haired specimen boasted the lumpy rotundity of Rubens' Bacchus, and the genitals of a cherub. I'm still having nightmares. Thanks for nothing, Lloyd Kaufman.

What more to report on the antics of the Fantasians? Just the expected overly-earnest Q&A sessions, which reached a baroque pitch of existential crisis at *Retinal Stigmatics: An Evening With Joe Coleman*. Some poor saps were insistently, rather desperately quizzing Joe on the meaning of life and death, begging him to tell them if he found evidence of a soul—and if not, then *what?!?*—in his experiments with human dissection.

All of this came after a presentation—blow-ups of Joe Coleman's very arresting miniature paintings, and clips of his much less arresting performance art, all narrated with a less-than-illuminating We-Human-Beings-Are-A-Cancer-On-The-Earth spiel—which was unfortunately accompanied by a couple of situationist manqués performing a sad and perfunctory *détournement*. Their belabored and almost embarrassed interruptions of the proceedings, in the form of hollered, mostly inarticulate remarks, only managed to elicit a few unimpressed parries by Joe himself, but the jesters did attract the attention of the Hall security force. I felt for those poor security guards, roaming around the balcony with flashlights to detect the culprits and then, presumably—since I'm assuming they are not armed—having to beg those attention-starved punks to just *please sit still and behave*. All the while I'm sure they are thinking, *I don't get paid enough for this*. But the punks actually did shut up. So, at the risk of undermining the anarchic spirit cultivated by the Fantasia Festival (to quote Mitch Davis' program notes on the Evening with Joe Coleman: "This night is sure to be one of the high points of Fantasia's history. There will be no safe harbour."), I say: thanks for keeping the peace, good security people. Those dudes were really annoying.

But, lest I wrap this up on a harrumphing note, it must be said that though Fantasia has more than its share of disturbed freaks and tiresome geeks and misguided anarchists and overzealous fanboys (well, I suppose it can't be "more than its share" *really*, since Fantasia

happily trades in such characters, and them on it), the general word-of-mouth can steer you to some nerve-mending, heart-swelling cinematic treats. My faves are hardly original, according to Fantasia's 2005 Public Prizes. I'd add *Kamikaze Girls* to the list. But otherwise, *Crying Fists* (2005) is up there for me. *Survive Style 5+* (2004) is a truly interesting, invigorating, and curiously touching film, with art direction and set décor to die for (I'd call it Baroque Eclectic); the first slow-motion fight sequence between the most winsomely beautiful couple this side of Johnny Depp and Vanessa Paradis, Tadanobu Asano and Reika Hashimoto, positively captured my heart—the sight of that little somber-faced pixie-woman in mid-air, green velvet dress a-flying... well, that alone is worth a few uneven narrative strands. And, speaking of the ultra-cool Tadanobu Asano... *The Taste Of Tea* (2004) is just lovely: melancholy and sweet and serenely soulful. The psychedelic/surrealist stylistics are funny and inventive but so perfectly at ease, so perfectly expressive of a singular cinematic vision of the workings of the mind.

Ultimately I find I have more to say about the taxing viewing experiences than the truly edifying ones. Perhaps this is because the films that I liked best have a dreamy quality that is best savored with diffuse, pleasant reflection rather than teased-out observations. Or maybe it is because Fantasia is all about over-stimulation, and over-stimulation makes you numb. But probably it's because much of the thrill of the festival is in complaining. Complaining about the late starts, the mix-ups, the crazy people, the stupid films: complaining that you are sick of the site and the sight of everything Fantasia-related. Everyone does it, anyone you run into. It's an ongoing, predictable, and utterly satisfying riff. We all complain and mock and criticize and rant. It's just the way to let off steam, and that's what a carnival is for. We miss it when it's gone.

And though I'm still recovering, I know I'll soon be counting down until next summer and the return of the mad mad days—and long hot nights—of Fantasia.

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