

Once a John Woo's

By Maurie Alioff

A question mark hangs over the future of the Hong Kong film industry, the third largest in the world, and until recently, one of the few to achieve better domestic box office than American imports. The gravest threat to HK cinema comes from the bureaucrats and censors of mainland China, who can't wait to rein in and defang a movie culture that has been described with epithets like "gloriously disreputable" and "shoot-from-the-id." Maverick filmmaker Wong Kar-wai admits that he rushed into *Happy Together*, his hyperkinetic new release about a doomed gay love affair, because he feared an inevitable postreunification clampdown.

Meanwhile, HK pictures ranging from classics like King Hu's 1975 Cannes winner *A Touch of Zen* to this year's nutty Triad flick, *Too Many Ways To Be Number One*, continue to win friends and influence moviemakers around the globe. "There's a vital energy, a genuine emotion you feel in the best of them," says Pierre Corbeil, director of Montreal's Fant-Asia film festival, which shows a knowledgeable selection of the ex-colony's genre movies to huge, wildly enthusiastic audiences.

Of all the HK directors being celebrated in the West, or trying with varying degrees of success to relocate here, John Woo is the one on a fast track to becoming cinema's first Asian international superstar. Japan's Akira Kurosawa once triumphed in the art houses, but Woo—like the industry that nurtured him—is a crossover success, equally beloved by the cognoscenti and the popcorn-munching crowd, especially since last summer's runaway hit, *Face/Off*.

Like Hitchcock's, Woo's appeal is intricate and multifaceted. While his box-office success undeniably depends on the joy that Buttheads everywhere derive from viewing bodies crashing through plate-glass windows, Woo's films soar far past the limitations of routine crime flicks and action-adventures.

In John Woo's universe, violent action is an operatic, balletic expansion of primary emotions. On one level, his dizzying fight sequences are all about the wish to gain mastery over one's life and vocation, exaggerated and stylized, as in a young boy's Billy the Kid fantasies. Woo's signature hero is the elegant gunfighter, dazzling in his gravity-defying bounding through space, part Gene Kelly, part wizard from Chinese mythology.

On the other hand, in pictures like the ironically titled *A Better Tomorrow*, yin slides inevitably into yang when Woo's heroes take a fall, and their actions lead them into a trap of disillusionment, despair and loss. The carefree protagonists of *A Bullet in the Head*, the director's veiled reference to the Tiananmen Square massacre, endure violence that's so horrific, their gunplay at the beginning of the movie seems like a kiddie game. In *A Better Tomorrow*, Chow Yun-fat's happy-go-lucky character Mark doesn't just die, he gets annihilated.

Woo's impish playfulness constantly darts in and out of the traumatized melancholy and cruel bloodbaths. In *A Better Tomorrow II*, Chow returns from the dead, miraculously resurrected as Mark's twin brother, Ken, and for most of the film, his characteristically twinkling grin telegraphs his

Thief

amusement with a ridiculous situation. And when Woo decides to steer *Tomorrow II* into low comedy, he lets his favourite star relish getting downright silly to an extent that would be unthinkable for Hollywood royalty like Tom Cruise or Harrison Ford.

The slapstick-loving, goofy side of John Woo comes to full fruition in his breeziest film, *Once a Thief* (1991). A nod to both Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief* and Truffaut's *Jules and Jim*, the picture follows the adventures of Joe (Chow Yun-fat), Jim (the ubiquitous Leslie Cheung) and Sherry (Cherie Chung), a trio of blissfully amoral art thieves. Complicating Woo's most outrageous storyline, Joe and Jim are rivals for Sherry's love.

Its first act set entirely on the lustrously photographed French Riviera, *Once a Thief* displays brilliantly choreographed heist sequences, as well as virtuoso swings between giddy lyricism, pathos and comedy. In one scene, Chow Yun-fat suavely performs a ballroom dance in a wheelchair. The zany final showdown features a wall-to-wall reproduction of an Henri Rousseau jungle, an exploding microwave oven and a hit man armed with a deck of razor-sharp playing cards.

Not surprisingly, John Woo chose this light-hearted property when he decided to pursue his creative and business interest in television. Airing in Canada on CTV, the adaptation—known as *John Woo's Once A Thief*—is the result of his collaboration with veteran program developers Bill Laurin and Glenn Davis. Executive producing the series for Alliance, the duo wrote the Woo-directed pilot movie, and they continue to pen many of the episodes. "John Woo is not just loaning his name," Laurin insisted during an interview. "Given the fact that he also makes \$100-million Hollywood features, he's a lot more involved than you would think. He reads all the scripts. He looks at cuts. He offers suggestions."

Drawing on directorial talent ranging from indie filmmaker John Paizs to television specialist T.J. Scott, Laurin and Davis are aiming at a bubbly program that picks up the original's mischievous tone, and "translates" the ethos of Woo's films. After all, their scale, depth of emotional





Clockwise from left: Nicholas Lea, Jennifer Dale, Ivan Sergei, Sandrine Holt. Long-time Woo collaborators Bill Wong and David Wu know how to get down those

provocation and magic carpet otherness could hardly be duplicated in a network TV series. "When you first see John's movies," Davis told me, "they're very stunning and part of their quality is that they sometimes leave you in a cultural disconnect. Stuff that plays as normal for a Hong Kong audience is very bizarre to North Americans. Part of what we wanted to do was to recreate a sense of 'What the hell is this?'—which is why this show, frankly, gets a little weird from time to time."

In the series, the original film's Jim, Joe, and Sherry transform into Mac (Ivan Sergei), Victor (Nicholas Lea) and Li Ann (Sandrine Holt), the only member of the trio who remains ethnically Chinese. Echoing Woo's feature film, Mac and Li Ann are expert Hong Kong thieves while Victor is an ex-cop who enters their lives when the action shifts from Hong Kong to Vancouver. Naturally, the love triangle gets reprised.

A new story element, one that activates some of the weirdness Davis talks about, is a typically mysterious and heartless crime-busting organization. Blackmailed into working for "The Agency," Mac, Victor and Li Ann find themselves

under the thumb of its director, played by Jennifer Dale as a sort of horny dominatrix. Week after week, she delights in assigning them to cases involving bizarre subcultures and twisted, but presumably charismatic villains. In one episode, the heroes confront a cult leader who sees murder and suicide as an art form. In another, a Hugh Hefner-like weirdo in pyjamas gets off on shooting snuff flicks.

Although Laurin and Davis want *John Woo's Once a Thief* to function on the level of pure action—"if that's what you come to the party for"—they seem proudest of its sense of style. The cinematographer and editor, long-time Woo collaborators Bill Wong and David Wu, know how to get down those flying bodies, Mexican standoffs, romantically scored firefights and whirling kick punches straight to the gut. As in Hong Kong movies, the show never explains why so many of the characters are kung fu masters. It's a skill, like knowing how to drive a car.

Embellished with punk or goth flourishes, sometimes over-dependent on modish costuming and vogueing, *John Woo's Once a Thief* also struts frequent references to movies, TV and literature. One episode alludes repeatedly to the opening holdup

sequence of *La Femme Nikita*. Another references *A Clockwork Orange*, *Blade Runner*, *The Blues Brothers*, and the porn classic, *Behind the Green Door*. *John Woo's Once a Thief* has even referred to itself by having a bad guy say, "I'm entirely unimpressed by pop arcana."

This program might give the impression that Canadian TV has finally severed its last ties to *The Beachcombers* and *Anne of Green Gables*. On the other hand, it has discombobulated traditionalists by daring to call itself a product of the pure white north. *Once a Thief's* creators are very firm on this one. "This is a completely Canadian show," said Laurin. "It's owned by Canadians, it's staffed by Canadians. And I think that the people who were labelling it non-Canadian were doing it because we have a curious history here: all television drama in Canada is tonally identical. From the CBC one-hours through *ENG* through *Traders*, they're not ironic, only about one thing at a time."

Emphasizing the "emotionally dark and quite pessimistic" attributes of much Canadian programming, Laurin says, "Look, there's nothing wrong with these qualities. Ibsen was dour and one of the world's great dramatists. It's just that we feel like there's room for more than one tone." Bill Laurin also suspects that the program's detractors are confused by its

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Hong Kong influences. "People are not yet used to the fact that not all Canadian television is made by white guys with names like Davis or Laurin or Doyle. It's guys named Woo and Wong and Chang, and these people are Canadian."

For Glenn Davis, the influx of people from Hong Kong into Vancouver and Toronto "ideally positioned this country to translate Woo and the Hong Kong film world to television. To me, it's so exciting—to use the old cliché that Canadian culture is a mosaic—that we now have this vital, brawling, sprawling Hong Kong filmmaking tradition as part of that mosaic."

Fond of building storylines around private fantasies, their own and sometimes the actors', Davis and Laurin have commissioned scripts from only a select handful of writers. "It's a tricky show to master," Davis explained. "You've got to write a fairly straightforward action-adventure-mystery to hang everything on. And it's action for television, which means being able to shoot it in seven days with two days second unit. Then you've got to service the kind of twisted son-of-screwball comedy that goes on, and come up with a cast of

supporting characters, including the villain. Plus we're trying to service all these film references. Tone is probably the trickiest thing."

Whatever the challenges of producing John Woo's *Once a Thief*, everybody concerned with the show has enjoyed collaborating with John Woo, now involved in the action show *Blackjack*, a separate venture with Alliance. "He's a very happy warrior," according to Laurin. "For a guy who makes very intense and driven movies the way he does, he's very relaxed." During filming Woo "gets real silent and prowls around restlessly for a long time. When he suddenly stops moving, you know he's got his shot."

"After filming," says Davis, "John's other big passion is for food. Frequently, when he's finished shooting, he goes home and cooks. And he is an expert Cantonese cook. If you go to a restaurant with him, he orchestrates dinner. It's just like one of his films. When you think it's over, more food arrives." ■



Thief