

Fantasia Day 8: “NINJA KIDS!!!”

Written by Ariel Esteban Cayer
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Before SUPER (review [here](#)), I caught up with iconoclast Takashi Miike’s latest off-the-wall family film, NINJA KIDS!!!, which I had initially missed in favor of THE WICKER MAN.

Right off the bat, trying to summarize the plot of NINJA KIDS!!! would be pretty damn hard...something about our little main character Rantaro enrolling in a ninja academy. Also something about cross-dressing instructors, a reality-hopping master of trivia, a whale slug, body-fluid humor, courage, determination, camaraderie, clans, a truckload of secondary and tertiary characters and a race to ring a bell. All of that, and more, crammed into 100 minutes of insanity. It’s crazy and it’s a Miike film—that I can assure you.



Mostly known for boundary-pushing cinema like AUDITION (1999), VISITOR Q (2001) and GOZU (2003), as well as excessive Z-grade yakuza films such as the DEAD OR ALIVE series, Miike has also, more recently, experimented with family-friendly entertainment. I personally find these films captivating, showing a great sense of humor—typically Japanese in their occasional crass, mostly slapstick and always endearing sensibilities—as well as moments of directorial brilliance that make the ultra-prolific filmmaker worth watching. ZEBRAMAN (2004) and THE GREAT YOKAI WAR (2005) are great examples, but the best is perhaps the insane YATTERMAN (2009), which was the opening film of Fantasia 2009 and totally broke my brain with its internal logic, sexual innuendos and candy-pop quality. NINJA KIDS!!! is based on an long-running anime series as well (NINTAMA RANTARO—1471 episodes and counting!) and understandably, Miike tried to cram every possible element into one neat package. And surprisingly, it works.

NINJA KIDS!!! is ADD-inducing, insane-o entertainment that I would’ve loved as a kid. Following a oddball narrative I couldn’t attempt to explain (Rantaro joins Ninja Academy, shows

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us around...then dozens of characters are introduced out of left field, one goofier than the other, and a lot of things happen), the film is a quick-paced gag show that accumulates comedic situations like nothing I've seen. I found myself chuckling all along at the sheer stupidity of the humor, but what's undeniably great about NINJA KIDS!!! is that it knows better than to take itself seriously, going as far as breaking the fourth wall and self-referencing in manners that are truly amusing. The kids, led by the cute-as-a-button, bespectacled Seishirô Sato as Rantaro, are obviously having a blast, and when, near the end, you find yourself with more than 20 characters to deal with, you know better than to question the mayhem and accept NINJA KIDS!!! for the overstimulative ride it so obviously aims to be. Characters are introduced in the most half-assed, cartoonish way possible, but I would've expected nothing less from a film with three exclamation points in its title.

Aesthetically, the film is a success. Mixing bright colors with a smart combo of CG and practical FX—which include gorgeous revolving sets, styrofoam boulders and various ninja tricks—the film had enough work put into the set design alone to have you marveling for its duration. Offering perhaps the most strikingly absurd contrast possible to Miike's 13 ASSASSINS (also playing at Fantasia), this frenetic pop odyssey showcases the director's imaginative vision and will have you wanting to (re)discover the various flavors of his back catalog.



Unbeknownst to me, that evening saw the premiere of THE CORRIDOR, which I was lucky to hear about in time to catch the second screening (review [here](#)). I also purposefully decided to miss THE DIVIDE, due to my profound hatred of director Xavier Gens' previous FRONTIER(S) and my desire to get home early and rest. I've since regretted missing it, despite the overwhelmingly negative word-of-mouth. You've got to pick your battles, I guess...

Next up: an extremely packed and uneven Day 9—four-hour-and-45-minute Japanese epic HEAVEN'S STORY, the testosterone-fest BELLFLOWER, the hyper-referential DETENTION and the seminal ILSA, SHE WOLF OF THE SS!