

Written by Ariel Esteban Cayer
Friday, 05 August 2011 01:18



In real time, Fantasia 2011 is almost over. It's quite the bittersweet feeling. With only five days left—two of which I think I might skip entirely in order to catch up with this blog and life itself—I'm grateful to be at the end of this amazing journey, yet anticipate the feeling of loss that will ensue.

Eating out, seeing friends, watching movies...not the healthiest way to live—those downtown burgers keep piling up in my stomach day after day, and if it wasn't for the vitamin C tablets next to me, I'm sure I'd have scurvy. With so few days left, it becomes clear to me keeping up the extensive daily format will be impossible. For the sake of completion—and because there are still many great films to discuss—I will power through Days 10 to 12 and later change the format to tackle the spotlight dedicated to Adam Wingard, as well as a roundup of the best short films I've seen thus far. Furthermore, this post, its structure and mostly unintentional stream-of-consciousness style will give you a genuine taste of what the day-to-day Fantasia experience is like at its peak.



HELLDRIVER

I've expressed my thoughts on the decline of the Sushi Typhoon/"Tokyo gore" film cycle already, but have failed to mention an important truth: Deep down, I'm a true follower. Driven by a completist urge that is hard to ignore, I will see them all, year after year, and—regardless of my critical standpoint—will find some nuggets of enjoyment in every one of them. After the rather disappointing YAKUZA WEAPON and the not-much-better DEADBALL, it would've made perfect sense for me to ignore HELLDIVER. But I don't consider myself a practitioner of common sense, and when I got up early to catch the 11:45 a.m. (madness!) screening of Yoshihiro Nishimura's latest, I unexpectedly found myself very excited by the prospect of a

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bloody, relentless film closer to TOKYO GORE POLICE than to its contrived predecessors. Thankfully, my enthusiasm wasn't in vain.

Undeniably Nishimura's best since TOKYO GORE, HELLDRIVER takes its cues from the dystopian zombie oeuvre of genre master George A. Romero, coupled with Nishimura's own characteristic insanity and infused with DEAD ALIVE's inventiveness. Relying on a good premise and using CGI sparingly to let Nishimura's practical FX work shine through the various bloody contraptions and costume designs, HELLDRIVER is not only a sensory overload but also a surprisingly engaging visual experience. It benefits from a solid foundation and plot—a psychotropic version of ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK—as well as three-dimensional characters lead by the mesmerizingly energetic and gorgeous Yumiko Hara as Kika, with whom I utterly fell in love, who almost eclipses the great Eihi Shiina as the film's zombie queen and main villainess and who proves to be a remarkably strong female protagonist who drives the plot forward in resonant ways. Her family dynamics are explored and give the film an emotional (!) backbone, something these films have certainly not accustomed us to.

Furthermore, HELLDRIVER—aside from its expected gushes of gore and relentless, bombastic storyline—offers an engaging structure (the title appears after 45 minutes of setup!), makes great use of lighting (a change from the previous movies' uninspired low-budget aesthetic) and goes into surprising depth with its world-building, developing a mythology around the zombies and providing a politically charged world for the characters to inhabit. Suffering from many of the same problems of excess as its predecessors, but adding an interesting plot, striking aesthetic, fleshed-out characters and head-bangin' soundtrack to balance everything out, HELLDRIVER is a refreshingly entertaining entry in a tired genre, and started off my day with a bang!



MONSTER BRAWL

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Immediately following HELLDRIVER, I saw the much-anticipated and rowdy MONSTER BRAWL. Despite boasting an impressive cast of monster wrestlers (The Mummy, Swamp Gut, Zombie Man, Frankenstein and more!), field veterans such as Art Hindle (from BLACK CHRISTMAS and THE BROOD) and the WWF’s Jimmy Hart, a spot-on classic-Universal-monsters aesthetic and all the elements to become a potential cult classic, MONSTER BRAWL falls short because of one fatal flaw: its dragging pace. Structured as a pay-per-view grappling championship and never diverting from its concept, MONSTER BRAWL shows great promise with its concept, but would’ve benefitted immensely from faster pacing and cutting—which would’ve turned a decent film into a fail-proof late-night classic.

It’s quite the understandable mistake, though; when given such high levels of production design and talent to work with, one wants the pleasure to last. Jesse T. Cook’s direction is very controlled and playful, but ultimately, the dragging style does not serve the tournament structure at hand—which starts off as enjoyable but quickly becomes tedious. The fights themselves, in their structure and execution, will undeniably please die-hard wrestling fans, but might bore other viewers after a while. Nonetheless, MONSTER BRAWL is a film that will blow young kids’ minds and delight wrestling fans, and is a sincere effort that will find its audience.



MONSTER BRAWL was quite the event, but I sneaked out quickly to treat myself to LOVE & LOATHING & LULU & AYANO by NAKED BLOOD’s Hisayasu Sato, which is as bittersweet, disturbing and charming a look into the Japanese porno/AV (adult video) industry as I had expected it to be.

Following that, Fantasia found itself right in the midst of December for its “Christmas in July” spotlight: a double feature of the Finnish fantasy film RARE EXPORTS: A CHRISTMAS STORY and the Dutch slasher SAINT.

RARE EXPORTS: A CHRISTMAS STORY

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When excavators find a “sacred tomb” buried deep within the Korvatunturi Mountain in the Finnish Lapland, Christmas’ darkest secret is unleashed upon unsuspecting reindeer herders living in proximity. Expanding upon Jalmari and Juuso Helander’s RARE EXPORTS, INC. short films, the former’s feature is one of the rare films that is as thoroughly engaging as it is smart, slick and original. Perhaps because of the short films, RARE EXPORTS feels like it’s missing a first act, but once past that fleeting impression of not having spent enough time with the scientists initiating the discovery, the film grabs you and takes you a swirling and cold journey through Christmastime terror.

Offering more than a few good scares, but mostly an excellent atmosphere of mystery and anticipation—recalling at times Steven Spielberg’s best era, only way edgier and more violent with some full-frontal male nudity—RARE EXPORTS is a near-perfect mini-epic, featuring an amazing cast, humor and a great reveal, while building on Finland’s folklore and smartly subverting the mythology of Christmas and its ties with capitalism. If it hadn’t been for the extensive coverage the film benefitted from in the past year, this would’ve been one of my best discoveries of the festival. Sadly, I knew a little bit too much about the film going in, but—much to its merit—it still managed to blow me away.



SAINT

A totally different beast, SAINT (or SINT) in turn demonizes the European Sinterklaas, while following a more conventional slasher-film structure and horror tropes, establishing its cast of

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teenage fodder and villainous backstory early on and building from there in the expected manner. In the hands of Dick Maas, mostly known for the cult classic *THE LIFT*, the film manages to be effective and humorous, but ultimately not nearly as memorable as *RARE EXPORTS*—to which it really shouldn't be compared, but that's inevitable in such a double-feature context. Solid nonetheless, the film offers an interesting satirical look into the Sinterklaas traditions, making it a worthy addition to the killer-Santa subgenre of films such as *TO ALL A GOOD NIGHT*, *CHRISTMAS EVIL* and the *SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT* series.



Day 10 still had one showing left, which opened a new door within Fantasia and, in retrospect, truly marked the turning point of this year's fest, propelling me into the eye of the storm with no chance of coming back unchanged. *All that and more in Part 2...*