

Fango Flashback: “BATTLE ROYALE”

Written by Jorge Solis
Sunday, 06 June 2010 08:09



Hailing from Japan, director Kinji Fukasaku’s BATTLE ROYALE is a high-octane thriller, a combination of LORD OF THE FLIES and THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME. Under orders from the authoritarian government, 42 teenaged students are given weapons and forced to play a deadly game of survival.

An education reform act has been enforced by the state to control the adolescent population. Once a year, a secondary school class is selected randomly to participate in the insane competition and taken to a deserted island. The military equips each student with a different weapon: a knife, a gun or a grenade. The entire class has approximately three days to murder each other; students must compete or else bombs attached to their necks will be activated. The last person standing is deemed the winner, and the only one allowed to return home. At the command center, an abandoned high school, an instructor explains the rules of the homicidal tournament to the film’s young protagonists. Actor/filmmaker “Beat” Takeshi Kitano plays the heartless instructor, who was once a teacher of the doomed class. Because he was once stabbed in the leg by a juvenile delinquent, he lost his passion for teaching and shows no remorse for his young scholars.



The film’s variety of characters reflects the different personalities in daily high school-life. Each of the competitors reacts differently to their predicament. Best friends turn against each other; bullied classmates arm themselves against their hecklers; some of the unwilling participants commit suicide. In the worst turn of events, some actually become ruthless assassins.

Shuya and his longtime crush Noriko serve as the emotional core of the story. They race against time to stay alive, while unexpectedly receiving help from the revenge-seeking Kawada. And no one in the game is safe from the silent predator Kiriya who thrives on bloodlust and

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extreme violence. Kiriyama does not speak, nor does he care for anyone else, in his rampage. His entrance into the game provokes interesting social commentary. During the dark midnight hours, Kiriyama encounters a group of his classmates, who are carrying nunchuks and a war fan. He raises his machine gun and shoots down anyone carrying a traditional Japanese weapon.

One of the highlights in the film is when Shuya unexpectedly finds himself at an all-girl camp in a lighthouse. Each of the girls slowly begins to distrust each other, suffering from two sleepless nights. A Mexican standoff ignites between the girls as they each succumb to hysteria. Shuya manages to escape from the bloodbath, but time is running out as the final hour approaches.

Based on the controversial best-seller by Koushun Takami, the feature is a condensed but faithful adaptation. Due to its running time, extended backstories of certain characters are dealt with for only a few minutes. Takami went into great depth providing each of the kids a personal, relatable story. Each death is supposed to be a heartbreaking tale of a potential future cut short.

The best parts of the novel remain intact in the visual medium—like a pivotal scene in which the classroom geeks unite in an effort to blow up the high school, rebelling against their corporal master—but this writer would have loved seeing the elaborate car chase through the island during the climax. Thankfully, the satirical message from the book’s pages is still loud and clear.

Quentin Tarantino cites the film as one of his personal favorites. After seeing her performance as one of the ill-fated students, Tarantino chose actress Chiaki Kuriyama as the lethal Go-Go in KILL BILL VOL. 1. The novel also became a serialized manga, which was followed by a sequel, BATTLE ROYALE II: REQUIEM. Fukasaku was in his 70s when he filmed the predecessor, and passed away during the making of the sequel. His son Kenta (who also wrote both screenplays) took over as director in order to complete the project.



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Despite many rumors, the film is not banned outright in the U.S.; the main issue of conflict actually concerns distribution. The Virginia Tech and Columbine High School massacres have discouraged distribution, which is why you can only find import and bootleg copies in the states.

In this writer's opinion, the movie is an American remake waiting to happen. The story's influence can clearly be seen in *THE CONDEMNED*, starring wrestler "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, and *After Dark's KILL THEORY*. Both movies share a similar island-faceoff premise, albeit involving adults. As recently reported on this site, *BATTLE ROYALE* is being converted into 3-D, with a premiere to be held in November.

Though difficult to find, *BATTLE ROYALE* is truly unforgettable, a definite must-see. Like the novel that inspired it, the movie is over-the-top violent, disturbing and provocative.

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