

Busan: A Critic Analyzes the Festival Lineup
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It is not just size but the element of surprise that makes the Busan Intl. Film Festival (BIFF) a Mecca for film buffs. A festival whose reputation is founded on discovering and nurturing new talents, picking which films to watch here is like blind-tasting. This is especially true for New Currents, the festival's main competition showcasing debut or sophomore Asian directors. Like trying out a new grape variety or wine from lesser known regions, the best thing to do is to trust your instincts and take many sips.

Since most overseas film professionals come to Busan to scout Asian films, the World Cinema and Flash Forward sections sometimes fall under their radar. Nevertheless, the programmers of Flash Forward fish for non-Asian indie films that may have slipped through the net in major festivals. "Bonfire," a debut by Dmitry Davydov, is set in Sakha Republic, the little-known federal subject of Russia, where two Yakutian fathers who lost their sons become locked in a tormenting cycle of revenge against a pristine snowy landscape. In "Night of a 1000 Hours," ancestral ghosts of an upper-crust family gate crash their posh dinner. With bone-dry humor and riveting suspense, Austrian director reveals how phantoms of the Nazi past hide in many families' closets. In "Bad Girl," a teenager discovers that her BFF is a Brutal Fiendish Foe out to bring deadly harm to her family. Australian Fin Edquist concocts a nerve-jangling thriller in the outback starring Samara Weaving, niece of Hugo.

The enduring vibrancy of Korean cinema in both festival and commercial arenas means that everyone is on the look out for the next breakout talent, and the Vision section is practically swimming with them. Yeon Sang-ho, whose zombie-thriller "Train to Busan" has received rave reviews around the world made his debut at BIFF with the dark, adult-oriented animation "King of Pigs." Among the young filmmakers using BIFF as a launchpad, several stand out for their attempts to break down the wall of Korean machismo by exploring attitudes to homosexuality and male stereotypes. "Lost to Shame" by emergent actor Nam Yeon-woo ("Fatal," premiered at BIFF) reveals the irony of an actor's unresolved homophobia despite an outward display of open-mindedness. Son Tae-gum's "Baby Beside Me" depicts the bittersweet experience of single-fatherhood — even if the toddler is not the protagonist's son.

Lee Dong-eun's "In Between Seasons" centers on a mother who, after discovering her son is gay, struggles to understand him anew by engaging exchanges with his lover. Lim Dae-hyung's "Merry Christmas, Mr. Mo" delves into the heart of an aging patriarch to chart his awkward yet moving attempt to open up to his filmmaker son by casting himself in his film — a tender drama enhanced by stylish homage to Chaplin and the silent era. Both titles are New Currents contestants. On the top of this reviewer's list is "Come Together," which depicts the unnerving implosion of a bourgeois nuclear family derailed by all-round competitiveness of Korean society. Director Shin Dongil, who made three of my favorite Korean independent films, "Host and Guest," "My Friend and

His Wife” and “Bandholbi” (all premiered at BIFF), always cuts to the bone in his dissection of Korean class tensions and human hypocrisy. This is his first feature in seven years. For the last few years, the Indian subcontinent has been making significant inroads into the program. An area that annually produces a mind-boggling amount of films, their cultural diversity can be gleaned from 16 films from India, three from Nepal, two from Bhutan and one from Sri Lanka. Check out “Chronicles of Hari” by Ananya Kasaravalli, “A Death in the Gunj” by Konkona Sensharma,” “Revelations” by Vijay Jayapal and “Honeygiver Among the Dogs” by Bhutanese director (Dechen Roder) — all of them focus on gender roles and female-centric themes. I myself am most excited about “A Billion Color Story,” Padmakumar Narasimhamurthy’s penetrating intellectual analysis of religious fundamentalism in India through a Hindi-Muslim couple’s confrontation with bigotry in film production.

As the hub of Asian Cinema, BIFF not only help talents spin their imaginative yarns, it’s also a huge reservoir of real life stories that testify to and question social, political and cultural contexts around the world. Wide Angle, an umbrella section that covers documentaries, animation, children’s films and shorts, boasts a first-rate documentary selection often overlooked amid the sea of fiction features. I’m excited to see the world premiere of “A Whale of a Tale,” Japanese filmmaker Megumi Sasaki’s contrarian answer to “The Cove.” Under the humane, egalitarian lens of Oh Hyun-jin and Ko Du-hyun, a group of factory workers from Myanmar are invested with the ordinariness, and dignity of individuals rather than foreign workers in a factory in Korean documentary “Burmese on the Roof.” The rate which Philippine filmmakers are cranking out original, challenging, often masterful work is nothing short of astounding. While celeb-maverick Lav Diaz (“A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery”) and young guns like Bradley Liew (“Singing in Graveyards”) have been lapping up overseas coverage, Pinoy documentarians also are quietly pushing boundaries with works like “Sunday Beauty Queen” by Babyruth Villarama Gutierrez and Sheron Dayoc’s “The Crescent Rising.” Filmed guerrilla-style in Hong Kong for well over a year, Villarama Gutierrez (whose “Jazz in Love” also launched at BIFF) celebrates overseas domestic helpers’ joie de vivre and self-empowerment through beauty pageants, offering a new angle on the old feminist dialogue on these pursuits of “vanity.” When Dayoc’s “Halaw: Ways of the Sea” competed in New Currents 6 year ago, it shook me to the core with its heartrending depiction of Mindanao migrants taking to the dangerous high seas in search of work. Going back to his hometown again, he offers a rare, knowledgeable study of the grievances and ideals of the Muslim community, often portrayed as violent insurgents in skewed popular media.

Last but certainly not least, the one thing I wouldn’t miss for the world are the revival of Nikkatsu Studio’s Roman Porno, a mind-blowing genre of erotica in the 1970s that became the springboard of some of Japan’s best directors. BIFF is presenting three of the five in a Midnight Passion triple bill: “Aroused by Gymnopedies” (Isao Yukisada), Wet Woman in the Wind (Akihiko Shiota) and “White Lily” (Hideo Nakata).