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Seeking a band of airborne rebels, a dancer and a swordsman get lost in orgasmic set design

The Hong Kong movie matrix has reached a state of deracinated gloss, homogenized out from speed-mad native pop lunacy to post-card-bourgeois picture show. On the face of it, favoring Zhang Yimou's *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* over the '80s HK wave seems akin to preferring Nickelback to the Ramones.

Depending on your experience, you'll either think that Zhang's new sumptuous, digitally Botoxed roustabout is simply doing what Hong Kong movies have been too fast, cheap, and out of control to do before or that it's commodifying the tropes into a streamlined McSpectacle.

Zhang, in any case, seems to have found the answer to his post-Gong Li career-death quandary: remake the Golden Harvest library for the upscale markets, surprising the nabobs with *wuxia pian* shenanigans while dazzling them with orgasmic set design and candy-colored landscapes. To its credit, *Daggers* is not as Crayola-crazy as *Hero*, but no opportunity for tableau craft is squandered: lavishly ornate brothel interiors, rolling autumn-in-New England foliage (shot in Ukraine), black-and-white birch forests, the obligatory misty bamboo-grove skirmish.

Not so much energy has been devoted to the story: Jin, a government guard (Takeshi Kaneshiro), goes undercover as a rogue swordsman and rescues Mei (Ziyi Zhang), a blind dancer who belongs to the titular clan of knife-winging rebels, and escapes with her into the wilderness as his captain Leo (Andy Lau) follows behind. Nearly everyone's role becomes upended before the end, but the characterizations remain strictly two-dimensional, as is the genre's custom. The American western, once it became familiar and co-opted internationally, eventually evolved into the adult, world-weary, illusion-free anti-western of Hellman, Peckinpah, Altman, Peter Fonda's *The Hired Hand*,

FLIGHT CLUB

BY MICHAEL ATKINSON



Photograph by Bai Xiao Yan

etc.; where's our anti-wuxia?

Zhang's casting wins most of his battles for him. Kaneshiro and Lau, the former as underutilized as the latter is ubiquitous, are two of the most likable stalwarts in the world's most likable talent pool, insofar as they are allowed to act in frozen close-ups and while sword fighting. But with Mei functioning as the very obscure object of everyone's desire, Zhang is the movie's hot romantic core; not many actresses' faces can

HOUSE OF FLYING DAGGERS

Directed by Zhang Yimou
Sony Pictures Classics
Opens December 3

beauty on; emotional traction is most often buried under acres of carefully coordinated vistas and CGI-hued flora, as if Selznick in his *Duel in the Sun* dog days had decided to do his own *Touch of Zen*. Certain stylistics are bewitching: the bamboo struggle that trumps Ang Lee, the all-green Flying Dagger members outfitted like the dancing toadstools from *Fantasia*. But Zhang certainly can't seem to get through a single hunk of combat without resorting to digitized arrows, stones, knives, bamboo rods, and blood droplets, all flying sleepily in bullet time.

Only in its climactic movement—a bloodthirsty pas de trois in the middle of a snowstorm so sudden trees go white in a few seconds' time—does *Daggers* achieve the sort of nutsy, post-Sirkian passion that Zhang struggled toward from the beginning of the film. Not a moment too soon. Even the dry-eyed pulp cynics in the crowd could find cause, for a moment, to swoon.

Lush hour: Ziyi

withstand this kind of relentless, worshipful examination, and her mother-of-pearl flawlessness suggests depths of feeling just as Ingrid Bergman's did long ago. When she erupts into a smile, you could be excused for empathizing with her beleaguered lovers and forgiving them their contrivances.

If only this epic had enough substantial melodramatic hooks to hang this woman's