



Bring on the film gems

On top of the usual acclaimed works, the Singapore film festival injects some low-brow cinema in the form of martial arts and horror picks



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Since its return in 2014, the Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF) has been the place to watch films that would otherwise never come to Singapore cinemas, not even to its more arthouse-friendly venues.

This year is no different. In its 28th edition, the festival, to run from Nov 23 to Dec 2, will have more than 100 screenings, many of them of films that have won awards and acclaim at other festivals.

The festival is also where fans and film students get to see film-makers in person. The Masterclass talks this year feature Shekhar Kapur, the Indian director known for his biopics *Bandit Queen* (1994) and *Elizabeth* (1998). Also on the Masterclass roster is Indonesian writer, director and producer Karin Nugroho, whose work is known for tackling social issues. He is co-writer of a festival highlight, *Marlina The Murderer In Four Acts*, a blood-soaked thriller that addresses poverty and women's rights in a remote part of Indonesia.

The Singapore Panorama section is where local talent is showcased and, this year, the documentary *I Want To Go Home* (PG, 61 minutes) will pull tears from even the most hardened soul. Wesley Leon Aroozoo's film about a Japanese man who goes diving in search of a wife who disappeared in the 2011 tsunami is a low-key gem.

The SGIFF's new Midnight Mayhem section, with its martial arts and horror selections, brings a

much-needed injection of low-brow cinema to the festival. If your taste runs to "Cambodian prison action thriller" and "Mindanao monster movie", then this is the place for you.

One of the hottest tickets at the SGIFF, director Yorgos Lanthimos' thriller *The Killing Of A Sacred Deer*, looks to be sold out. Likewise, all screenings of the acclaimed gay coming-of-age story *Call Me By Your Name* are full.

But that does not mean there are no gems left.

There are a few tickets available for art-world satire *The Square* (M18, 142 minutes). Swedish writer-director Ruben Ostlund loves piercing the thin veneer of polish that hides the weak, incompetent person hiding inside. He did this with great effect in scathing family drama *Force Majeure* (2014), Sweden's entry to the Academy Awards. In his latest work – which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival – Christian (Danish actor Claes Bang) is the wily, narcissistic head of an art museum who butts heads with an American journalist (Elizabeth Moss from TV's *Mad Men*) and wealthy donors.

One of the picks in the Midnight Mayhem section is splatter-fest *Mayhem* (M18, 86 minutes). It stars Steven Yeun, whose appearance in *The Walking Dead* television show should have prepared him for this

horror-comedy. A couple, played by Yeun and Samara Weaving, are locked in a building and have to fashion weapons from office supplies after a viral outbreak turns fellow desk jockeys into violent maniacs.

Director Joe Lynch will speak after the screening of this allegory about office politics, visualised as a skull-cracking gladiatorial fight.

Yeun's fellow Korean-American actor John Cho appears in another pick, *Columbus* (PG13, 104 minutes). In this slow but beautifully-framed drama about belonging, single-named writer-director Kogonada places his characters in the Indiana city of the film's title. In this hub of modernist architecture, two persons, played by Cho and Haley Lu Richardson, develop a cautious, tentative connection under the shadows of the iconic buildings of I.M. Pei and Eero Saarinen.

Surprisingly, tickets are still available for *The Florida Project* (NC16, 112 minutes). Selected for the Cannes Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival, the drama about struggling families living in a cheap motel owned by Bobby (Willem Dafoe) bursts with colour and realism, thanks to its cast composed of actors and real-life residents of the rundown motel in which this movie was filmed.

No one told Indonesian film-maker Mouly Surya that she could not make a western in Indonesia, so that is what she did and the result is the gripping and visually stunning tragicomic revenge *Marlina The Murderer In Four Acts*.

Filmed on the largely undeveloped island of Sumba in the east of the country, one woman (Marsha Timothy) has to fight both gangsters and centuries of misogyny in her quest for justice.

Award-winning director Vahid Jililvand's *No Date, No Signature* (NC16, 102 minutes) is an example of how good Iranian films are at exploring the fallout after social classes collide. One dark night, a motorcycle carrying a poor man and his children strike the car of a wealthy doctor.

The doctor pays off the man to prevent him making a police report. The next day, while on his rounds, the doctor finds the motorcyclist's young son in his morgue. Should he do the right thing or the safe thing?



A wedding photo of Mr Yasuo Takamatsu and his wife, Yuko, who went missing after the 2011 earthquake.

Weekly dives to find his wife



For many non-Japanese, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake will be remembered as the one that caused nuclear power plants in Fukushima to malfunction.

About 16,000 persons perished and of these, the bodies of more than 2,000 have never been found. The tsunami scoured coastal cities such as Onagawa, dragging tonnes of debris into the sea.

Among those who are still missing is Onagawa resident Yuko, wife of Mr Yasuo Takamatsu. In 2013, the bus driver learnt to scuba dive so he could search for her in the icy waters off the coast.

Singaporean film-maker Wesley Leon Aroozoo (inset) read about Mr Takamatsu's weekly dives in 2014 and felt that his debut documentary should be about the man and his search.

"He intrigued me. I couldn't understand why he was doing this," says Aroozoo, 33.

The result is the documentary *I Want To Go Home* (PG, 61 minutes).

The title is taken from the last text message Yuko sent her husband from the rooftop of the bank where she worked. She and other employees had been told to wait out the tsunami there, but the wave that came in toppled the roof.

In 2015, Aroozoo, who is also a lecturer at the Putnam School Of Film and Animation at Lasalle College of the Arts, flew to Japan to film Mr Takamatsu and to interview him in person.

The director decided to go with on-camera interviews instead of using narration because he thinks that watching Mr Takamatsu's face and body when he answers questions reveals just as much, if not more, than words.

This is especially true of the key questions, such as why he is still diving, four years after the tsunami, and over the objections of family members.

"We spoke to him in his home, where he feels comfortable, and asked him the more personal questions there. It's important to see his expressions," says Aroozoo.

The film-maker says he wanted to inject variety into the images, as much of them show Mr Takamatsu going diving. So among other techniques, the film includes animation from the award-winning team of Henry and Harry Zhuang.

"We wanted to illustrate the things Mr Takamatsu might be thinking of when he is diving," he says.

Spending that week filming Mr Takamatsu and interviewing him revealed to Aroozoo a couple of lessons about love and loss.

"What I got from him is that sometimes, it's all right to do what you want to do, even if other people don't believe in it."

• *I Want To Go Home* screens on Dec 2, 4.30pm, at the National Museum of Singapore.

• Director Wesley Leon Aroozoo will take part in a post-screening dialogue.