

Second Moon Rising

Wednesday night I went to the Gene Siskel Film Center to see the American debut of Masahiro Sugano's first feature film *Second Moon*. The film screened as part of the 12th Annual Asian American Showcase, a month-long exhibition of art that focuses primarily on filmmakers. The intention of the showcase is to break down the stereotypes that still constrain Asian American artists: the geek, the martial artist, the dragon woman...

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Second Moon was a critics' choice selection at the Pusan International Film Festival in Korea, but Masahiro has had a hard time getting the film picked up in the United States. On his own admission, Masahiro is a control freak, and so the only people in the room last night who had ever seen the whole film were his lead actress Jennifer Shin-because she went to Pusan- and his producer Sanghoon Lee. I went to the screening because Masahiro is a good friend and needed to pack the house, but also because I really wanted to see the film. As a person, he is a fascinating character and his focus on his art is unbending, scary at times. I was curious to see what he had spent two years of his life making. As I took my seat, I had the conflicting emotions of the fan/critic. What if it sucked?

I won't keep you on edge. It didn't suck. I wouldn't be writing about it if it had sucked. I just would have told him it was great and shut up about it. I didn't go into the movie without any expectations. I had seen the trailer for the film, which features a dreamy picture of a guy in a Santa Claus suit floating in a canoe down the Chicago River. And I had discussed the philosophy of the movie with Masahiro over Ma Po Tofu at Ken Kee Restaurant in Chinatown, where one scene is filmed. I knew that the original tag-line for the movie was "a Neo-Yakuza Romantic Farce." But those data points were so confused, so suggestive of one of those indy art films that tries to do way too much without doing anything at all, that I was a little apprehensive. But the trailer for the film is beautiful at least, and that was encouraging.

Second Moon is the story of Q, an agent in a secret society called The Art of Love. The Art of Love is the creation of Don Jim, a cross between the Godfather and Tom Cruise's male motivational speaker character in *Magnolia*, and its mission is to free married women from the chauvinistic shackles of monogamy. The Art of Love's agents swear allegiance to Don Jim and his philosophy, which tenets include: Thou shalt not let the woman sleep over; thou shalt not let the woman cook for you; thou shalt not eat what the woman cooks. You get the picture. The Art of Love is a philosophical caricature of the Man Movement and Free Love rolled into an underground *Men In Black* package. Masahiro is not afraid to play with stereotypes.

The plot thickens when Q first pities and then falls for M, a transient Korean girl who embodies pre-feminist womanhood with her reckless loyalty, her breathless surrender, and her penchant for cooking and cleaning. Masahiro says that the idea for the movie came from reading Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a book about a philandering man and a woman who can only love one person. I read the book in college and remember very little other than my first encounter with an archetypal scene that has gotten much film play, a woman smelling another woman's juices in her man's hair. It took my breath away when I read it.

The parallel between the book and the movie is most pronounced in the character of M, who confronts the philosophical problems posed by her lover and his Art of Love physically, like a spirit medium in a shaking fit in one scene. *Second Moon* is a farce though, and it balances the very serious story of M and Q with the ridiculous parody of the Art of Love's agents that pokes fun at movies like *Pulp Fiction*, *Fight Club*, and Hong Kong action films.

I asked Masahiro why he wanted to make a serious farce, how you go about making a serious farce. His response: I'm a very serious guy and sometimes it makes people crack up. The more serious something is, the more tragic, the more

funny it has to be. I didn't study how to make farce, I just thought about it in terms of the rhythm and pacing of the movie. You do a serious scene, then you need a funny one, something with out of nowhere humor. It's a reflection of how I am.

Masahiro always mentions Kubrick when he is asked about his influences. Perhaps the greatest success of his film is that it creates a lush and coherent visual language that is its own, but Kubrick's influence is clear enough in the slow, uneasy pacing, the way sound and vision heighten the character drama so that the audience feels the rank tension of cheating in their shoulders. There are moments when the movie is incredibly uncomfortable, but they are never too long. Comic relief comes by way of the helper characters-Don Jim, Bond, Bobby-and by way of the absurd, like when Q uses mind control to defuse a desperate husband by talking about the 85 Bears, the true meaning of his words communicated in subtitles across the bottom of the screen. My only real criticism of the film is that there is about a fifteen minute segment in the second half just before the climax, when you feel like you are being batted back and forth between comedy and tragedy almost arbitrarily. But I forgot the abuse almost as fast as I registered it, as the movie swept towards a brave and conventional climax.

The acting in Second Moon is mostly very good, particularly the two lead characters. Andre Ing, who plays Q, is sufficiently cool, complicated, and easy to watch. He gives us the blank slate we need to project onto. Jennifer Shin is a stage actress-currently playing the lead in The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chou-and she is a powerhouse on film. Her face is so expressive that what the screenplay lacks in intimacy she more than makes up for.

The real miracle of Second Moon is that it is at one time incredibly thought provoking and also ridiculous. It is absurd and also conventional. The whole thing was filmed in 21 days in Chicago on a shoestring budget raised by Sanghoon Lee from a handful of loyal Korean restaurateurs. You wouldn't know it. The show was completely sold out and nearly the entire audience stayed for the Q & A with Masahiro and his lead actors. I had the feeling, as I watched him field questions, that I was witnessing the debut of a really great contemporary artist. I very rarely have the feeling, leaving a movie, that I should go home and write. It was part inspiration and part competition. The question now is what Masahiro can do with a couple million dollars and a year to film.