

“HIGANJIMA: ESCAPE FROM VAMPIRE ISLAND” (Blu-ray/DVD Review)

Written by Thom Carnell

Tuesday, 07 February 2012 17:12



Anyone who knows anything about horror movies knows one thing: Vampires are cool. They've always been a staple of genre cinema, from Bela Lugosi to Hammer films to DARK SHADOWS to the fun *jiang-shi* or “hopping vampires” presented by many Hong Kong filmmakers. Their neighbors to the north in South Korea have gotten into the act with HIGANJIMA (whose subtitle ESCAPE FROM VAMPIRE ISLAND is more prominent on FUNimation's Blu-ray/DVD combo packaging).

Directed by Kim Tae-gyun, the man behind VOLCANO HIGH (“Where Martial Arts and Hip Hop COLLIDE!” according to the poster) and based on the Kodansha *manga* by Matsumoto Kouji, HIGANJIMA is a slick, beautifully shot flick aimed directly at the heart of every preteen, tween and teen in the world. It's as if MTV Japan and Syfy saw TWILIGHT and thought, “Hey, we could do *that!*” The film begins with Akira—a young, unsure, kind of geeky kid—being chased by the brother of some girl he snubbed. A girl, let it be said, who is *way* out of his league.



As he runs through the city streets, Akira is obviously physically adept, parkouring his way through market stalls and high-school hallways. As the camera tracks him running, the audience is introduced to a few of his friends, and we're given quick impressions of what will soon become the supporting cast: the sullen, moody co-leader of the group, the quiet and innocent love interest, the geeky science study, the social outcast and, of course, the fat comic-relief guy. We soon learn that Akira's bad-ass brother and his girlfriend disappeared a year or so prior while on vacation on a far-off island. A beautiful and mysterious woman appears with news of the brother's whereabouts, further explaining that he's not only alive, but on the eponymous island hunting vampires. Quicker than you can say “predictable plot point,” Akira and his friends board the woman's boat and are soon on their way to Vampire Island to find big brother and rid the world of the bloodsucking menace. Yes, it's all Setup City until the kids arrive at their destination, where the film shifts from teen *manga* clichés to hypermelodramatic claptrap.

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OK, let's get this out of the way right off the bat: HIGANJIMA *looks* terrific. The Blu-ray's video quality (2.39:1 widescreen) is top-drawer, the images cast in subtle shades of blue and black, and there's no denying that Kim can arrange his elements within the frame. The locations are beautiful, the acting is solid (but avoid the English dub track, which is *atrocious*), the cinematography is stunning and most of the FX are perfectly serviceable. Heck, even the CG environments look good, and a few of the monsters are kinda cool, but it's all window dressing for a derivative, cookie-cutter story.

HIGANJIMA's main problem is its insincere motivation. It's obviously meant as product aimed at a very specific demographic (teenagers) and there is not a single surprise in the film. “Gee, will Akira save the day?” “What do you think will happen to some of his friends?” Put it this way: The only thing missing here is a few of them wearing red shirts. “I wonder which of the characters is secretly working *with* the main vampire, and will they have a change of heart at the end?” Sidebar...let's talk about the main vampire. Good grief; if there's any question who the producers are aiming this flick toward, all you have to look at is this guy. He looks like something out of a Visual Kei band like Malice Mizer, Glay or Versailles. I mean, the dude is prettier than most of the women in the cast.

Conveniently, this is Japan, so a lot of the accepted facts of vampire lore don't necessarily apply. In HIGANJIMA, vampires can go out in the sunlight. Stakes aren't necessary; all you have to do is crush their skulls (oooooh...splattery!). Being bitten is not a road to becoming undead; for that, you have to get some of their blood into your body via a cut or your eye. So...Danny Boyle deserves a royalty check at some point.

Thankfully, things pick up in the final reel when the action kicks in—and to be fair, some of it is actually pretty good, including swordfights, hand-to-hand combat and gooey human-crushing via one of the worst CGI monsters *ever!* Sadly, though, it's all far too little, far too late. The ending is drawn-out in an already long and yappy film (there is no reason whatsoever for this thing to be 122 minutes), and left so wide open for a sequel that the last image literally negates everything that has gone before it. The only real reason to see HIGANJIMA is if you're young (or have a younger sister) and have decided you're ready for something...meatier than TWILIGHT.

The disc also features a trailer for this and eight other FUNimation titles, and a 45-minute behind-the-scenes featurette. This documentary is quite in-depth, and will be especially

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interesting for people who like to see how such FX- and stunt-heavy films—even unimaginative ones like HIGANJIMA—are made.

MOVIE: 🖤🖤👁️

DVD PACKAGE: 🖤🖤👁️