Written by Michael Gingold
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The Korean cinema scene seems to have a thing for serial-killer movies, and for doing them well. Before THE HOST, Bong Joon-ho directed and co-wrote the quietly devastating MEMORIES OF MURDER, and Na Hong-jin’s gripping THE CHASER remains one of the country’s most underseen and underappreciated films in the U.S. Now comes Kim Jee-woon’s I SAW THE DEVIL, easily one of the most extreme (emotionally and viscerally) entries in this subgenre from any country.

This out-and-out gorefest, in which the protagonists’ minds become almost as damaged as the victims’ bodies, is utterly unrecognizable as the work of Kim, who won a lot of attention for his quiet-horror fable A TALE OF TWO SISTERS. Conversely, I SAW THE DEVIL (currently playing the Sundance Film Festival, and hitting Stateside theaters in March from Magnolia Pictures’ Magnet Releasing; see details here) is a full-bore plunge into derangement and violence. It begins with a sweet young woman, Ju-yeon (Oh San-ha), getting a flat tire on a remote country road, where she’s approached by what appears at first to be a Good Samaritan. But Kyung-chul (Choi Min-sik) is not, as soon becomes brutally clear—but this remorseless killer has just chosen the wrong girl to add to his string of victims. Her fiancé, Soo-hyun (Lee Byung-hun), just happens to be a government agent who’s well-trained in tracking down evildoers and exacting justice upon them.

After obtaining a list of suspects, tracking each one down on his own and taking a, shall we say, direct approach to questioning them (“Someone smashed his balls,” a cop matter-of-factly says about of those questionees), Soo-hyun gets his man. But what then? I SAW THE DEVIL reaches what would be the climactic setpiece of a traditional thriller shortly before the hour mark—with, as is typical of Korean flicks, well over an hour to go. But Soo-hyun isn’t interested in bringing Kyung-chul in, or even simply killing him. He’s got a much more elaborate punishment planned—one whose execution will lead him into emotional and spiritual places as dark as any where his enemy dwells…

I SAW THE DEVIL belongs to the subset of films in which the nominal hero becomes indistinguishable in mindset and methods from the villain, and the lines become blurred early, often and to especially disturbing effect in Park Hoon-hung’s screenplay (“adapted” by Kim). Soo-hyun becomes so obsessed with mentally and physically torturing Kyung-chul that he’s blinded to the suffering of anyone else unfortunate enough to enter their orbit, and his singular focus on his own methods leads him to tragically underestimate his wily nemesis. Adding to the overall chill in the movie’s air is the setting of this cat-and-mouse—or, perhaps more accurately, cat-and-cat—game in a world suffused in brutality and suffering…where random evil is everywhere, and someone who seems to offer a friendly ride can prove to have a body in the trunk, and (in one of the film’s scattered implausibilities) one of the key suspects in a vicious slaying spree can hold a job driving a school bus full of kids.

At the center of this maelstrom are a pair of riveting performances that allow the story to maintain a grim fascination, even as it leaves the possibility of sympathy or empathy far behind. Choi’s banal features, which helped make him so perfect as the tormented Everyman in Park Chan-wook’s OLDBOY, serve him equally well playing a sociopath for whom murder is as much a routine as eating or breathing. His matter-of-fact maleficence is well-matched with Lee’s driven demeanor; the latter actor, probably most familiar to U.S. audiences as Storm Shadow in G.I. JOE: THE RISE OF COBRA but also the star of Park’s terrific J.S.A.: JOINT SECURITY AREA (still that director’s best film—check it out!), makes it easy to comprehend and be chilled by Soo-hyun’s descent into a depravity all his own.

The supporting cast, also including Chun Kook-haun as a retired police captain and Soo-hyun’s would-have-been father-in-law, Chun Ho-jin as the current captain and Kim Yoon-seo as Ju-yeon’s sister, fill their bills admirably, though not all of them are around to see the final credits. Kim’s merciless tone and occasional bravura flourishes (one long take inside a car is killer) are complemented by the savagery of the violence he presents; we’re talking INSIDE levels of gore here, which led the movie to be trimmed for release in its not-typically-censorious homeland (the U.S. version is intact). Makeup FX artist Kwak Tae-yong has created a series of grisly tableaux that even hardened horror fans might not be able to watch without flinching, while those who can tear their minds away from the mayhem may wonder how the two pro/antagonists can take the physical damage they do and still remain standing.

Most quibbles that viewers will have with I SAW THE DEVIL will only come up after they’re done viewing it; while it’s playing out, Kim sustains his grip for pretty much the entire 144 minutes. And while it at first seems obvious who the devil of the title is, by the time the movie’s over, it may well leave you feeling that you’ve actually been watching two.

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