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## Killzone Double Feature

(2007) Rated: Unrated  
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by Marc Calderaro

Before an in-depth dissection of two menial, yet endlessly entertaining Hong-Kong martial arts film, the *Killzone Double Feature*, can commence, there's something that needs to be said. The price of this 3-hour-long DVD is only \$9.95, that's all. If you have enough interest in the kung-fu niche that you use such a comprehensive site as *PopMatters* to decide this DVD's viewing fate, stop. Don't read on, because it's not important. Just buy *Killzone Double Feature*, and decide for yourself, (as if you weren't swayed by the title already).

There's nothing that can be said to alter your enjoyment of charismatic stars like Sammo Hung and Donnie Yen in their early days, (in Yen's case, his very first film). Though neither movie is perfect, specifically, Yen's *Drunken Tai-Chi (Xiao tai ji)* could use some work, as an audience, you know what you're getting, and it's worth it. The end.

For the rest of you, a little something more.

These two films, *Drunken Tai Chi* and *The Incredible Kung-Fu Master*, illuminate a drastic difference between Hollywood martial arts and that of Hong Kong. Not the oft-misused term, "authenticity," as Hollywood has its own bona fides, but these films have a separate set of goals for the storytelling. How the plots and meaning unfold is unlike any recognizable pattern in the Hollywood-action oeuvre, and quite telling.

Hollywood martial arts films focus on the main character kicking ass and taking names, (whether it be Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Michael Dudikoff or Don "The Dragon" Wilson), with the world acting as flavor. Hong-Kong focuses on that grandiose world surrounding the main character, paying less attention to hulking feats of athletic achievement. With a pastiche of setting, character, and multi-generational plotlines, the "authentic" kung-fu film engulfs the viewer, contextualizing the achievements and goals of the martial-arts style highlighted. The focus is on the style, not on its practitioner.

*Incredible Kung-Fu Master (Xing mu zi gu huo zhao)* criticizes warring brothers and the practice of mono-stylistic kung-fu, to promote the balance of Sammo Hung's "all-varieties" approach. In my favorite speech in the film, Hung offers this metaphor of his "omni-style:" "Some people like chicken, some fish ... I like all of them; that's why I'm so fat!" Similarly, *Drunken Tai Chi* contrasts the egotism and conceit of the townsfolk with the reserved, modest styling of Tai-Chi Boxing; patience and grace mean more after an hour of talk and agitation.

Both the movies' premises are interested in relating their chosen styles with the world around them. As opposed to a character-centric movie, the films are holistic in approach, perhaps explaining why their stars may have preferred to stay away from Hollywood – choosing more modest, supporting roles when in America. Even though Donnie Yen is the main actor in *Drunken Tai Chi*, extended scenes remain entirely removed from his toils of his character, Cheng Do.

Unlike Hollywood, corollary characters don't act as pieces of the puzzle, but as zoomed-in sections of the portrait. There's nothing that must be worked together; it already fits within the framework: the overweight woman trying on dresses, the street puppeteer, the mentally challenged bully all add to the atmosphere, and don't just exist to interact with Yen.

Not only does a decentralized story create a different action experience, but playing down the lead can also destabilize the infallible image of the "action hero". When we see Chuck Norris in a battle, we know he'll win, (unless, of course, if he's fighting Bruce Lee), but I'm concerned for Donnie Yen's battle-fate, especially with this overly cocky attitude. Similarly, since Sammo Hung has only had 35-40 minutes of screen time, his life may actually be in jeopardy in the final bout. This subtle warping of the action pedestal-of-value adds palpable tension to the long fight scenes, which are a large chunk of any credible martial-arts film.

Of course, uncertain destiny isn't the only thing to enjoy in these fights. The choreography of both films is an incredible feat and illustrates just how much farther ahead Hong-Kong was than America when they were made. *Incredible Kung-Fu Master*, is clearly the superior film of the two. The film showcases personality-oriented fights, with movements highlighting the individuals' goals and ideas, which is not an easy task. Influenced greatly

by vaudeville, these fights are reminiscent of the playful, prop-oriented battles of Jackie Chan, with humor sewn seamlessly into the aerial and muscular wonders. Additionally, in the final showdown, eight fighters act as a tumbling, kicking synchronized-swimming-like team, who can easily hypnotize with a modern dance of violence. *Incredible Kung-Fu Master* is a joy to behold and more than worth the price tag on its own.

Though *Drunken Tai Chi* has its moments, the tone is uneven at best and makes for hit-and-miss viewing. Perhaps, as an American, I'm on the outside, but some things that pass for humor leave me unsettled and appear a bit amoral. So when it comes time to take the plot seriously, I'm a bit miffed, especially at the ending. Throughout the film, the killer of Do's family is shown to be a misunderstood hulk and an amazingly caring father to his young son. After mercilessly slaughtering this hulk in the final climax, Do tells the son his father has "gone away" while the two are playing on a swing set. When the son asks, "Can we go visit him?" Do starts laughing and falls off his swing.

Cue freeze frame; roll credits. Really? Is this funny? Orphaning a young child isn't a topic rife with humor from my perspective, and it's morally ambiguous situations like this that weigh down the tone of the movie. Although *Kung-Fu Hustle* and *Save the Green Planet* were able to find that balance between comedy and drama, I don't think the same can be said for *Drunken Tai Chi*. The incredibly poor sound quality doesn't help the film, either. At times the sound is so poor that scenes are entirely inaudible.

But there are many gems as well, most memorably, a scene where a miming Cheng Do moonwalks to a copyright-infringed, techno version of "Tequila," much to the amusement of onlookers. *Killzone Double Feature* is great fun, and easily worth the price.

RATING:  6

EXTRAS:  4

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