



NOT YOUR CHILDREN'S BEDTIME STORIES

“Cinderella” and “Arang”

> Review by Sean Kim

GREAT fairytales can inspire wonder and draw connections between people and the world around them. They have an intelligence all their own, which is why they're eternal. Now, Tartan distributors have brought us two tales loosely riffed off classics, “Cinderella” and “The Legend of Arang,” which were re-translated into horror movies, specifically Korean horror. The results? Mixed.

There is nothing familiar about the film “Cinderella” (2006). Directed by Bong Man-Dae, the movie has little to do with the Grimm's fairytale, except as a signifier for a tale of vanity. The story centers on a mother's love for her daughter and the terrible secret she hides in the basement of their home. The suspense is subtle, not so tangible as in a Hitchcock film, but it's there lurking in the back, slowly unfolding as we learn more about the mother's relationship with her husband and daughter and why the basement is a serious no-no place.

“Cinderella” stays light on the shock, relying on horror tropes like the ghost girl with long black hair, but it does a fair job of keeping you on edge. For the seasoned horror fanatic it's no roller coaster ride, but for someone unfamiliar with Asian horror, “Cinderella” is eerie with a degree of intelligence (think “Suicide Club” and “Audition”). The movie finds ways to creep you out, taking you into dark rooms where the lights mysteriously go out and you wait for the bad thing to happen or glimpse the girl lurking in the corner. It's not horrifying, but it's scary enough.

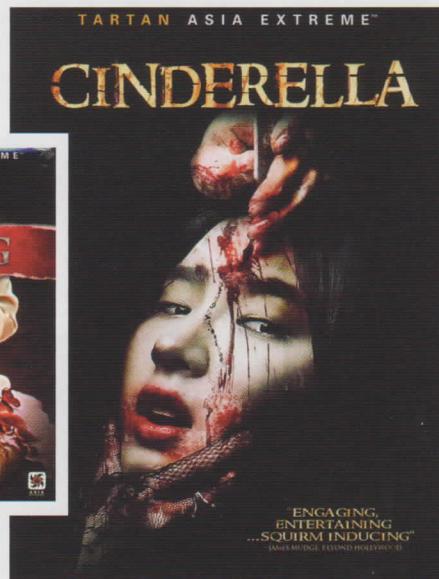
Its strength lies in its solid story with

a twist and a fairly believable dramatic core. The movie slowly approaches its final revelation, paced evenly with flashbacks that blend into the present. Is she the real daughter or was she the replacement daughter? Is it a ghost, or is it real? All these questions are answered in a timely fashion.

“Arang” is another K-horror loosely based on a folktale. The “Legend of Arang” tells of a court lady who was killed while fighting to keep her chastity against a wily servant. She then returns as a ghost to seek revenge.

“Arang” the movie is a sensationalistic rehash of this original plot, focused on the rape and murder of a young girl by four boys, then the consequential murder of the four boys years later when they're grown men.

One of the more admirable aspects of K-horrors is they attempt to create a sense of pathos through its characters. But in “Arang,” there are no believable characters, and thus, no pathos. In the first 30 minutes, three of the men get knocked off before we get a chance to know them. Granted, we find out later they weren't great guys, but even assholes have character. Then there's the female detective, So-Young (played by Song Yoon-ah), who altogether falls flat. We can never really believe she is a detective, let alone all the implications of being a woman detective, unless the opening boxing montage and her so-called “tomboy” looks are supposed to



be proof enough. The rest of the cast is similar. They are shells of what they are and nothing more.

That is, except Hyun-gi (played by Lee Dong-wook). The only character with a conscience, he is possessed by a fearsome guilt that translates.

The rest fall into the standard Asian ghost story replete with pools of blood, exploding lights and, again, the girl with long black hair. But where “Cinderella” rides on the strength of its story, “Arang” lays bets on character motivation and trips up due to transparent motivations and shallow characters. To make any of the action matter, one has to care about the people. Otherwise, no matter how gruesome their deaths or traumatic the scares, viewers will be left cold.

I've heard it said that Korean films are unique because they add an extra twist to story conventions. I can believe it. But no matter how ingenious the twist, if it's sloppy then it fails. As far as these two K-horrors go, it's one step forward with “Cinderella” and two steps back with “Arang.” ☀

“Cinderella”



Horror flicks that wish they were as good as their fairy tale counterparts.

“Arang”

