



POP GOES THE WEASEL

“The President’s Last Bang”

> Review by Sean Kim

IN a sad attempt to understand modern Korean history, I Googled through articles on the assassination of ex-president Park Chung-hee, the South Korean tyrant and dictator of 18 years from 1960 through the late '70s. In reading through the hodgepodge of presidencies before and after him, each vaguely linked to the other in a complicated web that grows more chaotic and sadder by the year, I realized how ridiculous it is to attempt to portray even a moment of history as film. Biopics are one example, with the recent popularity of films like “Walk the Line” and “Ma Vie en Rose,” but it’s impossible to portray a single life in just two hours. There’s such a wealth of things to criticize, because history is so complicated and so varied, there’s no right thing a movie can do. And really, there’s no such thing as a historically accurate film since history itself is an interpretation.

Which brings me to Im Sangsoo’s “The President’s Last Bang,” a movie very loosely based on the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979. A truly entertaining black comedy that borders on sheer ridiculousness, it’s filled with buffoonish characters, intrigue and humor. There’s even a climactic shoot-out with pools of blood pouring out from the necks of its victims coupled by slapstick performances by the actors. You couldn’t ask better from a Tarantino flick, or even the bloody bravura of DePalma.

The center of action revolves around Korean CIA Director Kim (Baek Yunshik), the samurai-inspired romantic martyr with bad liver and constipation, and his trusted right-hand man, Chief Ju (Han Suk-kyu) who follows his boss into the fray of the assassination. The two bump around in the slapstick circus of



incompetents that is politics in Korea. Han is especially good as the bitter and disgruntled underling Chief Ju, who couldn’t stand being relegated to guard-duty at the president’s private drinking parties in the Secret Room. Actually, both performances are spot-on, with Baek doing a fine balancing act between dead-earnest and tongue-in-cheek.

Now, I have no clue what’s true and what’s not, as far as the actual incident goes. Better to ask a history professor (which I did, and she gave me enough context to understand that this movie is a work of fiction and nowhere near as complex as the actual incident). Thus, satire as a vehicle is a good direction to go. One can imagine a satire based on the Watergate hearings or on our current administration, while understanding it’s not exactly history. The point of it all is to judge the foibles of men. So does “The President’s Last Bang” make a judgment? Yes, though a little clumsily.

The one thing I take issue with in the



A truly entertaining black comedy that borders on sheer ridiculousness, it’s filled with buffoonish characters, intrigue and humor. There’s even a climactic shoot-out with pools of blood pouring out from the necks of its victims coupled by slapstick performances by the actors. You couldn’t ask better from a Tarantino flick, or even the bloody bravura of DePalma.

film: Im drops a heavy hand in the end with a moral stamp to the film. What a mistake. In the last five minutes, a narrator suddenly appears to ask viewers if those involved in the assassination were in the right. The question is pointless, as is the narrator. The film has already made it clear that all parties involved were nothing more than innocent boobs running around, reacting to events while taking no real action.

But I won’t split hairs. “The President’s Last Bang” is an effective work of fiction that works as a black comedy. And in light of the new president-elect of South Korea, Lee Myung-bak, it helps to remember that seemingly great shifts in power is often a lot of hot air. ☐



History repeating itself can be enjoyable, but only if it’s via satire.