



CITY OF LIFE AND DEATH (NANJING, NANJING)

Autumn
Season
2010

From a review by Derek Elley, *Variety*:

At times semi-impressionistic, at others gut-wrenchingly up close and personal, Nanjing massacre chronicle *City of Life and Death* lives up to hype and expectations. This third feature by mainland Chinese writer-director Lu Chuan inhabits a strange space between art movie and the mainstream that Lu has made his own with his previous, very different pictures (*The Missing Gun*, *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol*) and, despite having been lensed in widescreen black-and-white with an almost clinical detachment, packs emotional punches throughout. Inexplicably turned down by Cannes, the picture deserves major festival platforms in Europe and North America to launch its specialty career in the West.

Even after more than 70 years, the 1937-38 Nanjing massacre remains an unresolved sore: China has claimed a death toll of around 300,000 and Japan has generally admitted to about half that number and still furnished no official apology. The event has featured in several Chinese-language TV series and movies over the years, but Lu's film represents the first full-on, non-melodramatic treatment by a Chinese filmmaker.

What's surprising about *City of Life and Death* is all the things it isn't. It isn't a bombastic, nationalistic slice of melodrama; it isn't wall-papered with emotive music; and it isn't two-hours-plus of unmitigated grief and wailing.

Only partly because it's in black-and-white, the picture recalls Central European war dramas of the '50s and '60s (such as Andrzej Wajda's *Kanal*), with their powerful mixture of both grit and spiritual emptiness. But underneath the visual trappings, the movie remains deeply Chinese in its emotional underpinnings and relationships.

Lu's screenplay is more a succession of events centered on a relatively small number of characters -- both Chinese and Japanese -- than an attempt to tell the complex story of the mass executions and other atrocities committed by Japanese troops. There's personal bravery but little movie-style heroism, more a general sadness at human behavior during wartime.

Characters are a mix of real personalities -- such as Rabe, who helped save many civilians by setting up an international safety zone -- and fictional alloys. Main character is not Chinese but a young, conflicted Japanese officer, Kadokawa (Hideo Nakaizumi), who's a member of a platoon led by the ruthless Ida (Ryu Kohata) and who falls for a shipped-in Japanese "comfort woman," Yuriko (Yuko Miyamoto).

Balancing them on the Chinese side are a young general, Lu (Liu Ye), who leads a unit in street-to-street fighting, and Tang (Fan Wei), long-time assistant to Rabe (John Paisley), who organizes the safety zone with a young female teacher (Gao Yuanyuan).

As civilians and soldiers are herded into groups and massacred, Tang tries to protect his wife (Qin Lan) and young sister-in-law (Jiang Yiyan). The killings and humiliations continue throughout the winter and up to the official celebration of Nanjing's conquest by the Japanese troops in March.

The movie's most powerful moments are the small set pieces: Chinese women volunteering to become comfort women, sparse dialogue exchanges or farewells, or (most cinematically striking of all) the Nipponese troops' bizarre conquest dance.

Lack of characters' backgrounding gives the picture a visceral immediacy and makes the historical situation the movie's real star. The downside is that, at least initially, it's difficult to work out Tang's exact relationships with the women around him.

Fan, known better as a comic in China but arguably even stronger in dramatic roles (*The Parking Attendant in July*), delivers the most powerful screen presence with the least effort, resulting in some genuinely heart-rending scenes in the final reels. Gao ("Shanghai Dreams") matures more gradually but delivers in the last lap, while Liu, one of the most versatile of China's younger actors (*Lan Yu*, *The Underdog Knight*), dominates the early going as a gritty soldier whose bravery is tempered by an almost childlike innocence.

On the Japanese side, Nakaizumi is a tad too low-key to fully flesh out the conflicted Kadokawa, and is easily overshadowed by the excellent Kohata as his loony commander.

Monochrome processing would have benefited dramatically from fewer grays and harder blacks and whites, but widescreen lensing (largely handheld) by d.p. Cao Yu is aces amid Hao Yi's terrific sets (built in north-eastern China) of blasted Nanjing buildings. Liu Tong's soulful, evocative music is sparingly deployed to maximum effect.

