



HOW BILL GOT KILLED

By Kasha Van Sant



It is a real shame when it takes films like **Kill Bill** and it's heavy Tarantino label to bring the humble martial arts flick back into prominence. Before Tarantino devotees cry out in protest, bear in mind that many a movie has gone unnoticed under the distracting glare of western cinema. If it is not immediately obvious what made the statuesque Uma Thurman don the hallowed yellow and black of Bruce Lee to play her own '**Game Of Death**'; then it should be. Let's take a look at how far some of the original cult masterpieces were edited to make the latest Tarantino blockbuster as we discover, 'How Bill Got Killed'!

Whilst the maverick director has taken his inspiration from all directions, three of the principal films have recently been released on the Artsmagic DVD label in a nicely packaged box-set; they are none other than **Babycart At The River Styx**, **Zatoichi Meets The One Armed Swordsman** and **Lady Snowblood**. There is much more to these classics than mouthy titles; indeed they pack a punch that seems difficult to replicate no matter who tries to weave their magic over them.

First in the dock is **Babycart At The River Styx**. Directed by Misumi Kenji in 1972, this is the second film from the graphic novel adaptations of Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima's 'Lone Wolf And Cub' series. This intriguing title sees our two heroes; a disgraced Samurai, Ogami Itto (Wakayama Tomisaburo) former executioner to the Shogun and his baby son Daigoro as they battle for survival.

When the opposing Yagyu clan murder his wife and frame him, Ogami Itto becomes 'Lone Wolf' wandering the path of hell in order to seek revenge. Needless to say our duo encounter assassins galore, namely a group of female ninjas who stage a bloody ambush at the River Styx. More carnage comes in the shape of 'The Gods Of Death', three Hidari brothers who protect Lone Wolf's next target. Still fresh from its BBFC ban, **Babycart At The River Styx** is very strong stuff!

The second contender responsible for starting the fire in Tarantino's brain is, **Zatoichi Meets The One Armed Swordsman**. Like it's predecessor, this film



Japanese legends collide when Zatoichi Meets The One Armed Swordsman

explores the themes of solitude and expulsion. This time our renegade is Wang Kong (Jimmy Wang Yu) a Chinese one armed swordsman who prevents a group of Nambu Samurai from killing a young boy who has stopped their procession. With the local peasants massacred for his troubles Wang Kong flees from the law.

On the other side of the coin we follow the tale of Zatoichi (Shintaro Katsu) a blind Yakuza swordsman who roams the land. Fate leads him to the same young boy saved by Wang Kong. Now, the sole charge of the boy, Zatoichi inevitably meets up with Wang Kong. With prices on heads and battles to be fought it is only a matter of time before the two meet in a duel to the death! Directed by Kimiyoshi Yasuda this film is dark and brooding. Meant to move, it will reinforce the solitude and solemnity of the fighter's art.

With the gender switch pushed to the opposite side, next we explore the role of the female assassin. The third and final addition to this set is the most potent of the three. Again from the pen of Kazuo Koike we find **Lady Snowblood**. Directed by Fujita Toshiya this is the ultimate incarnation of a liberated female. Known by it's full title, **Lady Snowblood: Blizzard From The Netherworld**; is set against the turbulent historical backdrop of the Meiji era. The political violence of this era vents itself upon a couple who fall foul to a group of men. With her husband lying dead, Sayo is raped after sating her vengeance temporarily when she kills one of the four attackers.

Thrown into prison for life her thirst for revenge grows. Seducing each prison guard, she plans to conceive a child to fulfil her vengeful ambition. Her task complete, she dies as her female child is born. Kashima Shurayuki (Kaji Meiko) grows

into a deadly swordswoman. White as snow, her persona is equally as icy. This 'Snow of the Netherworld' is completely devoid of emotion; her only purpose being to seek and destroy the three remaining members of the gang. Breathtakingly beautiful, it is a small wonder that such inspiration has sprung from this film. Strong visual imagery is very much at the forefront, from the obvious white on red connotations which arise with frequency; to the swordplay and gore.

With all this beauty on show, story telling might be expected to fall short, however this film has a very high celluloid IQ, a contemporary flair which displays a wisdom that far exceeds it's vintage. Such a tempting fruit ripe for the picking, it was a question of time as to who would get their mitts on this one first. Sadly, the words 'blatant' and 'rip-off' come to mind...

Like it's heroine, the genre of female Samurai films was a pioneering concept. This 1973 film was to spawn a slightly under par sequel a year later, with director Fujita Toshiya still at the helm. Kaji Meiko too was wielding her deadly cane sword once more in **Lady Snowblood: Love Song Of Vengeance**.

Although not part of the box set this sequel deserves a mention and is also available on the Artsmagic label. 'Yuki' Kashima is still as sullen and mesmerising as before, this time embroiled in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. Japan is jubilant in it's success against the Russian bear, sweeping up all and sundry with their zeal. 'Yuki' is thrown into custody only to be rescued by the head of the secret police. Kikui has his own designs on 'Yuki' as a pawn in his political game, set the task of exposing anarchist, Ranui Tokunaga. It seems however that our dainty heroine takes exception to all of this and carries out her own brand of corporal punishment!

For all the **Kill Bill** critique, we can only hope that Tarantino has awakened interest in the true heart of the martial arts flick and rekindled the meaning of honour, revenge and betrayal. Call me cynical, but somehow I think that the purists can rest assured; despite it's brief airing, oriental cinema is still well and truly underground.

For further information regarding all the films featured in this article, please visit the Artsmagic website at www.artsmagic.co.uk



Ogami Itto The Lone Wolf



Babycart At The River Styx