

The Hollywood Reporter

Film Review: High Kick Girl

Bottom Line: Hard-core martial arts fans will get a rush out of this authentic karate film.

April 15, 2009 By Maggie Lee



HONG KONG -- "High Kick Girl" achieves what last year's "Shaolin Girl" failed to do at a fraction of the cost -- create a proper martial arts vehicle for a hard-knuckled nymph to kick ass in a mini-skirted uniform. It is poised to high-kick its way into genre film ancillary.

Producer-director Fuyuhiko Nishi, who choreographed the exemplary "Black Belt," discovered Rina Takeda, a virtuoso karate girl who performs all her own fights with clean precision (and a dash of fiery viciousness) and partners with genuine karate master Tatsuya Naka. This film is the real deal for serious martial arts fans who so often get short-changed by genre films enslaved to visual effects and wire-fu.

Where "High Kick Girl" stumbles is the script's inability to develop genuine characters or human interaction and the near absence of comic relief. Plus, the noticeably thrifty budget and Spartan production design appears less flattering on the big screen.

Kei Tsuchiya (Takeda) is a high school girl whose hunger for a black belt drives her to challenge and crush her seniors like insects. Impatient with her master Matsumura's (Naka) strict adherence to practicing "kata" - detailed choreographed patterns of movements -- rather than teaching her actual fighting, she undergoes rigorous trials to become a member of the Destroyers, a ruthless organization of mercenary henchmen. It has dangerous consequences.

Many action films from Asia like to speed up the editing to make the fight scenes look more dynamic. "High Kick Girl" does the opposite, playing all the moves in slow motion so one can see the coordination of the body and the continuity of its movements.

Kata is rarely seen on screen. A long, gracefully tracked sequence, in which Naka applies perfect form, is worth rewinding several times. This authentic and beautiful representation of karate is blended with some pretty brutal infliction of bodily harm. Nishi, himself a karate pro, choreographs the action without frills or fads.

In stark contrast to the elaborate and elegant action choreography, the plot is bare and mechanical. Sets are not really visually or dramatically integrated to the action.

Seventeen-year-old Takeda may not be as cute and baby-faced as "Chocolate's" Muay Thai heroine Jija. Nonetheless, given artist management grooming, especially in the acting department, her skills can become an asset in bigger pan-Asian action co-productions.

Production Companies: Nagoya TV/Digital Hollywood Entertainment/Hexagon Pictures

Cast: Rina Takeda, Naka Tatsuya, Akihito Yagi

Director-screenwriter-producer: Fuyuhiko Nishi

Screenwriter: Yoshikatsu Kimura

Executive producers: Akira Yoshida, Motoko Kimura, Yoichi Sakai

Producers: Masaaki Mizuno, Kenji Nakanishi

Sales: Hexagon Pictures

No rating, 81 minutes