

Several issues ago, "Post Mortem" contained an irritating letter from a female reader in London, crowing about the fact that while Metropolitan hipsters like herself had The Scala, we hicks from the sticks were reduced to amusing ourselves with ferret-breeding, hoop'n'stick races and, of course, doffing our cloth caps and tugging our forelocks in the presence of any swinging Londoner who condescended to travel North of the Watford Gap.

Well deary, I'm as upset about the demise of the Scala as anyone (you neglected to mention, didn't you, that many of that cinema's staunchest supporters lived outside the capital) but what, pray, have you got now, clever clogs? Anything to compare with Nottingham's excellent Broadway repertory cinema, for instance?

The Broadway, home of the prestigious annual "Shots in the dark" crime film festival, is also a place where the residents of that fair city (when we can tear ourselves away from deer-poaching in Sherwood Forest and

**John Martin
interviews John
Woo, director of such
acclaimed
bloodthirsty action
flicks as A BULLET
IN THE HEAD, and
THE KILLER.**

archery practise on the village green) have recently had the opportunity to spend some quality time with HENRY creators John McNaughton and Steve Jones, RESERVOIR DOGS' Quentin Tarantino and, most recently, the gentleman who's the subject of this piece ...

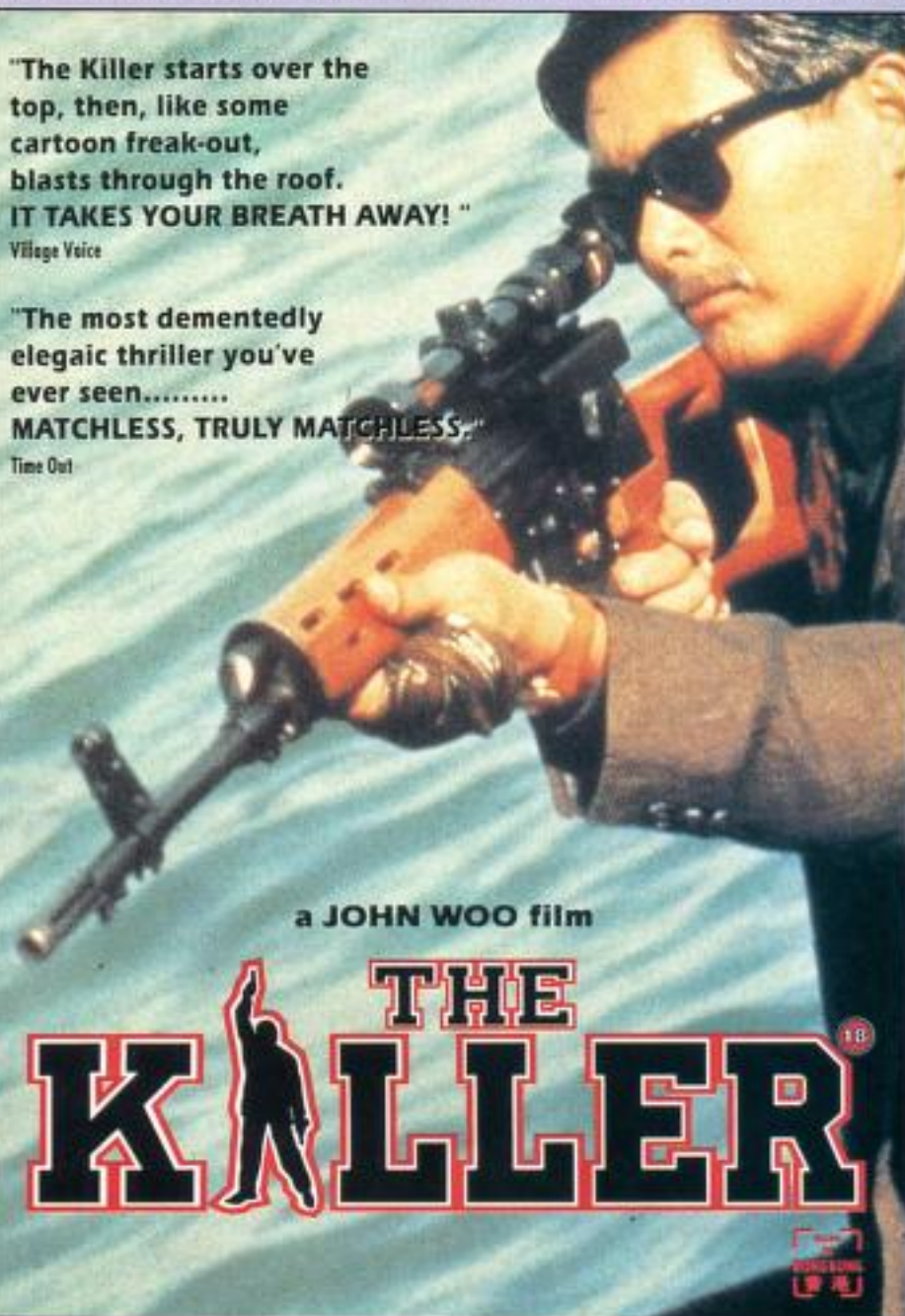
The relatively short geographical shift from London in favour of Nottingham has followed hot on the heels of a continental switch of allegiance on the part of British fandom, away from the seemingly clapped-

"The Killer starts over the top, then, like some cartoon freak-out, blasts through the roof. IT TAKES YOUR BREATH AWAY!"

Village Voice

"The most dementedly elegaic thriller you've ever seen..... MATCHLESS, TRULY MATCHLESS."

Time Out



a JOHN WOO film

**THE
KILLER**

SLAYED IN HONG KONG!



None of the plaudits heaped on him by the likes of Scorsese, Tarantino, Walter Hill et al (if they don't convince you that this guy is a bit special, the slugging he received from Barry Norman certainly should) having gone to his head. Indeed, he breaks into nervous laughter when expressing his "dream of working with Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Harvey Keitel, Daniel Day Lewis..." as though the very expression of this desire is somehow presumptuous of him.

So many monstrous egos are encountered in the day-to-day business of genre journalism, that John Woo comes as a breath of fresh air, and living proof that you don't have to be a total shit to succeed - ergo an extraordinary guy, but that'll come as no surprise if you've seen any of his extraordinary films, notably *A BETTER TOMORROW* parts 1 & 2, *THE KILLER* and *A BULLET IN THE HEAD*, those sagas of sartorial elegance and sanguinary excess, male-bonding, betrayal and redemption, in which, typically, a noble, Melvillian gangster sets off for one last hit (he

out Euro-product that has hitherto been its staple towards the vortex of creativity and vitality that is currently Hong Kong cinema, and particularly towards its most exciting practitioner - to wit to Woo: that's John Woo, aka Ng Yu Sum or, according to his publicity, either "The Master Blaster" or "the new sheriff in town..."

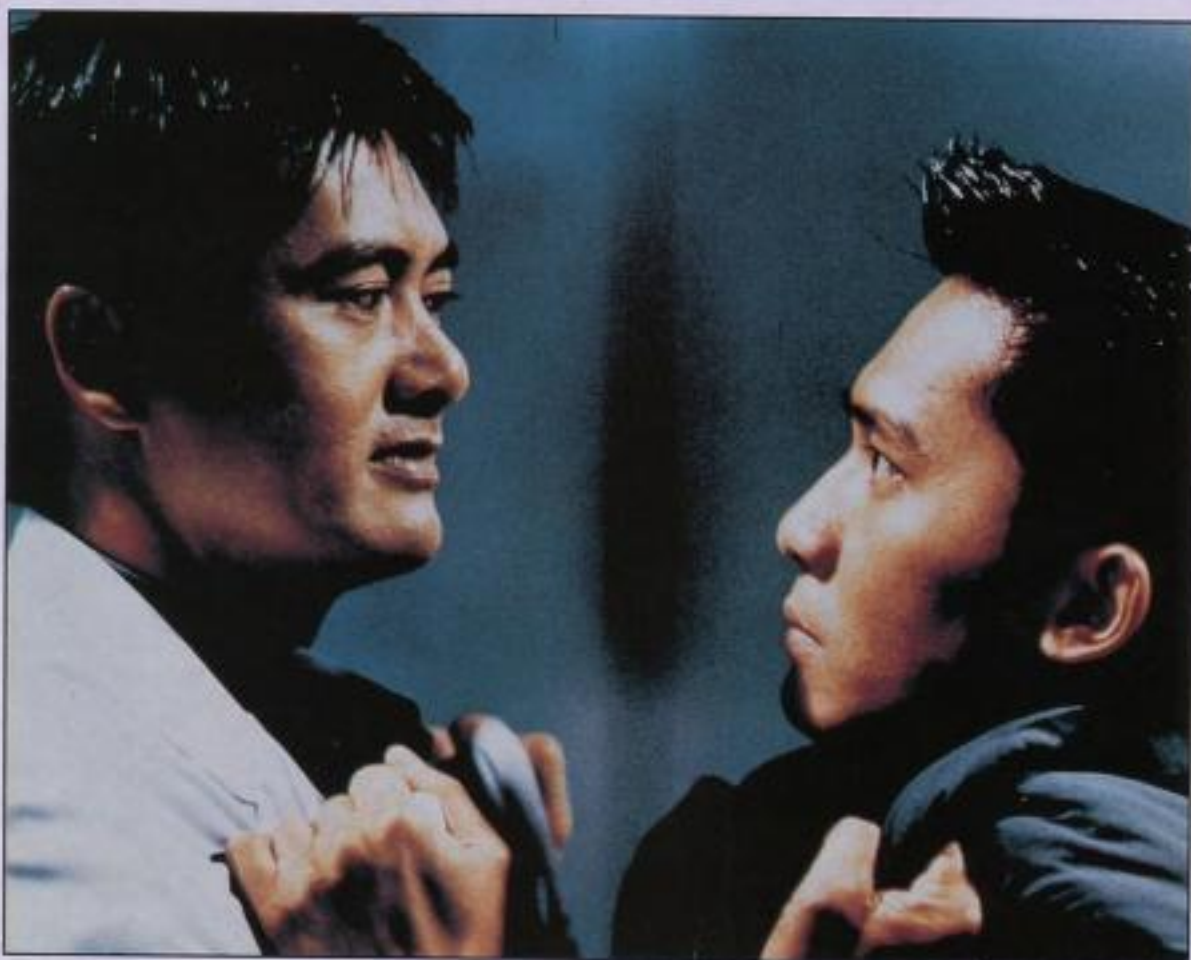
Except that he isn't ... in town that is, and the Broadway's ever-obliging press officer Jo is doing her best to mollify the grumbling journo at the bar, on one wall of which, projected slides from Woo productions relentlessly succeed each other, pointedly marking the passage of time. Suddenly, complete with entourage, John Woo is here, apologising profusely for his (unavoidable, as it turns out) lateness, energetically pressing the flesh and expressing his gratitude for "all the support I've had from you critics and journalists for my movies and all Hong Kong films. I appreciate your friendship - the Hong Kong movie needs you!"

Yep, John Woo turns out to be a truly nice guy, the physical incarnation of those very virtues - friend-

ship, nobility, honour and righteousness - that are celebrated in his films. He walks it like he talks it, though thankfully without recourse to the two handed gun-play that his heroes are invariably forced into to get their moral message across. In fact Woo, who's happy to describe himself as a Christian, has never fired a gun in his life and can't drive (another prerequisite for his heroes). He's also incredibly modest and self-effacing,

thinks), to earn himself and his loved ones a better life - that Better Tomorrow - with proverbially explosive results.

Woo isn't afraid to drape his characters' emotions over their sleeves, but whenever sentiment threatens to lapse into sentimentality, things are dragged back onto the right track with regular outbreaks of the most outrageous action set pieces, nothing less than sheer choreographed mayhem. Such



scenes have earned his films the soubriquet "heroic bloodshed", and when asked if he approves of this term, Woo's face cracks into a huge smile as he nods his head enthusiastically: "Oh yes!"

I put it to him that the sheer scale and intricacy of his virtuoso action sequences make it difficult to believe what we hear about him never using storyboards. "In Hong Kong I never used a storyboard," he confirms. "Everything is in my mind. I have a very good assistant and the crew are very used to working with me, so we have a very

good understanding. They all realise what I need, so even though we shoot a big action sequence, usually I only tell them the general idea, and it's all done on instinct. I do whatever I feel like doing, no worries because I'm in total control for every shot. I feel like I'm a painter, usually I will shoot everything by the feeling, by the mood. I'm very moody - in fact, crazy!" he laughs.

John Woo is an untypical product of the Hong Kong film scene, where it's often the case that several specialists direct different scenes within a single movie - hardly an ideal background for the emergence of a Western-style auteur director. But Woo insists that, "I myself always had a lot of freedom in Hong Kong. Although films are made there in only two main genres, comedy and action, within those two limits I have total freedom in creating my own material; unless I touch on sensitive political issues, I can't get away with doing that."

I was tempted to enquire here about the level of control exerted by the Triads over Hong Kong cinema (reportedly there are more gangsters behind the scenes than in front of the cameras, and anyone who's seen a Woo film will know that this means a lot of gangsters!), particularly the implications of the legendary "respect my rice" scene in *A BETTER TOMORROW PART 2*. But, discretion being the better part of valour, I opted instead to ask about the off-screen demeanour of the current coolest leading man in world cinema, the debonair and devastating Mr Chow Yun Fat.



"Oh, he's a really wonderful guy!" enthuses JW: "He's very dedicated and we have so many things in common, the same thinking, the same approach and the same feelings. He really cares, you know? Off the screen he's very quiet, very normal. Instead of shooting people, he loves to help people! We've got so much interest to bring Chow Yun Fat to Hollywood and star him in the American style. So Chow's taking classes. His English is very much improved. Quentin Tarantino, his partner Lawrence Bender and Terence Chang are going to produce the picture, and Quentin's writing the script now."

Having gone west on the strength of *THE KILLER*'s rapturous reception in America ("I got offers from twenty-one Hollywood studios"), Woo was originally to have directed an anglicised remake of that film. Wisely (in view of the *VANISHING* fiasco) he declined to do so, instead taking on *HARD TARGET*, which came complete with those box-office generating muscles from Brussels, courtesy of Jean Claude Van Damme.

Although *HARD TARGET* is basically yet another remake of *THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME* (already the subject of countless screen adaptations, under that title or as *THE HOUNDS OF ZAROFF* or even - in the case of the Fred Olen Ray reading - *SLAVE GIRLS FROM BEYOND INFINITY*), Woo's partner and (on the rare occasions it's necessary) interpreter Terence Chang insists that the film is "an art/action

movie - probably the first of its kind in America."

Such firsts don't come painlessly, and Woo admits that it's been difficult for him to adapt to the Hollywood system: "I didn't expect the problems I got. I had nine producers on *HARD TARGET*. There are too many people interfering with the creative side, and I didn't have script approval, so I couldn't do exactly what I wanted. Sometimes I wanted to make some changes, had a great idea and wanted to put it into the movie. But what they say all the time is that you're not allowed to go over budget, and also there's so much concern about the ratings. Before the shooting I had been advised to turn down the violence, the bullets, and the body count. So sometimes I feel like I've been restricted by these rules and all these pressures..."

Terence Chang chips in with his own thoughts on the subject: "I think that aside from the budget problems, the studios want total control because they want film-makers to conform, they are not comfortable with new ideas and new ways of doing things..."

But possibly realising that too black a picture is being painted of his new paymasters, John begins to rhapsodise about, "the great support and help I got from the studio, the crew and the actors in Hollywood. Especially the crew. I must say they are much more professional and dedicated, and the actors are so much more passionate about making a good movie than in Hong Kong, where I also have plenty of good talents but most of the crew just come to work for the



money, not the ideas, and most of the crew aren't educated in film. They just learn on the job and from their spirits, so that's the difference."

Bearing such differences and difficulties in mind, does John feel that there are any other Hong Kong directors capable of making inroads into Hollywood? "Oh yes," he says, "many others, all very good film directors. For instance Ringo Lam... Tsui Hark..." (the latter is a great friend and former collaborator, who produced and had a hand in the directing of *A CHINESE GHOST STORY*, the first HK film to make us occidentals sit up and take notice, and whose relationship with Woo gives *A BETTER TOMORROW* its emotional underpinning).

If these or any other Hong Kong directors do follow the trail blazed by John Woo, hopefully they'll find as strong an advocate and godfather as Woo had in Sam Raimi. "Ah, Sam was very kind and very helpful," remembers John: "He gave me great support and helped me to find a very good crew and also very good actors. He also said that he was such an admirer of *THE KILLER*, which I really appreciated, and soon he will produce for me, with Robert Tapert and Terence Chang, an action/suspense film, a "syndicate" (gangster) story. It will be the first of

my films to have a heroine... a female cop and a male cop together against terrorists."

John's innate modesty again comes to the fore when I mention to him that so many of Hollywood's youngest and most exciting talents have professed their devotion to his work. "Well, they have their own style and their own special qualities. I don't think they're copying me, it's just such an honour to have this kind of friendship. I feel like I have so many friends, and I appreciate that we have so many things in common. Terence and I learn so much from them too."

It's some kind of statement about cultural imperialism that Quentin Tarantino, who has made one excellent movie, should be in a position to "introduce," as some kind of new talent, John Woo, who's made several. But it's a more tangible imperialism that makes its presence felt throughout Woo's movies: the looming prospect of mainland China's takeover of his homeland in 1997.

Has Woo now turned his back on Hong Kong for good? "No, I will definitely return," he pledges, "because I love Hong Kong and I miss it. I've learned more in Hollywood, and after I've made a few more American films I will go back to Hong Kong to make more films. Also, I plan to make a movie in China, I'm planning to make an

epic, that kind of movie. I wish I could bring western talents over and combine them with Chinese ones to make a real good movie. I hope I can make this film like *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA*. I'd like to take that challenge, since I admire David Lean so much. That kind of movie is everybody's dream, but you need so much support and so much experience and courage to do it."

I ask if his recurrent image of a gun held against somebody's noggin is symbolic of the feeling in HK in the run-up to 1997. "Maybe subconsciously it's related to 1997," he concedes, "but mostly it's a personal thing. I want that particular image to signify my unwillingness to yield to any pressure, whether it's political or social - to show the world I won't compromise."

In *A BETTER TOMORROW*, he has Chow Yun Fat say that a man who can control his destiny becomes a god. Is that consistent with his self-confessed Christianity? "I don't know if that's consistent with my religion," he admits. "But that's my theory, anyway!"

Having experienced the quiet power of his personality, my own theory is that Woo, already a demi-god among the cognoscenti, will surmount his settling-in difficulties and go from strength to strength. This guy has a real shot at movie immortality!