

THE BIGGER THE BETTER

"Tazza: The High Rollers"



> Review by Sean Kim



IT'S funny that I should get excited about going to see a movie in an actual

movie theater, considering that I write film reviews. But in my case, going to the theater is the exception, not the rule. I'm more often relegated to screening DVDs in my living room — sitting in the dark, watching a small screen, pausing for phone calls, waiting for roommates to get out of the way, and squinting to take notes. Who was it said the cinema is dead?

Maybe cinema is dead because cinema-going is dead. Fewer people go out to the theaters nowadays and that number's bound to shrink with the YouTube generation growing up fast. I suspect the day will come when taking your kids to the movie theater becomes a nostalgic romp down memory lane, similar to going to a drive-in now. Still, nothing beats the communal experience of watching a movie in a theater, and it so happens your intrepid film reviewer had an opportunity to see "Tazza: The High Rollers" at the Four Star in San Francisco in early March.

"Tazza," which opened in Seoul last year, has all the touch and finesse of the old sting and caper flicks of the '70s — the American '70s. Focusing on the game of *hwato*, where players vie for the highest score using cards that signify flowers and seasons, it unveils a world of con artists and sheisters, fast-talkers, scar-faced thugs, and, of course, the slinky femme fatale.

A *tazza* is a sort of king of gamblers, someone who's achieved the highest point of skill and ingenuity in the game. Entering into this subculture is Gomi, played by Jo Seung-woo, who is seduced by the thrill of the game and by a powerful desire to win. Jo does well as Gomi, playing the up-and-coming slickster with an endearing greasy style and the sly grin of a wannabe on the up and up. He's got drive and talent,

right down to the subtle finger coordination he uses to pull shuffling tricks with a deck, but he's also got a look in his eye that says he's greedy for greatness.

Gomi's mentor, Pyeong Gyeon-jang, is a wizened old man who was once a *tazza*, played with fatherly stiffness by Baek Yun-shik. On learning all the tricks of the trade from Gyeon-jang, Gomi moves out from under his tutelage and falls in the employ of the

slinky yet coy Madam Jeong, played by gorgeous Kim Hye-su. Suffice it to say (without giving away too much), Gomi gets better at both the game and the con and finally comes face to face with Agui, the most notorious and vicious *tazza*, played to the height of evilness by Kim Yun-seok.

With its lightness and humor undercut by the ever-looming threat of violence, "Tazza" tells an old story about loyalty, deceit, vengeance and, above all, the adherence to a code that everyone abides by, even the bad guys. Which is what makes con movies like this one so great: the struggle to abide by the rules of the game, no matter what.

"Tazza" keeps to that spirit and never takes itself too seriously, delivering a classic with an even and stylish flair.

Which brings me back to the point about going to the theater. There are movies meant for the big screen and movies that are just fine on TV. "Tazza" is clearly the former, but not for the reasons you might think. There's no spectacle here, no costly special effects or explosions, no superstar celebrities (at least in the American context). Rather, "Tazza" is a movie that belongs in the theater because it lays its stakes on the classic standards of beauty, thuggery, slicksters and wicked women. It's about larger-than-life characters with larger than life desires — which deserves a larger-than-life screen.

So make the effort and catch "Tazza" in the theaters before it gets bumped into the DVD realm and shrunk to a thin bar on your TV screen.

It will be a rare opportunity to enjoy a real, old-fashioned movie-going experience. ☺