

# Heading off to Glory

By Joshua Rothkopf

**L**ike many Americans, I wish to confront evil with my secret but stunning powers of kung fu. Since this would be far too vulgar a display of force, I've learned to make do with the cinematic offerings, picking up pointers and improving on my sound effects. *Master of the Flying Guillotine* is as deliriously satisfying as such seminars come, a notorious 1974 bloodfest currently revived from its choppily dismembered afterlife on late-night television. (Such extremities deserve their loving restorers too, maybe even more so.) Whole again at a full 93 minutes yet still delightfully cruddy to behold, it crackles with more punchy style per square inch—not to mention plain old punching—than seems strictly legal.

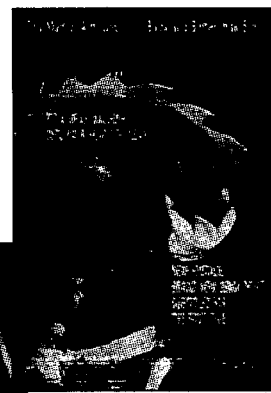
**B**ut I get ahead of myself. The titular weapon, an artifact dating back to the Ching Dynasty (or at least the illustrious reign of Shaw Brothers Studios), is basically a red hat attached to a length of chain. When it drops onto your head with a little whistle, the look is really quite fetching; a mesh veil descends, and for a brief moment you resemble a beekeeper with a taste for Gaultier. But with a violent jerk of the chain, razor sharp blades emerge, sending the bonnet—with its contents—back to the wielder. Take it as a lesson: It pays to accessorize.

To watch this beauty in action, a riposte to all laws of physics and practicality, is to be awed by film's purest inventions—by King Kong or flying saucers. You tremble at the sight of its Master (Kam Kang), an ancient monk with feathery eyebrows the size of mature tarantulas. (His swastika-adorned bib may have Buddhist precedent, but its symbolism here is all too obvious.) Only blind in a technical sense, he rages forth from his mountain retreat to avenge the murder of his two disciples. The guy even has his own theme music, a churning metallic groan that swells whenever he wanders into frame. (Credit where sorely due: Neu!, Kraftwerk and other sampled krautrockers should contact their attorneys.)

His avowed prey is the One-Armed Boxer, played by the ingenious writer and director Jimmy Wang Yu. The critic pauses for reflection, knowing that auteurs must be made, not merely discovered. Candidate appears to have been discovered poolside, handsome and chiseled but

never actually inclined to learn a martial art. Shortcomings are hidden by camera trickery, as befitting the ambulatory-challenged roles that bring him idolatry in the late '60s. By the time Wang Yu commands his own productions, his grasp of compositional sleight-of-hand is total. But sadly the moment is over: Bruce Lee's bona fide athleticism is the writing on the wall. Scandals and financial mismanagement do the rest.

*Master* can thus be appreciated as Wang Yu's final flourish, a sorcerer's last stand. Nothing about it is subtle or honest, no flinch goes unamplified, no body blow unpunctuated. At its heart lies an epic tournament wholly unrelated to the central drama but far too weird to dismiss. One after another, gifted combatants enter the dusty, abstracted arena to ply their skills: the monkey boxer, the "braided hair" strangler whipping his deadly ponytail, the "yoga master" brandishing



extendable eight-foot arms. What little reality remains gets wafted away as two opponents duke it out while perched on wooden poles, suspended over glittering swords. Each match ends with a sickening flourish, the snap of a victory fan as the winner is declared and the "loser" swept off. Once more the drums are beaten. Another round begins. And so on.

It would be scant exaggeration to estimate the influence of this sequence in the billions of dollars; when the mortal combat finally does subside, it's tempting to dig into your pocket for another quarter. Still, the plot must go on. There are one-armed pretenders across the countryside to be beheaded, barefooted assassins to be fried on metal floors. (Words cannot begin to serve.) Along the way, the Boxer solemnly offers bits of wisdom sure to send even non-expert viewers into paroxysms of joy: "The main fundamental of kung fu is to act wise and brave." Wouldn't you know it? He's the good guy.

Eventually, it all comes down to the blind versus the handi-capped. But with so much genial exuberance on display—ricocheting zooms, wall-climbing choreography (by the legendary Lui brothers), ass-kickings aplenty—it's easy not to care. *Master of the Flying Guillotine* is either the arcade classic of the season or the most notable pulp rediscovery in years. A few more movies like this, and who knows? I might just have to bust out my eagle claw, my supple snake fist. Evildoers be warned: I can feel my limbs tensing already. You can't hold me responsible. ■

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