

## HOUSE OF FLYING DAGGERS:

The time is 849 A.D. in China. The Tang Dynasty is crumbling because of a weak emperor and warring factions. The government is under duress, especially by a faction called the "Flying Daggers." The latter take from the rich and give to the poor.

At least, that's the excuse for the flimsy plotted vehicle. Actually, the film is merely a love story cloaked in brilliantly choreographed martial arts. It is an exercise in excess.

Director Shang Yimou whose previous collaboration was this year's "Hero," fails to engage the viewer in anything but more flying martial art antics. The love story is the main focus here. There is little to differentiate between the "presumed" evil government and the "Robin Hood" implied Flying Daggers.

The "evil" government is merely seen through soldiers. The "Flying Daggers" are equally brutal. I felt myself emotionally detached and cold to the warring factions, and the love angle never genuinely captivated me.

Played like an operatic tragedy, the movie is simply another addition to the martial arts/fantasy world filled with unlikely, though exquisitely choreographed ballet sequences and beautiful décor. It seems impressive, but it is getting tiring.

This is not a bad movie. The action sequences are heart throbbing with a thumping musical score that adds to the drama. The use of the color backdrops are startling and evocative. The colors are magical and breathtaking, each taking on an almost photographic like image.

The film is like a remake of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," but without that movie's emotional, philosophical depth. This formula is becoming stale. The only satisfying intrigue in the movie, is when the three main characters change alliances.

Otherwise, I felt the movie intellectually, and politically barren. Even though I understand that this was meant to be an action piece, I wanted more. It feels like an endless pinball game, while attempting to include an emotional wallop as the prize.

The film begins well enough. Jin (Takeshi Kaneshiro) and Leo (Andy Lao) are two friends and government officers who want to solve the mystery of an alleged informant working in the Peony parlor. It is a place where beautiful woman dance for men.

A tip leads them to the parlor and a blind girl, Mei (Zhang Ziyi), does a dance for Jin. Jin becomes obsessed with her.

Somehow, Mei becomes the primary suspect. Because of her defiant attitude, Leo incarcerates Mei believing she is the informant. Jin rescues her from prison and certain death and our adventure begins.

The movie never tells us where they are escaping to. Will Jin now turn his back on the emperor and join the House of the Flying Daggers? Or, is he using Mei to find out where the renegades are hiding? Their encounters with government soldiers are at the heart of the movie, as is their trust in each other, and falling in love.

The rest of the movie involves betrayal, fantastic battle sequences opulently staged, a love triangle and deception. Daggers fly everywhere.

Some memorable sequences include the Echo Game, the fight in the tall bamboo forest, the changing of the foliage as Mei and Jin try to escape from the soldiers, and the memorable fight sequence in a snowy blizzard storm.

Since the movie seems like a cross between ballet and opera, I was less than thrilled. Logic tends to be left backstage. Fortunately, the violence is stylized, and less than graphic. Still, I found the whole affair uninvolved and hollow.

119 Minutes

In Mandarin with English Subtitles

MPAA Rating: PG-13 (for sequences of stylized martial arts violence and some sexuality)

**RATING: B-**