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### Review of Sleepless Town

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## Sleepless Town

(Ventura Entertainment, 7.19.2005)

Asian crime thrillers are not only renowned for stylish action sequences but for the demands they place on viewers' attention spans. With characters having similar or multiple names and plot twists inside plot twists, it is often difficult to tell exactly what is going on. The *Infernal Affairs* trilogy is a typical example, with style and mood often overwhelming common sense. Lee Chi Ngai's *Fuyajo* or *Sleepless Town* is more than usually demanding, and until everything is reasonably well sorted out in a series of gun battles during the final half hour, it is difficult to determine who is doing what to whom for what reasons. For those with enough patience, the journey is worth the effort.

This 1998 Hong Kong-Japan co-production is set in a mostly Chinese neighborhood within the Shinjuku ward Tokyo. Several rival gangs from Shanghai, Beijing, and Taiwan are fighting for control of the local crime scene. Caught in the middle is our hero (Takeshi Kaneshiro), a half-Japanese, half-Chinese hood known as both Ken'ichi Ryu and Jian Yi. The two names and his ethnicity underscore the split in his nature. While such a character in an American or even European film would be torn between the criminal and straight worlds, as with *Mean Streets*, *Fingers*, and [The Beat That My Heart Skipped](#), our protagonist, (let's call him Ken) seems happy to be a gangster, though a romantic weakness keeps him from being as vicious as most of his colleagues.

Ken, known as a slick operator who will buy anything but children's organs, is a protégé of the aging crime boss Yang (Sihung Lung) and an enemy of the younger, much meaner Yuan (Eric Tsang). Tsang's Yuan is a warm-up for the larger-than-life gangster he would play four years later in *Infernal Affairs*. Ken and Yuan taunt each other about the lessons to be learned from *Tale of the Three Kingdoms*, the classic Chinese epic about warring emperors. Ken's former partner, Fu-Chun (Kippei Shiina), has fled after killing Yuan's number-two thug. Yuan wants to use Ken to help him trap Fu-Chun, rumored to be returning to Shinjuku. Fu-Chun's lover Natsumi (Mirai Yamamoto) shows up to entice Ken into helping his old friend, but Ken learns she is not exactly who she claims to be. Ken is conflicted over how to foil Yuan's plans, protect his psychotic friend, and serve Papa Yang. Complicating everything is his falling first into lust and then into love with the complex Natsumi, who is much more than arm candy. Even when she breaks down and begins telling him the truth, Ken cannot be sure that he knows everything he needs to survive.

Best known for his roles in *Chungking Express* and *House of the Flying Daggers*, Kaneshiro, with a ponytail and long black leather jacket, swaggers through *Sleepless Town* with a bravado recalling Antonio Banderas in his El Mariachi mode. Sometimes criticized as being a tad blank, Kaneshiro, also of mixed Japanese and Chinese parentage, ably conveys Ken's torment over loving and

mistrusting Natsumi. While the cool elegance displayed by Asian actresses such as Gong Li and Ziyi Zhang is the current vogue, Yamamoto throws herself into the lustful, devious, perhaps unbalanced Natsumi. Yamamoto, who married co-star Shiina in 2003, creates an unforgettable femme fatale.

Viewers looking for a crime film in the vein of John Woo and Johnnie To may be disappointed in *Sleepless Town* since the middle hour is essentially a tormented romance. Lee, adapting a novel by Seishu Hase, is more interested in slowly unveiling the characters' contradictory motivations so that when the bloodletting finally arrives—and boy, does it arrive—the violence will have considerable emotional resonance. Lee and cinematographer Arthur Wong shoot from odd angles, with the camera seamlessly flowing from exteriors to interiors through windows. There are lots of overhead shots, some distorted like reflections in curved mirrors, all the better to reflect Ken's unpredictable world. Beautiful cinematography has come to be expected in Asian films, but Wong's work here is exemplary, with lush greens and bright reds framed by dark corners. This pristine 1.78:1 anamorphic widescreen transfer perfectly captures the quality of these striking images. *Sleepless Town* received Hong Kong Film Awards for best cinematography and art design.

*Sleepless Town* is finally most notable for the Ken-Natsumi relationship. He knows he shouldn't trust her but can't help himself, providing echoes of the fraught Robert Mitchum-Jane Greer pairing in *Out of the Past*. As Natsumi tells Ken, their world is about betraying someone or being betrayed. The couple even have a theme song, a terrific rendition of "Unforgettable" by Leon Daniels that starts out like the Nat Cole original only to shift into a rougher, bluesy version, much like the film itself.— Michael Adams