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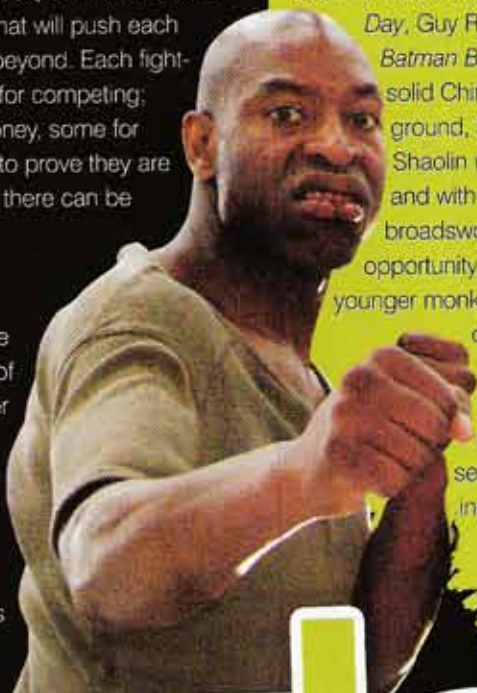
THE VIOLENCE OF THE LAMBS - BLACK SHEEP HITS UK SCREENS



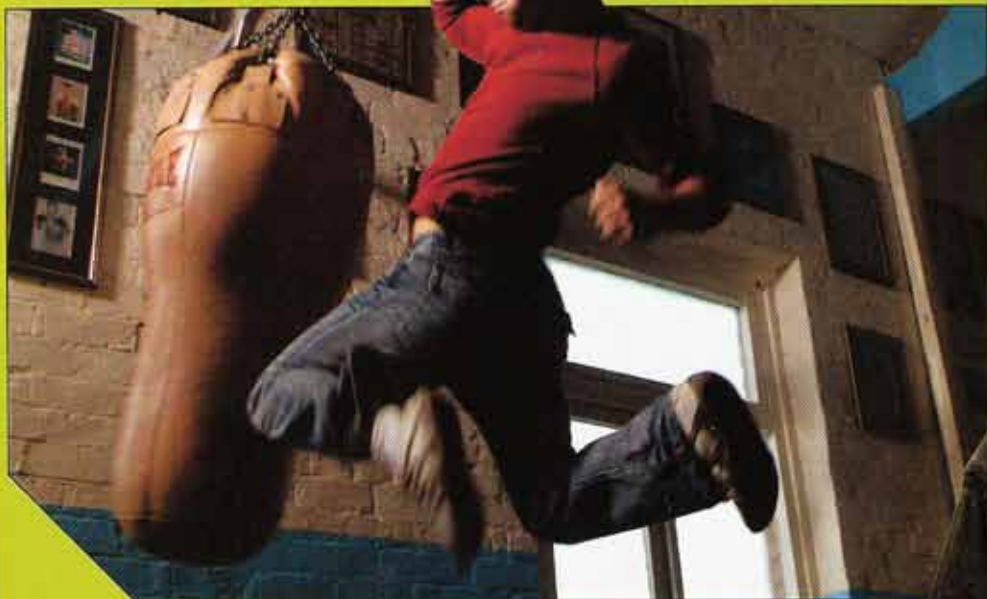
Over the last few years the UK indie martial arts/action movie industry has gone from strength to strength, and this month *Impact* takes a look at one of the most impressive and highly anticipated full blooded martial arts films made in the UK, *Underground*. The film which has already been picked up for release in a number of countries around the world including North America, features some of the UK's most highly skilled martial talent both in front and behind the camera. *Impact's* own Matthew Dawson brings us the first UK review.

In the suburbs of the UK, an underground martial arts tournament offers a £500,000 prize to the winner. Twelve hand picked fighters from very different backgrounds are invited to compete in the tournament that will push each fighter to their limit and beyond. Each fighter has their own reason for competing; some are in it for the money, some for their families, some just to prove they are the best. But in the end, there can be only one winner!

That's the plot for *Underground*, the feature length directorial debut of Award winning filmmaker Chee Keong Cheung who has contributed to numerous productions from around the world including feature films, shorts and music videos with film-makers from around the world.



Martial arts champion, Zara Pythian who holds



Beau Fowler, whose credits include *Displaced* and *Batman Begins*, plays Beau, the Delinquent. Fowler's martial arts background includes both Gung Fu and Capoeira as well as use of the staff and sword. Fowler's character is drawn into the competition in the hope of making a better life for himself and his girlfriend. The film serves as a good showcase for Fowler's very gymnastic style of martial arts action. Leon Sua plays Leon. The Triad fighting to redeem himself in the eyes of his masters. Sua's credits include both *Tomorrow Never Dies* and *Die Another Day*, Guy Ritchie's *Revolver* and *Batman Begins*. Coming from a solid Chinese martial arts background, Sua has trained in the Shaolin martial arts both unarmed and with weapons, especially the broadsword, and was given the opportunity and honour of training the younger monks at the Shaolin Temple during a trip to China with the UK team. Sua has a very strong cinematic presence, bringing a real sense of menace but also an inner strife to his character.

thirteen World Martial Arts Titles and more than thirty British and European titles and whose film credits include *Crops* and the forthcoming *Furor*, plays the role of Zara, the Teacher. Her character is a seemingly vulnerable young woman working within the sometimes frightening British education system, who shows her inner strength and courage as the only female competitor in the tournament. It's a good role for Pythian and showcases her impressive martial arts skills to very good effect, she has a great look and with the right projects could go far.

Glenn Salvage the star of *Left For Dead* and *The Silencer* plays the character of Father Salvage, the Priest fighting for his Parish and the chance to make a difference. It's a good role for Salvage, and it makes for an interesting idea... Salvage gets to bring his skills as a fighter into play in his standout scene against Nathan Lewis in the film.

Nathan 'The Megatron' Lewis, three times World Kickboxing Champion and four times British Kickboxing Champion plays Nathan, the ex-convict. Lewis's martial

underground



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Underground marks a very impressive directorial debut for the film's writer, producer and director, Chee Keong Cheung who also manages to invest the story with enough drama and the main characters with enough individuality and backstory to make you care for them.



arts background includes Kickboxing, Karate Lau Gar Kung Fu and much more including knowledge of a good many weapons including the broadsword, nunchuku and the three-section staff. Lewis' credits as a performer include *Batman Begins*, *Doctor Who*, *Torchwood*, *Displaced*, *Fight School* where he played the *Sifu* and most recently *The Bodyguard: A New Beginning* shot in Hong Kong and the UK.

Mark Strange plays Mark, the Homeless fighter. Strange has more than twenty years martial arts experience behind him and his film credits include *Batman Begins*, *Displaced*, *Twins Effect*, *The Medallion*, *Tough Justice* and most recently *The Bodyguard: A New Beginning*. Strange is one of the industry's genuine nice guys, highly skilled but lacking in ego and arrogance, he shows his potential as the homeless fighter, hoping to be able to provide for his family. Strange really gets to showcase his martial arts skills to full effect in the film.

Scott Houston plays the Kid, a fighter hoping to make a name for himself and his family in the underground fight game. Houston is a trained karateka and kickboxer as well as an exponent of Parkour/free running, he makes his feature debut in the film. Former Taekwondo Champion William Mickleburgh plays William the Instructor, a fighter who wants the chance to show his skills in the real world and benefit his family. Mickleburgh's credits as an actor include *Harbour Lights*, *Atilla*, *Bertie & Elizabeth* and *Without Motive* starring Ross Kemp. Mickleburgh is an accomplished TKD'ist and gets a nice chance to show his ability in the film.

Former Chinese Circus Acrobat and Wushu stylist Liang Yang plays the role of the Foreigner, fighting for the chance of a better life for himself and to fulfill the dreams he has lived for. It's a great introductory role for Liang who will also be seen in *His Dark Materials: The Golden Compass*, as he not only gets to showcase his very impressive Chinese martial arts skills but also his potential as an actor, showing a good range of emotion in the film. Former South African based stunt fighter Shane Steyn has more than fifteen years experience in both Karate and

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Taekwondo, as well as stunt experience in such films as *Cold Harvest* with Gary Daniels, *The Purifiers*, *Left For Dead* and *Soul Searcher*. Steyn plays Sgt Steyn, the Police Officer who is fighting to help his mother and perhaps escape his experiences dealing with life on the streets. Martial artist Chris Smith makes his movie debut as Corporal Smith, the Soldier fighting for, the hell of it! Smith comes from a very diverse martial arts background having studied Eskrima, Muay Thai, Ju-jitsu, Boxing and Greco Roman wrestling as well as a variety of weapons styles.

While Joey Ansah, recently seen as Matt Damon's Morocco based nemesis in *The Bourne Ultimatum*, plays Joey the model and gets to show his style and martial arts skills to full effect. The cast is rounded out by a number of familiar faces playing the Entrepreneurs involved in the fights including Danny John-Jules from *Red Dwarf* and *Blade 2*, Gary Webster, Carson Lau seen recently in *Out for a Kill* with Steven Seagal, Leonard Fenton still best known as Dr. Legg from *Eastenders*, Sophie Linfield from *The Football Factory* and in a non-fighting role, Gordon Alexander from *Sucker Punch* and *The Purifiers*. A special mention also goes to Fidel Nanton who plays 'The Organizer' who runs the competition.

The film's fight choreography is by highly respected fight choreographer Dave Forman whose credits range from *Batman Begins*, *The Last Samurai*, several James Bond movies including *Die Another Day* and *The World Is Not Enough* and the recent reworking of *Doctor Who* with David Tennant. Forman also played Leonardo in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and is currently working on *The Mummy 3* in China. His choreography works very well here, there's no wirework, no stunt doubles, it's the fighters

themselves throwing the punches and kicks, and taking the hits and falls. His action has a powerful, realistic feel to it, without straying too far into the highly stylized Hong Kong style but still incorporates some flashy and very spectacular techniques into a solid style of fight action.

Highlights action-wise would have to include the *AWOL*-esque fight between Mark Strange's character and Leon the Triad, which sees both men taking some major hits while showing their martial arts skills to full effect; the battle between the Foreigner and the Delinquent where both men get to show their acrobatic styles in a very exciting fight; as well as the battle between Sgt Steyn and the Foreigner which sees both men pulling off some very impressive high impact reactions. The fight between Zara and Joey the model might not be the most politically correct but it's a good one, and reminds you that they're fighting for money, not for fun. The final challenge which pits three of the fighters against a number of armed opponents to see which of them is worthy of a place in the final is impressive, as is the final battle between two highly skilled



fighters, both of whom you find yourself cheering for, even if the end you know there can only be one winner!

Underground marks a strong directorial debut for the film's writer, producer and director, Chee Keong Cheung who also manages to invest the story with enough drama and the main characters with enough individuality and backstory to make you care for them. Chee says, "The aim of *Underground* was to showcase what could be achieved by a collective of talent within the UK with the intention of creating something memorable and real..." And the film certainly delivers on the promise, it's a no apologies, full blooded British martial arts movie, which delivers exactly what it says on the box! The film showcases a good range of the martial arts talent that resides in the UK and is a good taster of just what they are capable of.

Underground has been released on DVD in a number of countries including North America where the film was recently given a solid DVD release complete with making of, deleted scenes and fight school. Here's to a UK release before too long. The UK independent action movie scene is alive and well, with each subsequent production raising the bar on what to expect in terms of action and film-making, *Underground* gets the *Impact* thumbs up and we look forward to seeing everybody involved in front of and behind the camera on more projects in the not too distant future.

**MATTHEW
DAWSON**