



Underground Review - 28th September 2008

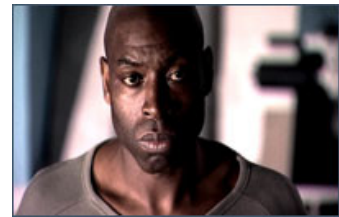
Story: An illegal underground tournament offering a big money cash prize pits twelve fighters against each other in brutal no-holds-barred fights. The competitors are each skilled in a different fighting style – from boxing to Wushu, wrestling to mixed martial arts – and each has their own reasons for taking part. Observing the event is a group of businessmen and high-stakes gamblers, each of whom chooses two of the fighters as their own before deciding which fighters will face each other in each round. The loser of each round is out of the competition – whether they walk or are carried out...



Review: Low budget modern-day martial arts films are a notoriously difficult prospect. Even more so when that low budget film is British, has no 'name' actors attached and is a tournament film. The tournament film is about as simple and straightforward as the action genre gets, and unless your film is called ENTER THE DRAGON you're in danger of disappearing into a pool of hundreds of low-budget / no plot flicks. Let's get straight to the point – UNDERGROUND is no classic. The plot is almost non-existent, the acting is shaky throughout and the low budget keeps the whole thing pretty small in scope. The surprising thing about all of this therefore is that UNDERGROUND is also a very well directed, beautifully edited film that despite all of its limitations still manages to pack a punch just a little above it's weight.



UNDERGROUND sticks to the 'rules' of the tournament movie genre like glue and never moves away from them. It's as simplified storytelling as possible - functional at best, but functional all the same. Fighters are given amusingly generic labels like 'The Soldier', 'The Triad', 'The Ex-Covict', 'The Model', 'The Instructor' and 'The Teacher'. When these names are first revealed it seems a little naff, but it's typical of UNDERGROUND's straight-to-business attitude as no time is wasted before getting on with the fight action. In the long run this actually works very well as a large group of people – twelve fighters, six gamblers and a host - are introduced clearly and quickly in order to get on with the ass-kicking - albeit with very little depth of character.



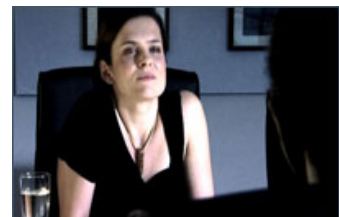
While plenty of you will be able to guess the way the film ends before you get there (I didn't), UNDERGROUND works because it makes good use of its episodic nature. Fights are set-up with nice little introductions – usually including a tidy display of skills from the fighters – before they kick off to give a taste of character in the same way that videogames often do. The fight then kicks off and when it's all over there's usually a very brief epilogue showing the losing fighter. It's a really nice touch and it manages to break each section up in a way that highlights the little differences between each character.



The low budget of UNDERGROUND means that there's no CGI trickery, and not even any noticeable wirework. The beauty of this is that UNDERGROUND relies on the skills of it's actors – several of whom (including Mark Strange, Nathan Lewis, Liang Yang and Beau Fowler) are pretty good on-screen fighters. The quality of the fights throughout UNDERGROUND do vary quite a bit depending on the fighters involved, but even those which are very average still remain pretty watchable. No fights last particularly long, but this is where the editing and structure of the film helps to keep things moving – you're never more than a few minutes from the next fight or the next result. The movement from one round to the next does become a little repetitive – but this is simply one of limitations of the tournament movie in general.



UNDERGROUND is not likely to attract any new fans to the 'tournament' genre, but for those who can accept its 95% action quota over plot and character, it's a decent enough distraction for an hour and a half. It's also good enough to put director Chee Keong Cheung on the radar as a name to watch out for future projects – hopefully projects which will let him spread his wings a little further.



DVD Review

A fairly decent disc from City Lights Pictures provides a decent transfer of UNDERGROUND with a few special features thrown in for good measure. Although they are fairly limited – being all to brief - these features consist of deleted scenes, trailers and behind the scenes footage including interview clips and some fight rehearsals. The real disappointment is the lack of a commentary track – given the skills of the filmmakers in making a small film stand out it would have been interesting to hear how the project was developed. Still, although the film is fairly obviously low budget visually the disc is fine and coupled with the sound options which include a 5.1 surround mix, the quality provided here is impressive enough.

Reviewed by Martin Cleary

Story	Cast	Entertainment	Subtitles	Overall
1	2.5	3	n/a	3