

## **AMERICAN SHAOLIN (1991):**

Executive Producer: Ng See Yuen

Director: Tony Leung

Producer/Writer: Keith W. Strandberg

Cast: Reese Madigan, Daniel Dae Kim, Cliff Lenderman

Locations: Jersey Coast, New York, China (Ningbo, Shanghai, Shaolin Temple)

AKA: THE KING OF THE KICKBOXERS II

Review courtesy of [www.kungfucinema.com](http://www.kungfucinema.com)

“(Producer and screenwriter) Keith W. Strandberg became a major force to be reckoned with when it comes to crossing over Hong Kong action with Hollywood casting for their films...This time around, Strandberg came up with a perfect concept for the film: What if an American broke the barriers and got a chance to become a Shaolin monk. Strandberg comes up with an intricate story that complements the martial arts fighting of the film.”

Hong Kong-based Seasonal Film Corporation continues their U.S. crossovers, after the NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER trilogy (1985-1989) and THE KING OF THE KICKBOXERS (1990) with this action packed film, about a young American determined to break the barriers and enter one of the most sacred places in martial arts history, the Shaolin Temple.

Drew Carson (Reese Madigan) is a young karate expert who is believed to have trained in Shaolin kung fu from his master, Kwan (Kim Chan). At a tournament, the odds-on favorite is Trevor Gottitall (Trent Bushey), a very cocky and arrogant fighter who manages to bring a second outfit for the finals. Drew and Trevor make it into the finals of the tournament, and just when Drew may seem to have the upper hand, Trevor not only gets the best of Drew, but adds insult to injury by pulling his trousers down, resulting in a very public humiliation.

It is then that Drew learns that the truth about Master Kwan. Kwan did attempt to go to the Shaolin Temple but was not accepted. Determined to seek revenge for his humiliation and in a way to honor Master Kwan, Drew decides to head to China and attempt to enter the Shaolin Temple. However, when Drew arrives, he is met with resistance as the Shaolin law clearly states that there are no foreigners allowed. After meeting Ashema (Alice Zhang Hung), a local girl, he learns from her grandfather about the story of a man who tried to enter Shaolin and waited in front of the temple for days and days until finally, they accepted him. Inspired by the story, Drew decides to wait in front of the temple. Enduring days of physical and mental torture, he meets a sweeper whom at first he insults, but finding out he speaks English, he apologizes and tells him why he wants to enter Shaolin and mentions the story. When the last class of the temple arrive, Drew is finally accepted to join the class.

However, Drew learns the hard way that learning kung fu at Shaolin is not as easy as it seems. He learns there is rigorous training involved, some of the most dangerous he has dealt with. He makes an enemy in fellow disciple Gao Yun (Daniel Dae Kim), who dislikes him because of his race. Meanwhile, he teaches some of the other disciples some of the more popular things in America, like showing them an issue of Playboy magazine! As Drew is determined to make it as a monk, Drew's skills improve and when he actually saves Gao from being expelled after an incident during a sparring session, the two rivals become friends.

After an incident at a local dance, Drew is at first expelled from Shaolin, but with the support of his fellow disciples, Drew is allowed to stay and go on a personal mission for the Abbot San Te (Zhang Zhi-Yen), who turns out to be the sweeper he insulted and apologized to earlier. Drew is to send a scroll to the Arhat of the Jade Mountain and ask him any question in 3 days. Drew succeeds in his mission and is exempt from joining the others in the ultimate test: the 108-Wooden Man Chamber. However, Drew requests he not only take the test with his fellow disciples but goes first. Eventually, Drew does succeed and when he is invited to go to a wushu tournament to see Gao Yun compete in an exhibition bout, Gao's opponent is none other than the very man who humiliated Drew months earlier, Trevor Gottitall.

With a successful streak since 1985 when *NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER* was made, producer Ng See-Yuen and screenwriter Keith W. Strandberg became a major force to be reckoned with when it comes to crossing over Hong Kong action with Hollywood casting for their films. The NRNS trilogy helped launch Jean-Claude Van Damme, Loren Avedon, and Cynthia Rothrock to stardom in the U.S., whereas Van Damme became an A-lister while Avedon and Rothrock got their due in lower budgeted yet exciting martial arts films. This time around, Strandberg came up with a perfect concept for the film: Whereas baseball player Jackie Robinson broke the barriers in Major League Baseball, what if an American broke the barriers and got a chance to become a Shaolin monk. Influenced by classic films such as *THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN* (1978) and *THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE* (1981), Strandberg comes up with an intricate story that complements the martial arts fighting of the film.

Cast in the lead role of Drew Carson is newcomer Reese Madigan, a stage actor who auditioned for Seasonal Films and earned the lead role not only because of his acting abilities. Madigan also has martial arts experience as a black belt in the art of shotokan karate. For his film debut, it was more than just fighting for Madigan, but as someone who is able to understand the philosophies of Chinese martial arts, Drew tends to fit the mold when it comes to understanding the true meaning of Shaolin kung fu. However, fans of the TV series *LOST* will recognize Daniel Dae Kim, who like Madigan, makes his film debut here as rival turned friend Gao Yun. Kim, like Madigan, also is a martial artist as he holds a black belt in tae kwon do.

Most of the cast actually made their film debut here, including jeet kune do expert Cliff Lenderman, who plays the character known as "D.S.", which stands for "drill sergeant". He is the trainer of the disciples and rules with an iron hand, or shall we say "iron palm", as in one scene, he actually begins to show the disciples Iron Palm training. Lenderman gets in on a fight scene himself where he takes on a group of young hoodlums who are assaulting the disciples on their day off. As for the film's antagonist, Trent Bushey had no martial arts training prior to the film, but under the aid of Hong Kong choreography legend Corey Yuen, Bushey actually looks pretty good in his few fight scenes, in which he pulls off a Jean-Claude Van Damme and only appears in both the opening and ending, a la NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER.

Speaking of Corey Yuen, he has crafted some amazing martial arts choreography here with the aid of four fellow Hong Kong members, including co-star Eric Kong, who plays the mute monk Yabbo, who helps Drew reach some potential after sparring with him late one night at the Temple. The training sequences themselves are exhilarating as the film co-stars real life Shaolin monks in training. While the monks did their thing, Yuen worked primarily with Madigan and the disciples of the new class as well as Lenderman and Bushey in their fight scenes. A highlight includes the aforementioned dance incident, where Drew and four fellow disciples take on a group of hoods in true Shaolin form. The final confrontation between Drew and Trevor is really well done and for those who have seen the Stephen Chow film FIST OF FURY 1991, they will definitely see striking similarities between the end fight of that film and this film, leading some to believe Yuen worked on both films at the same time or around the same time as most of the techniques look similar, with Chow's being more "exaggerated" as it was an action-comedy.

In 1993, Academy Entertainment released the film as the "sequel" to THE KING OF THE KICKBOXERS, whereas years later, another film starring Loren Avedon, FIGHTING SPIRIT (1992) was released as KING OF THE KICKBOXERS 2. Nevertheless, AMERICAN SHAOLIN is definitely its own film and it is a shame that star Reese Madigan decided to do more stage work and not do any more martial arts films. He seems to be one of the ones who have both acting talent and martial arts skills. But fans of LOST will want to see Daniel Dae Kim in his film debut and Corey Yuen's masterful choreography, some of his best to date here.