

THE KING OF THE KICKBOXERS (1990):

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Executive Producer: Ng See Yuen

Director: Tony Leung

Producer/Writer: Keith W. Strandberg

Cast: Billy Blanks, Loren Avedon, Keith Hirabayashi Cooke

Locations: Thailand, New York, Hong Kong

"This is clearly one of the most underrated movies to come out in the B-movie circuit of the early 1990's."

After making two sequels to the 1985 martial arts film *NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER*, tae kwon do and hapkido expert Loren Avedon stars in what many fans consider his best film to date, a story of revenge set in the underground of Bangkok, Thailand.

Avedon plays Jake Donohue, a no-nonsense New York City police officer who always gets himself in trouble with his superiors due to his freestyling ways of nailing criminals. Perhaps, this was somewhat based on Mel Gibson's character of Martin Riggs from the *LETHAL WEAPON* series. When Jake is asked to go to Bangkok as part of an Interpol mission to stop an illegal snuff film ring, he refuses. That is, until he sees the man who stars in the films. It is Khan (Billy Blanks), a martial arts expert who was responsible for the murder of Jake's brother Sean ten years ago. Determined to seek revenge, Jake decides to take the mission and heads for Thailand.

Arriving in Thailand, Jake meets his Interpol ally Anderson (veteran actor Don Stroud), who wants Jake to go undercover as a fighter in order to infiltrate Khan's organization. There does hold one little problem: Jake is not a martial artist. Trying to get attention, he beats up a group of Khan's thugs and meets Molly (Sherrie Rose), a former model who has become forced to become Khan's love slave only to escape his clutches. After using his street smarts to dispatch a group of students at a kickboxing academy, he gets thrashed by Thai-American senior student Thasi (Ong Soo-Han). Thasi tells Jake of a former kickboxer who was the only man who has come close to defeating Khan, Prang (Keith Hirabayashi).

When Jake arrives to Prang's house, he learns that the once former kickboxer has become a drunken hermit with a chimp. However, the chimp proceeds to take Jake's passport and when Jake returns to get the passport, he sees Prang assaulted and tries to help, but gets thrashed again. Here's where the fun begins. Prang unleashes a flurry of kicks to the thugs. Wushu champion Keith Hirabayashi showcases the amazing kicking skills that gained notice from producer Fred Weintraub and director Robert Clouse, who casted Keith in his first film, *CHINA O'BRIEN* (filmed in 1988, released in 1991) opposite Cynthia

Rothrock and Richard Norton. Hirabayashi even proceeds to pull a nicely shot jumping triple side kick almost near perfection to the legendary Hwang Jang-Lee. After learning of each other's stories, Prang takes Jake under his wing, having him go through some intense training. Jake is relegated to having himself in the splits overnight, attempting to meditate to hear the sound of "one-hand clapping", and getting hit with a stick with the thickness of a baseball bat. At first, Jake can't stand Prang's methods but soon realize that they are the only thing that can defeat Khan, including Khan's trademark technique, a series of three kicks. It starts with a double jumping round kick to the head. Then, it is a double jumping front kick to the chest. The final move is a jump spinning back kick to the chest. It is this series of kicks that killed Jake's brother Sean and Prang has developed a method of blocking the kicks.

When the newfound skills of Jake finally get him noticed, he is ready to take on Khan in the ultimate battle for revenge. Incentive on Khan's side is taken when Molly (who by this time is Jake's love interest) is kidnapped and Prang is killed in an ambush, the stage is set for the battle of a lifetime.

When it comes to early 1990's B-movie actioners, Loren Avedon was definitely a name to look out for. After being discovered by Roy Horan and Ng See-Yuen, he was cast in NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER 2: RAGING THUNDER (1987) and the third installment, NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER 3: BLOOD BROTHERS (1989). This film would mark Avedon's final film with Hong Kong-based Seasonal Film Corporation and to put it nicely, he went out with a major bang.

This is all in part to the action choreography of Tony Leung Siu-Hung and his team, who worked with Avedon on NRNS3. Compared to the action in NRNS3, Leung ups the ante in the fight choreography as he finds the perfect villain in future Tae-Bo founder Billy Blanks, who despite pulling off a horrible accent, lets his frenetic martial arts skills do the work in his fight scenes from the 1981 flashback to the finale, pitting him and Avedon. The fight at Prang's house and a flashback sequence would be Keith Hirabayashi's only fight scenes, but as mentioned, he makes a major impact.

As with the rest of Seasonal's Hong Kong-USA crossover films, Ng See-Yuen helped cast other martial arts champions in roles that play an intricate part. When Jake is on an undercover mission in NYC to nail a drug dealer, the dealer is played by Jerry Trimble, who co-starred with Jet Li the previous year in THE MASTER and his two henchmen are played by fellow U.S.-based Hong Kong actors Vincent Lyn and Steve Tartalia. Ong Soo-Han would gain fame in the B-movie circuit as the prison guard Demon in the sequel BLOODSPORT 2: THE NEXT KUMITE, opposite Daniel Bernhardt. Canadian-based Hong Kong veteran Bruce Fontaine plays a victim of Khan's, thinking he is the star of one of the "movies".

The finale of the film is truly an underrated fight classic, pitting Avedon and Blanks, decked out in Thai costumes in the middle of a bamboo booby-trapped ring. Despite very little wirework, the film showcased the martial arts skills of

both combatants to a tee. This marks some of Leung's best action choreography in the martial arts department.

The U.S. cut of the film trims a graphically violent scene where Fontaine's Dan Handel gets suspicious while shooting his movie, only to see a dead prostitute and after getting obliterated by Khan, gets impaled with a hook to his throat and hung. In the U.S. version, after Dan is thrashed, it cuts to Dan being hung.

Despite the cut, this is clearly one of the most underrated movies to come out in the B-movie circuit of the early 1990's and it is all thanks to the Hong Kong-style choreography and the skills of Loren Avedon, Billy Blanks, and Keith Hirabayashi.