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'Dark Figure of Crime,' a chilling cold case

By *Sophie Braccini*



Image provided

A psychological thriller from South Korea, "Dark Figure of Crime," is this month's choice for the International Film Showcase in Lamorinda. Dark, convoluted and unnerving, this well-made and played film offers an interesting peek into this country's criminal judicial system, and delivers a chilling portrait of a smart and manipulative criminal, matched by a stubborn police officer.

Director Kim Tae-gyoon has a knack for spotting news stories that make excellent movies. In 2010 he wrote and directed "A Barefoot Dream" from a story he had seen on TV that became his country's nominee for the Oscars that year. This time around, he was inspired by a true crime story featured in a documentary. It is the true story of criminal investigator Hyung-Min (Kim Yoon-Seok) who through an informer meets Tae-oh (Ju Ji-Hoon) who pretends having been hired to bury a body 10 years prior. As Tae-oh is about to reveal where that body is, he is violently arrested by another police group for another murder. A month later, the now prisoner contacts Hyung-Min again and confesses having in reality killed seven people; he will give the officer more detail if the officer comes back to visit him and pays him money.

The movie develops as the chess game unfolds between the two men. The cunning and often very annoying criminal, who has studied the law and knows how to exploit its fine print, leads the very patient and tenacious officer, a model of probity and humility, into a wild goose

chase studded with false clues and half truths. What is the criminal's aim and what does he have to win in this game?

The Korean movie is no "Silence of the Lambs" and does not rise to that level of tension and horror. It is nonetheless at times violent, but is more focused on the need to seek justice and truth, even when the victims have fallen into oblivion, a topic that has recently become more prominent with the arrest of Samuel Little.

Tae-gyoon's direction is solid, with no frills or excess gore. Yoon-Seok is very credible as the relentless and unyielding investigator. An American audience may have appreciated a deeper dive into the investigator's motivations and psyche. There are a few hints about his past, but possibly not enough to develop strong empathy for this character. Ju Ji-Hoon creates a very convincing villain.

Director Tae-gyoon said during a promotional press conference for the film that after he watched the TV documentary he drove the following day for five hours to the Busan region where the story happened to meet with the detective and his team. He met extensively with everyone involved and it took him five years to finish writing the film.

The result shows the meticulous puzzle work that went on within the confines of the prison walls and the mental games that went on, unraveling the lies of a murderer, and racking the nerves of the spectator, as any good thriller should.

"Dark Figure of Crime" will be presented at the Orinda Theatre for one week starting March 8, then will show at the Rheem Theatre in Moraga starting March 15.

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