

Catbird Seat - Tampopo – Friday, June 9

By Joe Kirkish

Our choice for a Club Indigo evening of summer entertainment is one of those utterly original movies that seems to exist in no precise category – so said critic Roger Ebert when it hit American screens in 1986, adding that it was a clever, irreverent delight.



And so it is.

Like the gently comic French films of Jacques Tati (“Mon Oncle” for example) or last month's British offbeat slapstick in “The LadyKillers,” it's a bemused meditation on human nature in which one outlandish situation flows into another, offhandedly, as if life were a series of smiles – Japanese style.



At the same time, if you can believe it, the film looks like some sort of Oriental satire of Clint Eastwood's spaghetti Westerns. Set in modern Tokyo, the male hero, Goro, is a lone rider with a quizzical smile, who rides not a horse but a semi truck. Along with some similar-styled friends, he searches for the perfect noodle restaurant, but cannot find one until he meets Tampopo, a sweet young lady who has her heart in the right place but not her less-than-appealing noodles.

The movie jumps about in a freestyle sort of efforts by Tampopo and Goro to research the perfect noodle and open the perfect noodle restaurant. (We can imagine the simile of a hopeful entrant in the American fascination with pizza parlors.) Like most movies about single-minded obsessions, this one quickly becomes very funny – so consumed and detailed, so completely submerged in noodleology, it gradually takes on a kind of weird logic of its own.

For example: consider the tour de force of a scene where a noodle master explains the correct ritual for eating a bowl of noodle soup – how to cut the noodle, how to cook it, how to address it, how to think of it, how to regard it, how to approach it, how to smell it, how to correctly slurp it after thanking it, and then, finally, how to remember it.

“Tampopo” is constructed as a series of episodes along the route to the perfect noodle restaurant. Sometimes the episodes don't seem to apply, but are hilarious anyway – as, for example, of an elderly man who actually dies in the pursuit of the perfect bowl of noodles.

Although the central image is of an Eastwood-style hero on an ultimate quest, there are all sorts of other sly little satirical asides, including one so perfectly aimed that even to describe it would take all the fun out of seeing it.

This very, very Japanese movie, which seems to make no effort to communicate to other cultures like our own, is still universally humorous almost for that very reason. Who of us, for example, cannot identify with the search for the perfect pizza?

This is an easily engaging comedy of manners that we enjoy laughing at, partly because we find it so much a part of a culture unfamiliar to most of us, but also because at the same time it reminds us of how we face similar American food obsessions.

I repeat: it's a very, very funny movie.

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