



Kenny Shopsin in *I Like Killing Flies*

PAGING ARLO GUTHRIE

I Like Killing Flies

review by George Sax

Maybe you could get anything you wanted at Alice's famous restaurant of yore, but forget about that at Kenny Shopsin's eponymously named New York eatery, even if the profane, pungently quirky proprietor does claim to offer 900 dishes and items (probably a matter of forgivable hyperbole). Sometimes, you can't get anything you want at Shopsin's because Shopsin may refuse to serve you. In *I Like Killing Flies*, Matt Mahurin's documentary about Shopsin and his popular joint, one woman, a patron and, evidently, a regular, tells us she has had "the honor of being thrown out. I believe everyone should have it."

"They have to prove to me that they're okay to feed," Shopsin says, one of the numerous salty assertions, apothegms and observations that may or may not be intended for swallowing whole. For one thing, Shopsin doesn't serve parties of five, only four or less. Not even if they split into parties of two and three, because to Shopsin, they're still parties of five. It says so right on the sign in the front window. (Sample: "It doesn't matter if you're a tackle for the Chicago Bears, you'll always be a party of five.")

"If you didn't know the rule, it means you're not a regular," Shopsin says dismissively, as he busies himself in his cramped but efficiently run kitchen. He's been plying his culinary skills and oddball, mildly intimidating, but generally ingratiating and bracing ethos at the same Greenwich Village location for 32 years as the movie begins. His restaurant looks to be little more than a hole-in-the-wall storefront diner, but its meals are inventive and reliably good enough to have attracted a large, sociologically diverse corps of patrons who are willing to pass muster. The resulting mutual loyalty is indicated by the owner's ethical take: "You treat people who don't deserve it with respect because you don't know when someone's only temporarily undeserving." It's obvious that Shopsin regards his work as a calling as well as a business.

From what we can see and hear of it, Shopsin's fare is a superior and boldly derivative version of short-order cum old-fashioned coffee-shop cuisine. Shopsin is a lot more than an expert fry cook. He's serving some creatively cobbled-together, internationally influenced cooking, as well as solidly grounded, old-fashioned food. He calls it all "fusion cooking with sexual tension." A guide someone reads from on camera recommends the place, noting, "The coffee's good; you have to get it yourself. If you don't like that, you know what you can do."

Mahurin seems to have mostly alternately sat around with Shopsin and followed him about with a video camera and mic (which at one point obtrudes into the frame), letting the guy kvetch, comment and aphorize in sound-bite-size utterances, interspersed with the occasional interpolations of others, including the wife and two sons who help him run the restaurant.

The movie, with its in-close, jerky cinematography, doesn't seem the work of someone who's a veteran photographer and music-video and feature-film director. Perhaps the lack of discernible technique is a choice in favor of making the subject even more prominent.

Such narrative arc as there is involves the restaurant's eviction by a new landlord and the difficult challenge of finding a new site in Manhattan's daunting real estate market. There is an ostensibly successful outcome, but one with a concurrent bitter-sweet development.

Shopsin comes across as a genuine, if modestly situated, genius. It's hard to imagine him and his establishment outside New York. The cosmopolitan eccentricity of both his personality and his cooking wouldn't play in a place like Buffalo, for instance. Which is Buffalo's and most of the rest of the country's problem. av

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Tony Jaa in *The Protector*

JAA LOVE

The Protector

review by M. Faust

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Having been more than usually stressed of late, I attended the screening of what was billed as a new film starring Thai kickboxing sensation Tony Jaa without realizing that I had already seen it. *The Protector* is actually a retitled version of 2005's *Tom Yum Goong*, a.k.a. *Honour of the Beast*, which has been available as an import DVD for well over a year. But because it's an entertaining film, a worthy followup to Jaa's hit *Ong Bak*, I settled in to watch it and see what changes the Weinstein brothers might have wrought upon it. (At Miramax, the Weinsteins—stop me if you've heard this—were notorious for putting their "personal stamp" on foreign films they acquired for American distribution by heavily reediting, redubbing and rescoring them.)

The Protector (which ironically shares the title of an early Jackie Chan attempt at American crossover, the failure of which sent him back to Hong Kong in the early 1980s and sparked his best work) is missing about 25 minutes of footage, mostly comic relief and scenes that flesh out the plot and characters. In a martial arts film like this, that's not always the worst thing in the world, at least from a box-office standpoint: Hardcore fans may squawk, but the bulk of the market only cares that the action scenes are intact.

And *The Protector* is almost wall-to-wall action, broken up by the barest fragments of storyline. Still, one has to wonder why the Weinsteins chose to remove any references to the fact that Madame Rose, the "villainess" of the piece, is a transsexual, played in over the top style by former Shanghai Ballet star (and real-life transsexual) Jin Xing. You'd certainly think that presenter Quentin Tarantino, the world's most prominent fan of this kind of movie, would have recognized her as an homage to his own homages *Kill Bill*.

The biggest sin the American release commits is less forgivable. The print I viewed is so murky and washed out as to look like a cheapo 1970s blaxploitation movie, shot on low-grade film stock. This is not the case with the original film, which is as crisp and vivid as any modern film shot by professional photographers. (One internet source suggests that the Weinsteins acquired an intermediate print from a French source rather than using the original

materials to prepare their release.) Even by the Weinsteins' low standards, it's shockingly shabby treatment of product and an act of real disrespect to filmmakers.

The bottom line, though, is that *The Protector* is still a hell of a lot of fun. Jaa plays a Thai native whose tribe has historically been protectors of elephants, considered sacred in Thai culture. When his father is killed and two of their prized elephants are kidnapped, he tracks them to Sydney Australia, where he uncovers a ring of gangsters whose illicit enterprises include a restaurant whose menu specializes in endangered species.

Well, "uncover" is perhaps not the best word. A Thai-born Australian cop does most of the actual uncovering; Jaa's role is pretty much limited to shouting "You killed my father!" before plowing into the bad guys, who always either outnumber him or outsize him. (His most fearsome opponent, Australian strongman Nathan "Megaman" Jones, is 15 inches taller than Jaa.)

Jaa's fighting style brings the phrase "whirling dervish" to mind, as well as the word "ouch." He's prone to making human wishbones of his opponents (who also just happen to be accomplished kickboxers), and the editor responsible for dubbing in the sounds of breaking bones seems to have been working on a piece rate.

But this is mayhem as a demonstration of real athletic and acrobatic skill. Director Prachya Pinkaew, Jaa's regular collaborator, makes a point of emphasizing that these skills are real—you gotta be impressed by a guy who can kick out the globe on a 12-foot-high streetlamp from a standing start. And Jaa, who choreographed his own fight scenes, offers open homages to Bruce Lee, Jet Li and Jackie Chan (who has a cameo appearance bumping into Jaa on his arrival in Australia). The most astonishing sequence comes halfway through the film as Jaa assaults the restaurant/bordello in a four-minute unbroken take shot with a single camera that is a miracle of organization.

Guilty pleasures don't get much better than this.

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