

## \* *The Enforcer* and *Afro Samurai*

### The Enforcer

**Starring:** Jet Li, Tse Mui

**Director:** Corey Yuen

**DVD Extras:** Interviews, commentary

**Ranking:** ✂✂✂✂

In the 1990s, two superstars ruled the Asian martial arts movie market: Jackie Chan and Jet Li. While the former revolutionized the modern action extravaganza with blockbusters like *Rumble in the Bronx*, the latter scored box-office gold by resurrecting the “ponytail classics” with epics like *Once Upon a Time in China*.

Occasionally, Li snuck in a contemporary movie or two, including the item on our menu this month: *The Enforcer*, a film that’s mildly enjoyable despite its syrupy script and cartoonlike fight choreography. With this 1995 production getting a DVD re-release by Dragon Dynasty, I’m reminded of why Li stuck to mostly costumed fare: His martial acrobatics appear unrealistic in modern settings.

In China, Li became a national champion in *wushu*, a mix of traditional kung fu and gymnastics. He was a natural at wielding the staff, the chain whip and other ancient weapons in exhibitions. His shift to movies with contemporary settings in the 1990s, however, was not as natural, and it shows in *The Enforcer*.

Li stars as an undercover police officer from mainland China whose assignment to infiltrate a Hong Kong-based gang strains his relationship with his dying wife and martial artist son. This role was a good change for Li, giving him a chance to smoke cigarettes, play a flawed character and develop rapport with a child.

No amount of change can hide the fact that Li doesn’t look as comfortable in jeans and a T-shirt as he does in a *changshan* outfit and queue pigtail—at least on-screen. In *The Enforcer*, he looks awkward with a gun, holding it like an alien artifact rather than an extension of his arsenal. And even when he picks up a pair of police batons, he doesn’t wield them like *tonfa*

or *kali* sticks; he swings them around like blunt broadswords.

It doesn’t help much that director Corey Yuen (*The Transporter*) got so caught up in the wushu wire-work fad of the 1990s that he forgot about a thing called gravity. In some scenes, there are so many wire stunts that Li might as well have put on a cape and flown above his enemies.

In another example, Li wraps a rope around his son (Tse Mui) and proceeds to whip the boy through the air like a yo-yo to take out an army of thugs. I laughed at the fight’s absurdity, something akin to Peter Griffin’s brawls with the giant chicken in *Family Guy*.

Together, Yuen and Li have made some good movies (*The Legend of Fong Sai Yuk*, which should hit DVD shelves by the time you read this), but in *The Enforcer*, their over-the-top fight choreography completely removed me emotionally from the story.

Thankfully, there are a handful of bright spots, such as Li’s epic battle against three high-kicking gangsters (including former

### SCREEN SHOTS RANKING SYSTEM

- ✂✂✂✂✂ = Master Level
- ✂✂✂✂ = Knockout Power
- ✂✂✂ = Contender
- ✂✂ = Rookie
- ✂ = No Challenge

Hong Kong *muay Thai* champ Ken Lo).

By 1990s standards, *The Enforcer* was a box-office success. By today’s standards, it’s more of a fun turn-off-your-brain-and-turn-up-the-volume movie. It has noteworthy bonus materials, but there are two glaring omissions (no Li interview or original Cantonese soundtrack). It does include exclusive interviews with Tse, Lo and producer/writer Wong Jing, as well as audio commentary by Asian cinema expert Bey Logan.

Lo and Wong’s interviews provide loads of insider information, from tidbits about Li’s personality (he’s a pretty quiet dude) to the fact that *The Enforcer* wasn’t meant to be a martial arts movie (Wong saw it as a dramatic action piece).

In one featurette, Tse remembers how the leading man offered “comments” on his wushu forms. “Maybe I shouldn’t say comments,” Tse says with a smile. “They were more like lectures.”

Maybe someone should have lectured Li and Yuen about the law of gravity in action scenes.

