

Mongol (15)

2nd November 2009

Director: **Sergei Bodrov**

Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia, Germany 2007

Running time : 126 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Tadanobu Asano** (Temudjin), **Honglei Sun** (Jamukha), **Khulan Chuluun** (Börte), **Aliya** (Oelun, Temudjin's mother), **Ba Sen** (Esugei, Temudjin's father).

SCRIPT: **Arif Aliyev, Sergei Bodrov**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Rogier Stoffers, Sergey Trofimov**. EDITING: **Valdís Oskarsdóttir, Zach Staenberg**. MUSIC: **Tuomas Kantelinen**.

The first of two promised films, the second of which, *The Great Khan*, is yet to appear, *Mongol* is a relatively straightforward telling of the early life and career of Genghis Khan, perhaps history's most prolific exponent of rape and pillage, and certainly the only one to use cavalry in quite such a key way. As such it succeeds, and for most will supplant, Henry Levin's unsatisfactory 1965 epic with Egyptian star Omar Sharif as Temujin(*sic*), Yugoslav locations doing service for the steppes of Asia and James Mason performing a Fu Manchu impression as a wily Chinese ambassador.

Sergei Bodrov, whose Caucasus-set contemporary war story *Prisoner of the Mountains* some may remember vividly, here presents us with an altogether more authentic production, with an Asian cast (Temudjin is played by a Japanese actor) and magnificent Chinese and Kasakh locations. He succeeds, where Oliver Stone in his recent biopic *Alexander* did not, in delivering a film which combines exciting action sequences with absorbing interpersonal drama.

We enter the frame with our hero living out a hell-on-earth existence shut up in a cage and hung from the battlements as a warning to all by a rash Chinese overlord, rash because of course he should have killed him while he had the chance and in the process saved both himself and hundreds of thousands of Asian and European citizens from slaughter by the hordes of Genghis Khan. But I am getting ahead of myself, not to mention the material of this film, for we are destined to leave the story at the point shortly after Temudjin frees himself and unites the warring clans of Mongolia under his new title.

We flashback to follow the boy as he journeys with his father, a Mongolian warlord, to choose a bride from another clan to whom the father is

indebted, as it is from them that he stole his own wife! In the event it is the girl who chooses her future husband, and so it is throughout the film almost: this redoubtable woman alternates between being a driving force behind some of Temudjin's deeds and simply supporting him or enduring without him.

The other intervention in our hero's apparently charmed life is divine. Thus, as he survives enslavement, banishment and imprisonment, there are times when his prevailing is nothing less than supernatural. Both of these elements, the feminine and divine agencies in his life, are refreshing additions to the hero biopic but familiar in countless epics from the *Mabinogion* to the *Mahabharata*.

As the boy Temudjin grows up he encounters one setback after another, which all boil down to tribal rivalry and would discourage any ordinary mortal from even considering embarking on a career of ruthless empire building. He emerges from each of these near-death experiences a little stronger and a little wiser until he is able to mount his own punitive expedition against his foe, a sequence full of Iliadic resonances in its close-quarter combat and setting around an encampment and the repossession of a concubine.

Bodrov's film never loses its grip: the episodes have variety despite the cyclical quality of the narrative with its reversals and escapes; the landscape is always fascinating and at times breathtaking, and the action sequences build in spectacle up to the climactic face-off between Temudjin and his would-be nemesis, the bald and oddly likeable former ally, Jamukha; and the performance of Tadanobu Asano in the lead is never less than compelling. For me this was the best costume pic since Kurosawa updated *King Lear* in *Ran*.

David Clare