



MOTHER (MADEO)

Autumn
Season
2010

Review by Tom Huddleston, Time Out:

It often feels like Asian filmmakers have more opportunity and inclination to move around and experiment with genres than their Western counterparts. A Korean director like Bong Joon-ho can make his name with icy serial-killer thriller 'Memories of Murder' and solidify his reputation with goofy political monster smash 'The Host' before shattering expectations entirely with his best work so far: 'Mother' is a murder mystery, a melodrama, a black comedy, a heartbreaking tragedy, a keen social satire and much more.



The title role is one Joan Crawford might have played: a fierce matriarch devoted to her mentally challenged son Do-joon (Bin Won), whose world falls to pieces when he is arrested for the sexually motivated murder of a teenage girl. Her quest to prove his innocence forces our heroine (Kim Hye-ja, listed in the credits only as 'Mother') to take up arms against an all-male establishment, the dead girl's enraged family and Do-joon's crafty and duplicitous best pal Jin-tae (Goo-jin), an amoral layabout who provides some of the film's most memorably shocking moments.

Bong juggles styles with insouciant skill, infusing his classic noir plotline with hints of Douglas Sirk melodrama, rainswept US indie realism and a brooding, blackly comic and almost Lynchian sense of a world spiralling out of whack. Kim's performance captures perfectly the sense of a woman at odds with a society she can't or doesn't want to understand, her doomed quest leading her into ever darker and more uncompromising situations. Bold, unpredictable and quietly devastating, 'Mother' is Bong's first masterpiece.

Review by Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian (reveals much of the plot):

Bong Joon-ho's Mother is a suspense thriller, a gripping psychological study and, like his 2003 movie Memories of Murder, a witty subversion of the forensic-procedural genre. It is also a great showcase for 59-year-old South Korean star Kim Hye-ja, excellent as a middle-aged single woman eking out a living as a herbalist and unlicensed acupuncturist. She is quiet, withdrawn, but with a steely determination to survive, which she deploys not for herself, but on behalf of her twentysomething son Do-joon (Bin Won) who has learning difficulties. He is gentle, childlike but moody, and has been bullied all his life. Bong's film exerts an awful fascination as we see Do-joon following a pretty, frightened schoolgirl home down a dark alley one night. Without explanation, the director cuts to Do-joon's arrival home later in a confused state. Later, the police arrive, and the Mother fanatically devotes herself to the greatest challenge any mother can face: she must get her son off a murder charge, and also turn detective, finding the real culprit. Soon this formidable woman is making discoveries and seriously embarrassing the police in the process.

What is so intriguing about Bong's style is that he will deliberately, almost capriciously, introduce an element of pure anarchy into the mix. As in Memories of Murder, the crime scene gets a little messed up, and the CSI world of forensics is treated with a touch of black-comic irreverence. And Bong will often throw whole scenes for a loop in the same mischievous spirit. When the suspected felon is taken away in cuffs in the back of a cop car, that would be the end of the chapter for most film-makers. Bong has his cops take their eyes off the road, and prang another vehicle, causing a melee of passers-by crowding round the crash. It has no plot significance. It's an arbitrary flourish of randomness, keeping us off balance and disturbed.

Perhaps the best moment is the deeply strange semi-stylised "dancing" tableau at the very beginning of the film, which is to find its own resonance later on. It is exotic, bizarre and challenging. Is it a dream? Or in some fantastical sense actually happening? And what kind of film can follow this? What kind of genre could absorb it? These unanswered questions are part of the film's mystery, taking it above and beyond the normal thriller. I have a sinking feeling that this might be one of those films that gets a slack Hollywood remake. See the shimmeringly strange original now.

