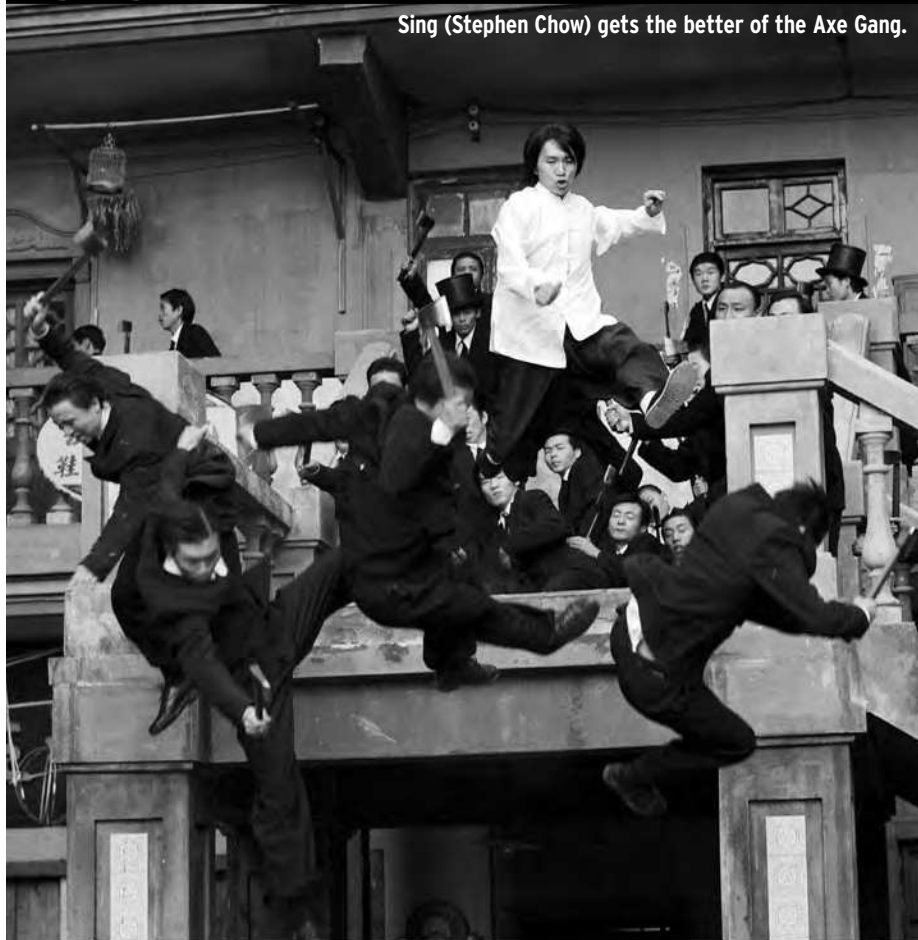




Sing (Stephen Chow) gets the better of the Axe Gang.

SAEED ADANI/SONY PICTURES CLASSICS, 2005.

The People Fight Back

Demented, delirious action comedy

KUNG-FU HUSTLE: Written, directed and produced by Stephen Chow. Co-writers Tsang Kan Cheong, Lola Huo, Chan Man Keung. Producers Chui Po Chu, Jeff Lau. Executive producers Bill Borden, David Hung. Action choreographer Yuen Wo Ping; Sammo Hung. Cinematography, Poon Hang Sang. Production design, Oliver Wong. Editor, Angie Lam. Visual effects supervisor, Frankie Chung. Costume design, Shirley Chan. Composer, Raymond Wong. Starring Stephen Chow, Yuen Wah, Leung Siu Lung, Yuen Qiu, Dong Zhi Hua, Chiu Chi Ling and Xing Yu. With Chan Hwok Dwan, Lam Tze Chung, Tin Kai Man, Jia Kang Xi, Funk Hak On, Feng Xiao Gang, Huang Sheng Yi, Lam Suet. Sony Pictures Classics, 2005. R. 95 minutes.

Delightful. That's the other D word I wanted to put in the sub-headline, although it is the last adjective I would have chosen to describe my reaction to the first half-hour of *Kung Fu Hustle*. First, a little background. A friend took me to my first Hong Kong action movie in San Francisco in the mid-1980s. It was the real thing: buckets of blood, gang fights, extreme brutality. We left the theater in the Castro after a few minutes, because the violence made me sick. In *Kung Fu Hustle's* early scenes, I feared I'd wandered into a similar situation, but this time I stayed. I'm glad I did, because after the bloody, gang warfare set-up, the fun begins and builds to a finale so over-the-top it made me giddy.

Like a Road-Runner cartoon, *Kung Fu Hustle* spares its protagonist no humiliation. The good guys (you will eventually recognize who they are) take many beatings from the bad guys, the dreaded Axe Gang, a late 1940s style group which wears dark suits and ties and affects a hip attitude. The film's artful confusion begins when a loser named Sing (Stephen Chow) practices extortion on the denizens of Pig Sty Alley, an urban neighborhood with no future.

Sing and his sidekick (Lam Tze Chung) attract the Axe Gang's attention, but they also stir up the Alley's people, who are not the simple citizens they appear to be. From the tailor (Chui Chi Ling), the landlord

(Yuen Wah), the landlady (Yuen Qiu) to the Coolie (Xing Yu) and a noodle maker, these mostly older people are ferocious freedom fighters who keep a low profile on purpose. When roused, they fight like hell.

The winding tale of Sing's misfortunes and good fortune has its beginning in childhood. A group of bullies are teasing a little girl, and Sing stands up for her. So, they beat the daylight out of him, taking particular pleasure in peeing on the boy and his Kung Fu instruction manual. The old man who sold the boy the book had said Sing was "the one."

With the legend in place, we wait in vain a long time for Sing to become the Kung Fu master he must be. Meanwhile, the dapper leaders of the Axe Gang grows ever more ruthless, finally springing from the madhouse a secret weapon to use against the people of Pig Sty Alley: The Beast (Hsia Liang, aka Bruce Leung). Beast's technique embodies the sinuous beauty of the martial arts, but he is a formidable foe. In a memorable contest with the landlady and landlord, the three of them form a visually dynamic human puzzle-ball from which none can easily exit.

The joys to be had from Stephen Chow's spectacular homage to the genre are not fleeting. I enjoyed his send-up more than any of the recent martial arts movies I've watched, such as *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*. The slapstick comedy routines remind me of the first film of the genre I really loved: Tsui Hark's 1986 action comedy, *The Peking Opera Blues*, which the Bijou brought to town. For *Kung Fu Hustle*, Chow employs *Peking Opera's* choreographer, Poon Hang Sang, who doesn't miss a flying bullet or a woman runner with curlers in her hair.

Great, fun-filled film, *Kung Fu Hustle* gets my very highest recommendations. Now playing at Cinemark, catch this one once or twice. It might get better and better. **CW**

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