

The Birth of Khan

Sheer beauty isn't enough to propel Genghis' story

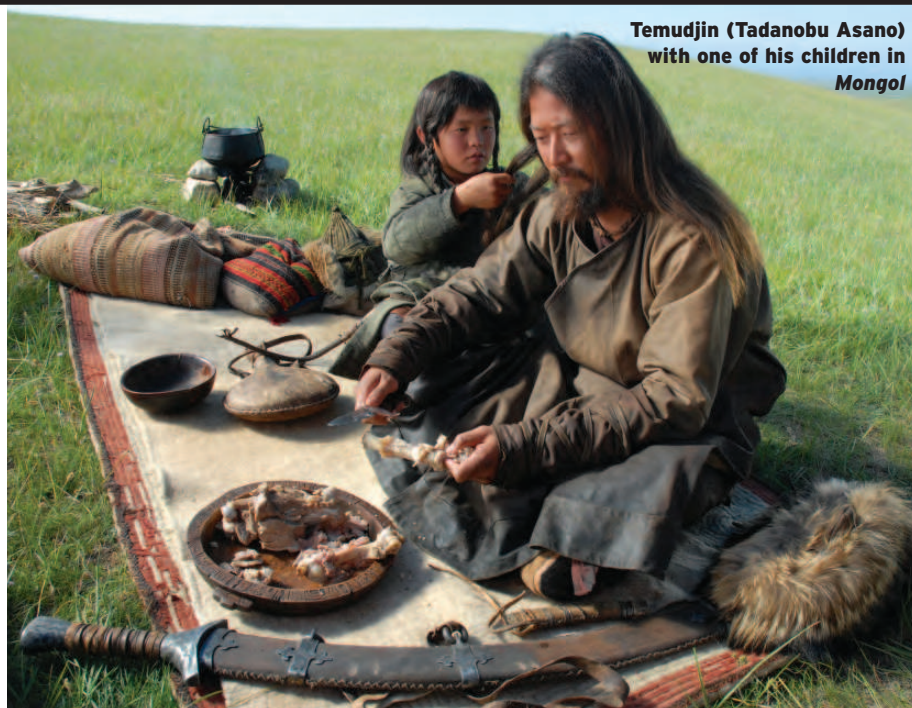
MONGOL: Directed by Sergei Bodrov. Written by Bodrov and Arif Aliyev. Cinematography, Sergey Trofimov and Rogier Stoffers. Music, Tuomas Kantelinen. Starring Tadanobu Asano, Honglei Sun, Khulan Chuluun and Odniam Odsuren. Picturehouse, 2008. R. 126 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Russian director Sergei Bodrov's sweeping, gorgeous *Mongol* is enough to make a person want to take a vacation to the Mongolian steppe, which appears, in the film, to contain multitudes — of landscapes. From the frozen lake into which young Temudjin (Odniam Odsuren) falls (never mind how he gets back out; he just does) to the rocky shrine of the lord of the skies to which he wanders, head and hands in a wooden yoke (never mind how he gets out; he just does), this late 12th century Mongolia is an absolutely beautiful place. It's also populated by strikingly beautiful people: Odsuren as the young boy whose future title we all know, Japanese actor Tadanobu Asano as his adult self and Mongolian former student Khulan Chuluun as his beloved Borte all seem to wear their features with a certain graveness, a stillness and confidence that suits the story of a legend.

But even a legendary story requires thoughtful telling. *Mongol* begins with the future Genghis Khan a nine-year-old boy in search of a wife and moves gradually

though the years to his first major battle. Unfortunately, this gradual progression is less than graceful. Time after time, Bodrov cuts away from moments that need explaining and more than once lets his story rest on a crutch worthy of a Bond villain: Enemies who want to kill Temudjin simply don't. He escapes in that damned heavy yoke not once but twice; neither freezing water nor arrows in the back can kill this man. When a former friend takes him as a slave, Temudjin is immediately sold, a decision which makes little sense unless you read the director's comments on how several years in Genghis Khan's life are unaccounted for. Here, he spends those years sitting in a cell in a distant city, on display as a failure until Borte, in a sequence that pushes even harder at one's strained suspension of disbelief, comes for him.

Mongol tries to aim for both the heart and the gut; vibrant gouts of spouting red blood trade screen time with scenes in which Temudjin and Borte look longingly at each other. They're a striking pair, but as with so many other epic, meant-to-be relationships, we've no real reason to believe in this one. We've even less reason to be interested in it when the film suggests (fairly enough) that Temudjin is to be praised for choosing to claim Borte's children, fathered by different men, as his own — but gives no consideration to how



Temudjin (Tadanobu Asano) with one of his children in *Mongol*

being kidnapped (and clearly raped) by enemies or selling herself to a merchant for passage might have affected the nearly saintly Borte, whose conversations with Temudjin tend to consist of little more than concern for his well-being.

Still, the film's greatest hiccup is when it leaps from Temudjin's imprisonment to the massed army with which he will fight a defining battle. How he built this army — how this wandering boy with seemingly countless enemies, all of whom can find him on the steppe whenever they feel like it, ever rallied men to his banner — is utterly ignored. We know what happens to this man; we know he's going to conquer

half the world, as the film helpfully reminds us at its close. But what drives a story like this is the how of the thing. *Mongol* gives us pieces of the story in flashes and starts, in mentions of strife between clans, the beliefs which drove Temudjin and a handful of discussions of what a Mongol is or isn't. But it's always in a hurry to get to the next battle or windswept vista, the next lingering shot of Borte's lovely cheekbones or the speeding legs of elegant horses. All make for a vivid portrait of a land rarely seen on Western screens — but not, alas, for a compelling take on the mythic figure at the center of this tale.

EW

Mongol opens Friday at the Bijou.

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