

## \* *The Rebel and Cyborg Soldier*

### The Rebel

**Starring:** Johnny Tri Nguyen, Dustin Nguyen

**Director:** Charlie Nguyen

**DVD Bonus Materials:** Featurettes, commentary and more

**Ranking:** ✂✂✂

Vietnam is known for many things, but a movie industry isn't one of them. Two American brothers are changing that notion, however.

Charlie Nguyen and Johnny Tri Nguyen were born in Vietnam but have lived most of their lives in the United States, where they've steadily built careers on Hollywood's periphery. Now, they've teamed up to produce their most accomplished work to date: *The Rebel*, an independent action movie shot in Vietnam.

With Charlie behind the camera as director, producer and co-writer and Johnny in front of the lens as the star (as well as a co-producer and co-writer), *The Rebel* contains flashes of brilliance and an entertaining story that melds Western movie aesthetics with a very Eastern setting.

It takes place in 1920s Vietnam, where pockets of peasant uprisings threaten the French colonialists. That causes officials to let loose Cuong (Johnny), a French-trained Vietnamese police agent with a blood-soaked conscience. After watching his captain, Sy (Dustin Nguyen, no relation), repeatedly torture a young revolutionary named Thuy (played by pop-singer Veronica Ngo in an impressive debut), Cuong breaks her out of jail and instantly becomes public enemy No. 1.

*The Rebel* is the brainchild of younger brother Johnny, who's best known for playing opposite Tony Jaa in *Tom Yum Goong* (aka *The Protector*). Johnny paid his dues as a stuntman in everything from Jet Li's *Cradle 2 the Grave* to Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* franchise.

Johnny has the acting chops to carry

the film, but it's his *wushu* mastery that will knock people out. He unleashes an arsenal of jaw-dropping twist kicks, jumping spin kicks and aerials. Plus, he pulls quadruple duty as the flick's action director. He also throws in *taekwondo*, mixed martial arts, Hong Kong-style kung fu and *muay Thai* knees and elbows—no doubt an influence from his time with Jaa.

This hybrid choreography actually makes the film a bit anachronistic in relation to the setting because many of Johnny's moves weren't invented until after the 1920s, but for the casual viewer, bending martial history won't matter much. Johnny's scenes are filled with soaring kicks and hard-hitting blows that lend a ballet-like quality to the violence. Plus, he keeps the camera angles unobtrusive to better showcase his amazing athleticism.

For fight-film connoisseurs, Charlie's

### SCREEN SHOTS RANKING SYSTEM

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

action direction is enjoyable but not without its flaws: The fights aren't overly realistic because they're too technical and repetitive. And how is it that every major character is a master of the exact same *muay Thai*-infused *wushu* style? The first few times they twirl through the air before landing a kick, it's pretty badass. But after the seventh time, it gets redundant. Sure, there's a police agent who fancies himself a knife fighter, but his moves still don't provide enough variety.

Only Sy has a unique fighting style: iron shirt kung fu. He can shrug off elbows and knives with nothing but internal energy and witty one-liners. The actor who portrays him, Dustin Nguyen, a veteran of *21 Jump Street* and *V.I.P.*, turns a skill that could have been laughable on-screen into an intriguing fight element. In his first turn as a villain, he brings a certain gravity to the movie, and his real-life taekwondo black belt enables him to add realism to the acrobatics.

Charlie also deserves some praise. Best known for directing music videos for Vietnamese-American singers, he took a reported \$1.5 million budget and made *The Rebel* look like a mini-epic. His strengths lie in photographing heart-rending drama, particularly Thuy's torture scenes. With cinematographer Dominic Pereira and editor Ham Tran, he creates elegant visuals that capitalize on the pain and beauty of his former homeland.

In Vietnam, *The Rebel* was a box-office hit. Now, Dragon Dynasty is distributing it in North America as a two-DVD set packed with bonus features—including interviews with the actors, a making-of featurette, and an audio-commentary track with the three main stars and Asian-film expert Bey Logan.

*The Rebel* is the Nguyen brothers' cinematic calling card, their potential ticket to mainstream projects in Hollywood. Let's hope someone in Tinseltown is watching.

