

Volcano High (Whasango) - 2001

Starring: Jang Hyuk, Shin Min-ah, Kim Su-ro, Huh Jin-ho

Director: Kim Tae-gyun

Availability: Hong Kong-import VCD (multi-region) and DVD (multi-region), Korean-import DVD (Region 3)

Rating:



Volcano High poster (image courtesy of Cinema Service)

If "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" had been directed by the Wachowski brothers ("The Matrix"), with a smidgen of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" thrown in, you would probably end up with something like "Volcano High". Taking place in a high school where the 'gifted class' possesses supernatural powers, this 2001 action-comedy blends martial arts fantasy, wire-fu acrobatics, and dazzling computer graphics to create unforgettable visuals that more than compensate for a lackluster script.

Based on the winning submission from a 1997 Korean screenwriting contest, "Volcano High" revolves around troubled teenager Kim Kyung-soo (Jang Hyuk), who is blessed (or cursed, depending on how you see it) with special powers, including the ability to levitate and hurl energy

projectiles at his foes. The story kicks off with Kyung-soo arriving at the titular high school after having been expelled from eight previous schools for assaulting teachers and fellow students. With this being his 'last strike', Kyung-soo tries very hard to fit in with his new classmates, control his temper, and avoid the type of supernatural displays that result in expulsion.

Unfortunately, Volcano High is unlike any high school that Kyung-soo has been to, as many of his fellow students also possess mystical powers. Furthermore, Kyung-soo finds himself caught in the middle of a power struggle between the school's principal, vice-principal, and rival student clubs over the 'Secret Manuscript', a tome which grants its bearer absolute control over the school. When Principal Jang Oh-ja (Kim Il-wu) suddenly falls into a deep trance, Vice-

principal Jang Hak-sa accuses the school's top student Song Hak-rim (Kwong Sang-woo) of trying to steal the Secret Manuscript and has him jailed. In actual fact, the vice-principal is after the book himself, and he enlists the help of school bully 'Dark Oxen' Jang Ryang (Kim Su-ro) to get the rest of the students in line.

Meanwhile, because of the power vacuum created by Hak-rim's imprisonment, the leaders of the various student clubs try to consolidate their power by enlisting Kyung-soo's support, such as the aggressive captain of the rugby team, Shimma (Kim Hyung-jong), who even enlists the charms of his pretty fraternal twin sister Yoma (Chae Shi-ah). However, Kyung-soo's attention is focused on 'Icy Jade' Yoo Chae-yi (Shin Min-ah), the beautiful and chaste captain of the all-female kendo team. And to make matters worse, the vice-principal brings in five new teachers, led by Ma Bang-jin (Huh Jun-ho), who specialize in reigning in wayward students with their seemingly unbeatable powers. Let the games begin!

If you are a fan of wire-fu flicks, such as "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon", or are looking for something to fill the time until the next "Shaolin Soccer", then you will probably think that you have died and gone to



Jang Hyuk (image courtesy of Cinema Service)

heaven when you watch "Volcano High", which is wall-to-wall with characters that fly, do impossible backflips, and do battle with stylish cartoon violence. As per the film's central conceit, 'martial arts set in a high school', "Volcano High" takes the conventions of *wu shu* martial arts epics and transposes them into a high school setting. For example, characters are introduced with subtitles bearing their names and descriptions (reminiscent of the Hong Kong film "Stormriders"), rival warlords and clans become student associations that don't get along, and dramatic camera angles are used to give the on-screen action an anime feel.

However, despite the emphasis on martial arts, the tone of the film is mostly jokey and irreverent. For example, Kyung-soo's dramatic arrival at Volcano High is punctuated by the image of a student falling out of a window, to which Kyung-soo is completely oblivious. One brief digression relays Kyung-soo's backstory as a sepia-toned educational training film. And despite his super powers, Kyung-soo is a bit of a klutz, especially in the presence of Chae-yi, for whom he can only muster a meek wave and a goofy smile.

If there is a complaint to be made about "Volcano High", it would have to be levelled against the script, which trades in comic book characterizations and cliché-ridden plotting as it swings wildly from one action sequence to the next.

The film also touches briefly on the stifling authoritarian environment of the Korean high-school system, though it is more of a scratch on the surface, as opposed to the more thoughtful examinations mined by "Whispering Corridors" or even "My Boss, My Hero". And because the script introduces a flurry of characters, their allegiances, and numerous plot points within the first half, some viewers may find the story a bit confusing and difficult to follow (hint: the story is not too dissimilar from "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone").



Kwong Sang-woo and Jang Hyuk (*image courtesy of Cinema Service*)

Performances are also as expected for such a spectacle-laden film. Top nod goes to Jang, whose charismatic and comic performance as the story's unwilling hero is second only to the outrageous special effects. As Kyung-soo's love interest, Shin is perfectly cast as the cool

Chae-yi, and she warms up nicely as the story unfolds. Kim, with his long locks and over-the-top facial expressions, is no stranger to playing bad guys (such as in "Attack the Gas Station!" and "The Foul King"), and in "Volcano High", he lends credence to the moniker 'Dark Oxen' with another fearsome performance.

It may lack brains, but "Volcano High" more than makes up for this shortcoming with its brawn. In addition to its light-hearted tone and the way it recontextualizes the *wu shu* epic into the confines of a high school, "Volcano High" benefits from imaginative fight sequences and dazzling special effects. Indeed, "Volcano High" is a wildly entertaining romp... exactly the type of film that fans of Asian action have been craving for a very long time.