Netflix’s Kill Boksoon is a progressive but head-scratching thriller

First premiering at the Berlinale, *Kill Boksoon* is a head-scratching thriller pitched as one of Netflix’s tentpole films for its Korean slate in 2023. The lead character’s name – which is also the film’s title – is a homophone that plays on a relatively common surname in Korea (“Gil”) and the violent and bloody vocation of career assassin Boksoon. Arriving on the streaming platform on March 31st, *Kill Boksoon* is as progressive as it is formulaic, veering between straight-laced action and poignant family drama.

Reminiscent of *John Wick*, Boksoon (Jeon Do-yeon) is a contract killer working for an agency called MK Ent., where an aura of white-collar sophistication lightly veils the gory labor involved. MK Ent.’s leaders dress in formal wear and suits, the organization has an employees’ code of conduct, kill assignments are called “shows,” and arriving on the location of the kill is termed “being on set.” Besides juggling an upcoming contract renewal with MK Ent., Boksoon is also a single mother with a teenage daughter, Jae-young (Kim Si-a).

Veteran actress Jeon has courageously opted for an action-heavy role as the titular character here – a big departure, as her career has largely revolved around more emotionally layered dramatic fare. In 2007, Jeon won the Best Actress prize at the Cannes Film Festival for her role in Lee Chang-dong’s *Secret Sunshine*, becoming the first Korean person to receive any acting award at the prestigious festival.

The film has a number of things going for it. Boksoon is every

bit the empowered woman – a confident go-getter and top employee (a 100 percent success rate!) who commands the respect of her peers – well, at least at first. She is unfazed by the double duties of work and family, belting out kicks and chops at work before tending to her daughter at home.

However, one assignment stops her abruptly in her tracks, and her failure to kill causes Boksoon to stray into treacherous waters with her ruthless boss Cha Min-gyu (Sol Kyung-gu) and his sister Min-hee (Esom). Soon, Boksoon finds herself on her company's kill list instead and pursued by her colleagues. At the same time, her daughter Jae-young is struggling with bullying and blackmail when a schoolmate finds out that she is lesbian and attracted to her best friend.

Kill Boksoon's best moments come when the film steps away from back-breaking action and invests in the emotional arc of its promising cast. The gang of contract killers at MK Ent. form a notably talented ensemble – which includes rising actor Koo Kyo-hwan (*D.P.*, *Train to Busan Presents: Peninsula*) and Lee Yeon – who all make the most of their limited screen time. Mature beyond her years, Kim Si-a also puts in a stunning effort as Boksoon's daughter, who communicates both the seriousness and innocence of young love with aplomb. The emotional layers of the film's final scene between mother and daughter are especially well-crafted.

Yet, as Boksoon's career screeches to a halt, the film similarly runs aground with its overly showy and excessively long action sequences. There is no doubt that director Byun Sung-hyun has several impressive shots in his wheelhouse, often using reflections in puddles and mirrors to remind viewers of his characters' complexities and multifarious identities. However, meaningful character development and dialogue are often sacrificed at the altar of dizzying action.

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What also holds the film back is the morally dubious territory that the story wades into and never gets unstuck from. From the beginning, Byun’s film already has an uphill task in balancing an encouraging storyline of an empowered female and convincing the audience to suspend disbelief due to Boksoon’s troubling profession. Charming as Boksoon is, it’s an inherently difficult moral undertaking for the viewer: “Hey, be inspired by the independent, empowered Boksoon but ignore how she’s actually a serial murderer!” The tender, nuanced relationships carved out in the film would have found far more mileage had Boksoon been given a more redeemable occupation — even a Robin Hood-styled thief role would have made the narrative more palatable.

The wacky absurdity of *Kill Boksoon*’s circumstances finds a moment of welcome lucidity when Han Hee-seong (Koo Kyo-hwan) muses to Boksoon in an attempt to rationalize their vocations: “The world is full of irony. We start wars for peace. We want truth. We believe lies. Killers gather and they make the rules.” It is perhaps most useful to think of *Kill Boksoon* as a bit of a philosophical thought experiment (albeit a 137-minute one filled with nasty blood splatter). In a world where the moral code is turned upside down and laws seemingly do not exist, how does one still behave ethically or according to one’s conscience? Beneath the veneer of an unflappable, accomplished assassin, Boksoon clearly is not completely at ease with what she does.

The only assignment that Boksoon ever fails to complete becomes the pivotal moral prick of *Kill Boksoon*, and Jae-young plays a key role in this sequence. Despite Boksoon’s best efforts to keep the two worlds separate, the sacred curtain between work and life shatters. Yet, this is also the very

moment that keeps the film afloat and drives the emotional momentum for the rest of *Kill Boksoon* as we watch Boksoon grapple with the weight of her vocation, conscience, and identity.

Boksoon fears that Jae-young will find out about the grisly nature of her occupation — often dodging or redirecting Jae-young's questions. As Boksoon wrestles with acknowledging that her life's priorities have changed, Jae-young similarly struggles to accept the developments in her romantic relationship. Unmoored in their respective existential journeys, mother and daughter slowly gravitate toward each other, comforted by a newfound bond.

Kill Boksoon *is streaming now on Netflix.*

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