

Toronto's own Director X flies high with Superfly

Julien Christian Lutz offers remake of 1972 blaxploitation film, mixing grindhouse and martial arts with the glitz of Atlanta rap

MELISSA VINCENT

At last week's Toronto premiere of *Superfly*, a remake of the classic 1972 blaxploitation film, the crowd featured the expected mix of protégées and mentors of the movie's director, Toronto's own Julien Christian Lutz (a.k.a. Director X). But also milling about was Mayor John Tory – perhaps an odd fit for a film about a cocaine dealer that features slasher-flick amounts of blood and generous nudity. Lutz, however, shrugged off the mayor's attendance with a knowing smile: "He's supporting homegrown talent."

In the past two decades, few examples of homegrown talent have shone brighter than Lutz. Transitioning from local wunderkid status to one of the most in-demand music video directors on the planet (creating award-winning music videos for Drake, Kendrick Lamar and Sean Paul), Lutz has been a fierce cultural ambassador for Toronto.

With the Atlanta-set *Superfly*, though, Lutz is now setting his sights on the entire world.

Having only been green-lighted this past November, the remake had formerly been a prized but ultimately unattainable project for a slew of filmmakers who had all been turned down.

"I feel like it was serendipitous," Lutz explains of the project, which brought on producer Steven R. Shore, son of the original film's producer Sig Shore, as part of a collaborative effort between those who had had a hand in the original and a group of fresh voices to deliver and remix the film for a new generation.

"The timing wasn't some grand master plan – it's been 20 years that [producer] Joel Silver has been trying to make this movie," adds Lutz. "So, it came together now just in time to be really relevant to the world we're in."



Over the past two decades, Toronto's Julien Christian Lutz (a.k.a. Director X) has transitioned from local wunderkid status to one of the most in-demand music video directors on the planet. He has been a fierce cultural ambassador for Toronto, but with *Superfly*, Lutz is now setting his sights on the entire world. QUANTRELL D. COLBERT/SONY PICTURES

Known for his James Turrell-inspired colour-scapes and hyper-lush portrayals of ordinary life, Lutz wanted to remain as close to the original film as possible while also adding his signature aesthetic flair.

It's an approach that cleaves from his 2015 debut full-length, *Across the Line*, in which Lutz prioritized storytelling over style as he tackled Nova Scotia's tenuous history of race relations.

Whereas *Across the Line*'s non-descript suburbs underscored the quiet, continued existence of racism in Canada, in *Superfly*, Lutz utilizes extravagant stylistic flourishes and extreme situations as a playground for his characters' moral decisions (Priest experiences nearly every epiphany behind the seat of a luxury car), their actions becoming the anchor that brings the film back to the real world.

"Creatively, it was really like, 'What's our balance?' Because I didn't want to push everything so far visually or narratively that we totally left reality," he says. "I asked, 'Who are the characters and what happens to them?' Then from there we said, all right, 'What doesn't translate from 1972 to 2018?'"

The original 1972 film was a foundation of the blaxploitation genre, becoming legendary for its soul-funk soundtrack written and produced by Curtis Mayfield.

For the remake, producers tapped a similarly positioned heavyweight, Atlanta rapper Future, to sit at the helm of the soundtrack, which has already hit No. 1 on the Billboard charts. It's impossible to miss the

ways *Superfly* offers up a heady retrofit of the original.

The new version of protagonist Youngblood Priest (Trevor Jackson) is in a committed polyamorous relationship, while the gritty street dealers who tussled with 1972's Priest are now a meticulously organized crew called Sno Patrol, clad in all-white uniforms ("They're more Stormtrooper than they are actual people," Lutz explains).

While the drug use in the original film was abundant, in 2018's *Superfly* it is either implied or reserved for its cast of crooked cops and morally decayed antagonists.

"I didn't want to create these super cool characters and then associate them with snorting," Lutz says.

"There's just no message you can put on that to not make that the coolest thing." Perhaps most striking is the positioning of the film's female characters. The 1972 version saw them as ornamental, existing to supplement the extravagance of their male counterparts. In Lutz's version, they play a pivotal role, often navigating the direction of the plot and delivery of crucial subtext.

Priest's two partners, the poised Georgina (Lex Scott Davis) and spunky Cynthia (Andrea Londo), are the backbone to Priest's business, while the kingpin of a Mexican drug cartel is a no-nonsense grandmother who calls all the shots.

"All the female characters that pop up in the movie are all strong, intelligent bosses; complicated and in charge of whatever

situation," Lutz says. "Lead female characters need to be just as strong and awesome as the hero."

You know heroes hang together, birds of a feather flock together."

With Lutz's signature eye for subtle vibrancy, *Superfly* is a Hennessey-soaked action flick where grindhouse and martial arts meet the glitz that has defined the social perception of the Atlanta rap scene. At its core, *Superfly* advocates for a bootstrap-hoisting, universal viability of the American dream, where anyone can take the reins and redirect the course of their own future.

"I recognized how American [the film] is," Lutz says. "I was pushing for that. Being Canadian you recognize that in a way that you want to double down on what this is."

While the original film was met with push-back from the NAACP for its negative portrayal of black characters on screen, Lutz selects to emphasize an alternative social history in his remake.

"I think the original *Superfly* was a cathartic movie for the community, which is why people loved it so much, when those dirty cops got their comeuppance," he says.

"In *Superfly*, they got to have a moment where we won, where we had the upper hand, even if it was just a fantasy. That's why you go to the movies, to live in that fantasy for a second and then back out to the world."

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TODAY'S KENKEN SOLUTION

24x	6	1-	2-	5+
2	6	4	3	5
6	2	3	5	1
12+	3	4	5	1
3-	2-	5-	2-	5
1	3	6	4	2
4	5	1	2	3
5	1	2	6	4

TODAY'S SUDOKU SOLUTION

2	3	5	6	4	7	9	8	1
4	7	8	2	1	9	6	5	3
9	1	6	8	5	3	4	2	7
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1	8	4	7	9	5	2	3	6
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8	9	1	3	6	2	5	7	4
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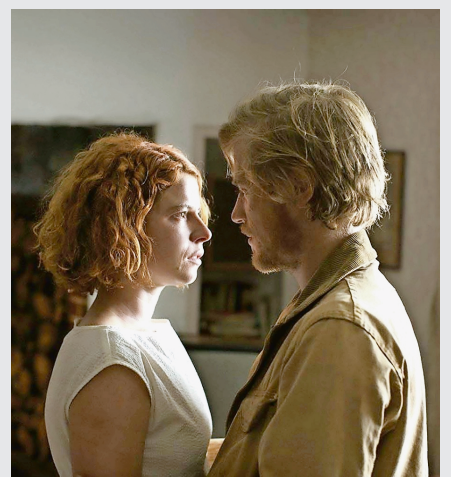
ALSO PLAYING

Beast
CLASSIFICATION: 14A; 107 MINUTES

★★½

With an eye for arresting imagery and a particularly fine performance from Jessie Buckley, director Michael Pearce makes an impressive debut in this thriller about a rebellious young woman who escapes her controlling family with a ne'er-do-well suspected in a series of sex slayings on the island of Jersey. Buckley is still and seething as the unhappy Moll while Geraldine James is aggressively nasty as her mother, the all-too-convenient bourgeois villain. But the charming Johnny Flynn ultimately struggles to find the right tone for the boyfriend, not helped by a director who hasn't quite mastered the rhythm required for his surprise ending.

KATE TAYLOR



Jessie Buckley and Johnny Flynn star in *Beast*.

Tag
CLASSIFICATION: 14A; 100 MINUTES

★★★★

Jeremy Renner broke both his arms when a stunt went wrong during the filming of *Tag*, a rambunctious comedy based on the true story of adults who have been playing the child's game for decades. Perhaps there's a message there – that actors should leave violent pratfalls to the professionals and that adults should leave the amusements of their youth behind. That is decidedly not, however, the message of the testosterone-spilling romp that is *Tag*. Jon Hamm, Jake Johnson, Ed Helms and Hannibal Buress star as friends united in the cause of finally "tagging" Renner's character Jerry, a ninja-like alpha male physically more nimble and mentally many steps ahead of his boyhood pals.

As such, he has never, ever heard the words "you're it" applied to him. First-time director Jeff Tomsic is enamoured with tricky camera techniques, some of which work. More consistently successful are scenes stolen by Isla Fisher (as a spiffire who takes the game uproariously seriously) and the wry observations of stand-up comedian Buress, who seems to be portraying a version of his on-stage self. Add to that the soul and sentimentality that elbow their way past the shenanigans and you have a film that is touching in a clumsy, boyish way that adults will understand and may even applaud.

BRAD WHEELER