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Tokyo Film Festival: Payback Focuses on the Grim Realities of the Philippines



A still from Brillante Ma Mendoza's Payback which premiered at the Tokyo Film Festival

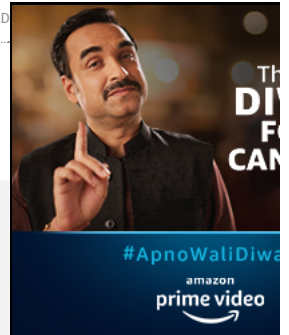
Payback unfolds against the hip-hop culture to narrate the story of corruption and election rivalry, and the movie uses a young man to take us deep into this slimy world.

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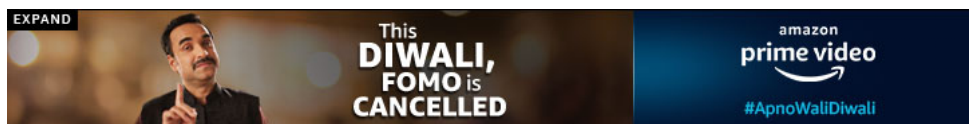
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The Filipino auteur, Brillante Ma Mendoza's latest outing, Payback – which was featured in the ongoing Tokyo International Film Festival, evoked one interesting comment. He continues to make “energetic

and its experiences during martial law in The Philippines. Gensan Punch mixed street conflicts with bouts in the boxing ring.

Payback unfolds against the hip-hop culture to narrate the story of corruption and election rivalry, and the movie uses a young man to take us deep into this slimy world. Vince Rillon is Isaac, a youth who runs a tricycle taxi in the city of Mandaluyong, but is sucked into the deep pit of crime when his father gets into trouble with a motorbike dealer, Jepoy Martinez (Albie Casino).



The film has many parallels with India like booth capturing, fake ballots, open bribery and promises made but never kept. And there are motorcycle thefts, with Martinez heading a gang of boys that goes out into the streets to steal vehicles. But somewhat like India again, he is a respectable politician for the masses, who can do no wrong. Helped by his eminently crooked uncle and mother, Martinez has a free run, and Isaac becomes his chief operator.

Isaac is very much a creature of circumstance, and when his younger brother, Peter (Nash Aguas), inadvertently sparks a riot, all Hell breaks loose. Isaac has to use all his smartness to get Peter out of trouble. And between feeding his family and some deft bike stealing, Isaac is neck-deep in trouble himself.

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Payback has some great action scenes, some lovely motorcycle chases with Isaac trying to ward off his attackers. These are highly realistic and there are several such sequences. Some are ugly: when children catch rats in exchange for rice. Such is poverty. The filth strewn around is even more revolting. When fumigation takes place, hundreds of cockroaches scamper out, and the camera lingers on them. A bit too realistic, I would imagine. But Mendoza is unflinching in his resolve to show us all the grime and dirt. And Joshua A Reyes's hand-held photography gives all these a sharp focus.

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In the end, Mendoza is unfazed while telling us what is what, and he wants us to watch all that. The view is "jaundiced" and highly critical and probably does not provoke anger in The Philippines – as it sometimes does in India. Once Satyajit Ray's cinema was criticised in Parliament; one member felt that it was selling poverty to the world at large. Was it Nargis?

(Author, commentator and movie critic has covered the Tokyo International Film Festival for several years)

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