Sadako vs. Kayoko

With Japan’s two most famous fright franchises having squeezed sequels dry, “Sadako vs. Kayoko” splices them together like a human centipede. The result: the J-horror to end all J-horrors. Director-writer Koji Shiraishi knows that self-parody is the only way to go with this crazy combination, contriving a goofy way to make the vengeful spirits from “Ringu” (a.k.a. “The Ring”) and “Ju-on: The Grudge” cross paths for a twisty-crawly smackdown. Ingenious marketing has created buzz ever since the two characters made a side-splitting ceremonial first pitch before a baseball game in Hokkaido. The film boasts long-festive legs and will be a jamboree for audiences when it screens at Toronto’s Midnight Madness section. Shudder, AMC’s Digital Networks’ streaming service, holds North American rights. MAGGIE LEE

Nocturnal Animals

A nice, polite, middle-class man goes after the homicidal goons who brutalized his wife and daughter (the plot of the 1974 Charles Bronson film “Death Wish,” and a thousand revenge thrillers just like it). Torn between romance and money, a woman betrays the sensitive female love she loves in order to go with the wealthy player who can provide the life she desires (a plot that goes back to Edith Wharton, or maybe “Dallas”). “Nocturnal Animals,” the first film Tom Ford has written and directed since his stunning debut feature “A Single Man” in 2009, draws its lurid, heavy-breathing elements from deep inside the well of pulp and noir and soap opera. Yet Ford, the celebrated fashion designer, doesn’t just recycle pulp — he aestheticizes it by taking it dead seriously. He strives to turn pulp into art. “Nocturnal Animals” is a suspenseful and intoxicating movie — a thriller that isn’t scared to go hog-wild with violence, to dig into primal fear and rage, even as it’s constructed around a melancholy love story that circles back on itself in tricky and surprising ways. With Amy Adams as a posh, married, but deeply lonely Los Angeles gallery owner, and Jake Gyllenhaal as the novelist from whose point of view this movie is told, there are two splendid actors working at the top of their game, and more than enough refined, dramatic excitement to draw awards-season audiences hungry for a movie that’s intelligent and sensuous at the same time.

The credits sequence is an outrageous grabber: a series of heavyset women, nearly nude, jiggling in slow motion and leering into the camera like middle-aged burlesque strippers. It turns out that we’re watching an art installation at the gallery owned by Susan Morrow (Adams), and what it expresses, in a very extreme way, is everything our junky cosmetic culture doesn’t “allow.” It’s a rebuke to monetized, eye-pleasing perfection.

We soon see what Susan is rebelling against: she lives in one of those steely, modernist L.A. mansions that seems designed not to be touched by human hands, and her marriage to the distant, model-handsome Hutton (Armie Hammer), who is some sort of financial wheeler-dealer on the side, turns increasingly violent. The whole setup borders on silver-spoon cliché, but then Ford leads us into another world. Susan has been sent the manuscript of a novel, entitled “Nocturnal Animals,” written by her ex-husband, Edward (Gyllenhaal), with whom she hasn’t spoken for 19 years. She puts on her big glasses, opens the book, and starts reading, and that leads into an extended sequence of hypnotizing intensity: Edward, along with his wife and teenage daughter, are driving through West Texas in the middle of the night, when a car forces them off the road. Inside the car are three nasty, drawing delinquent varmints.

The leader of the gang is Ray, played in long, black sideburns by Aaron Taylor-Johnson, who gives this taunting sociopath a strange kind of depth. On some level, the sequence is pure red-neck Gothic craziness, and on another level, it’s an all-too-real domestic dreamscape of sexual terrorism in which Edward is forced to confront the fact that he’s too “weak” to solve this situation with the kind of heroic action we’re used to, by meeting violence with violence. The movie says, implicitly: He’s not Bronson or Liam Neeson — he’s you or me.

Each time the film cuts back to Adams reading the novel, we’re reminded that none of this may even be happening. But it feels like it. The movie then intercuts what transpired 20 years ago between Susan and Edward, who grew up together in Texas and both wound up in New York, where they reunited and got married. We see the sincerity of their love, but also how the worm of professional failure eats away at their relationship.

Ford is a true moviemaker. He has structured “Nocturnal Animals” beautifully, so that the past feeds into the present, and fiction into reality. In some ways, this film is a cautionary tale about the false gods that can lead one to make the wrong choices.

Reviews in Brief

The 9th Life of Louis Drax

Nine-year-old Louis Drax has a bad habit of dying. Electrocuton, spider bites, drowning. One or two spills like that, and you figure he must have one heck of a guardian angel, but when a kid suffers eight such accidents within the span of so many years, it starts to raise questions about his parents, especially after poor Louis takes a tumble off a tall cliff and into a coma. The last sinster of gore auteur Alexandre Aja’s films by far, this film noir-esque adaptation of Liz Jensen’s page-turner barely musters enough heat to qualify as a potboiler, though Jamie Dornan and Aaron Paul’s involvement should give the overly predictable Summit Premiere release a second life on VOD following a short stint in theatres. PETER DEBRUGE

Roadside Assistance

Director: Koji Yakusho, Canadian Shannon star in Tom Ford’s thriller “Nocturnal Animals.” has become a sham; they are actually broke, and trying to keep up appearances as Hutton jets off to New York to prop up another deal.

The whole setup borders on silver-spoon cliché, but then Ford leads us into another world. Susan has been sent the manuscript of a novel, entitled “Nocturnal Animals,” written by her ex-husband, Edward (Gyllenhaal), with whom she hasn’t spoken for 19 years. She puts on her big glasses, opens the book, and starts reading, and that leads into an extended sequence of hypnotizing intensity: Edward, along with his wife and teenage daughter, are driving through West Texas in the middle of the night, when a car forces them off the road. Inside the car are three nasty, drawing delinquent varmints.

The leader of the gang is Ray, played in long, black sideburns by Aaron Taylor-Johnson, who gives this taunting sociopath a strange kind of depth. On some level, the sequence is pure red-neck Gothic craziness, and on another level, it’s an all-too-real domestic dreamscape of sexual terrorism in which Edward is forced to confront the fact that he’s too “weak” to solve this situation with the kind of heroic action we’re used to, by meeting violence with violence. The movie says, implicitly: He’s not Bronson or Liam Neeson — he’s you or me.

Each time the film cuts back to Adams reading the novel, we’re reminded that none of this may even be happening. But it feels like it. The movie then intercuts what transpired 20 years ago between Susan and Edward, who grew up together in Texas and both wound up in New York, where they reunited and got married. We see the sincerity of their love, but also how the worm of professional failure eats away at their relationship.

Ford is a true moviemaker. He has structured “Nocturnal Animals” beautifully, so that the past feeds into the present, and fiction into reality. In some ways, this film is a cautionary tale about the false gods that can lead one to make the wrong choices.