



# MONGOL

Autumn  
Season  
2008

From the **New York Times** review:

*Mongol* - or, as I prefer to think of it, "Genghis Khan: The Early Years" — is a big, ponderous epic, its beautifully composed landscape shots punctuated by thundering hooves and bloody, slow-motion battle sequences.

Directed by the protean and prolific Russian filmmaker Sergei Bodrov (who wrote the script with Arif Aliyev), it is, among other things, a stubborn defense of old-fashioned, grand-scale moviemaking. (It is also an old-style international co-production financed by some fairly new players in world cinema, including companies in Kazakhstan and Mongolia.) Without irony or digital effects "Mongol," the first installment in a planned trilogy, tells the story of a solitary man's rise to a position of great power.

Mr. Bodrov follows his hero, a young warrior named Temudgin (played by the Japanese actor Tadanobu Asano), from boyhood to the eve of world conquest in 1206, when he would become the Genghis Khan known and feared by millions. There are some gaps in the narrative, but the portrait that emerges is of a reformer and a unifier, a leader who consolidates rival tribes and factions and who modernizes some of the traditional Mongol ways.

At his side in these efforts are a few allies and, above all, his wife, Borte (Khulan Chuluun), to whom he is betrothed as a child and to whom he remains loyal in spite of many setbacks and temptations. When she is kidnapped by marauding Merkits, Temudgin musters a small army to bring her back, a mission that astonishes his friend Jamukha (Honglei Sun). "What Mongol ever went to war for a woman?" he wonders.

"Mongol" moves solemnly across the decades, accumulating rich ethnographic detail and enough dramatic intrigue to sustain a viewer's interest through the slower stretches. While it takes a sympathetic view of young Genghis Khan — whose name, in the West, is a synonym for rapacity — it does not force him into conformity with modern sensibilities. His world feels authentically raw and refreshingly archaic, and also strangely beautiful.

Directed by Sergei Bodrov; written by Arif Aliyev and Mr. Bodrov; directors of photography, Sergey Trofimov and Rogier Stoffers; WITH: Tadanobu Asano (Temudgin), Honglei Sun (Jamukha), Khulan Chuluun (Borte), Odnyam Odsuren (Young Temudgin).

**Empire** review (some plot spoilers): Drawn from the one extant piece of original source material - The Secret History Of The Mongols, a curious blend of myth, legend and apparent fact - Sergei Bodrov's Oscar-nominated *Mongol* is an impressive piece of epic filmmaking. The ancient manuscript, like many sagas, is somewhat repetitive, moving swiftly from a mythical 'origin' story into the early life of Genghis Khan (Tadanobu Asano) - or Temudzhin as he was originally known - which unfolds in a seemingly endless cycle of triumph and loss. Life on the ancient steppe was dominated by tribal warfare, as horsemen constantly battered one another in a bid to capture livestock, women, and good grazing for their herds.

For Bodrov, this presents a challenge. He conceived the film as the first part of a trilogy, and it extends no further than the moment when Temudzhin vanquishes Jamucha (Honglei Sun), his former blood brother, to position himself on the cusp of greatness. The director sifts through the multiple layers of betrayal and revenge that lead to that point, a sequence that could disintegrate into a bloody, martial monotony.

Thankfully, the Secret History contains an intriguing chapter in which a rival clan kidnaps Temudzhin's intended spouse, Borte (Khulan Chuluun), and the director develops her role to the point where she plays a pivotal part in her husband's political and spiritual evolution. *Mongol* offers a considered portrait of Genghis, with Borte's presence adding depth to the warlord's emotional makeup; if there is simplicity in his and his brethren's actions, they are simple folk. Bodrov also benefits immeasurably from his leading man's performance, with Japanese actor Asano Tadanobu bringing a confidence and quietude to the part, which in turn adds gravitas to his epic journey. Like many sagas, *Mongol* carries its principal player through a period of shadow, when he is imprisoned by the Tangut kingdom. He endures his privations with grace and dignity. When he emerges, freed by Borte's cunning, he goes on to fulfil his destiny, his journey painted on a truly epic canvas. The cinematography, rendering the stark, unworldly beauty of the Central Asian Steppe, is astounding.

## Verdict

With its breathtaking landscapes, bloody battles, bitter betrayals and an aching love story, *Mongol* is a sumptuously crafted epic.