



With an US\$80 million budget, which makes *Red Cliff* (赤壁) the most lavish Asian production to date, and a running time of more than four hours, which has seen the movie split into two installments, John Woo's (吳宇森) Chinese sword-and-sandals epic marks a triumphant return home for the director after 16 years in Hollywood. Set in the Three Kingdoms period of China's history and centering on the legendary Battle of Red Cliffs (赤壁之戰), the epic sees Woo live up to his reputation as a masterful storyteller who reinvigorates a somewhat overworked and clichéd genre with a good old-fashioned narrative developed by a rich cast of capable actors. Set during the Han Dynasty's death throes, the film opens with shrewd Prime Minister Cao Cao (Zhang Fengyi, 張豐毅) sending his million-strong army and a sizable fleet off on an unprecedentedly large campaign to forge a unified empire. Unable to match Cao's army, the benevolent exiled leader Liu Bei (You Yong, 尤勇) sends his military strategist Zhuge Liang (Takeshi Kaneshiro, 金城武) to secure an alliance with Sun Quan (Chang Chen, 張震), a southern warlord. Buttressed by formidable warriors



Not all Chinese sword-and-sandals epics are made equal, as John Woo proves with his lavish production, *Red Cliff*. PHOTOS: AP AND COURTESY OF CINEPLEX

such as Zhao Yun, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu (Tony Leung Chiu-wai, 梁朝偉), Zhuge Liang successfully contrives to defeat Cao's vastly superior land force. The victory proves to be Pyrrhic when the allied forces find themselves confronted by Cao's fleet of more than 2,000 warships anchored off shore. As the decisive battle looms, the two military masterminds scheme to secure victory. Having opened in China, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan yesterday, this is the diptych's first segment. The second part is scheduled for release

Once more unto the breach

With 'Red Cliff,' John Woo restores credibility to Chinese epic filmmaking

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

in Asia in January of next year. The epic's lengthy running time is justified by Woo's grand narrative, which is told in the vein of *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*. With the filmmaking luxury of length, Woo defines his characters through anecdotes and slowly builds up the tensions and the contrasts between

the two opposing sides, which culminate in a Good vs Evil finale. Though there are lavish sets, spectacular choreography and massive battle scenes enhanced by CGI effects, it is the substantive narrative that sets *Red Cliff* apart from the glut of big-budget Chinese historical dramas that have

Film Notes

RED CLIFF (赤壁)

DIRECTED BY: JOHN WOO (吳宇森)

STARRING: TONY LEUNG CHIU-WAI (梁朝偉) AS ZHOU YU, TAKESHI KANESHIRO (金城武) AS ZHUGE LIANG, ZHANG FENGYI (張豐毅) AS CAO CAO, CHANG CHEN (張震) AS SUN QUAN, LIN CHI-LING (林志玲) AS XIAO QIAO, HU JUN (胡軍) AS ZHAO YUN, ZHAO WEI (趙薇) AS SUN SHANGXIANG, NAKAMURA SHIDO AS GAN XING

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME: 84 MINUTES (FIRST OF TWO PARTS)

TAIWAN RELEASE: ON GENERAL RELEASE

military wisdom is made sexy and enthralling when Takeshi Kaneshiro and Tony Leung Chiu-wai take on the roles of master tacticians in a complex battle that involves a maze-like military formation. Woo's unconventional interpretations of historical figures have caused controversy. Doubts serviced when the director cast Japanese-Taiwanese actor Takeshi Kaneshiro as one of China's most revered scholars. If audiences expect the heartthrob to exude Chinese virtue and be the living embodiment of intellectuality, they'll be sorely disappointed. Instead, the actor gives the crusty character Zhuge Liang a playful update, bringing a sometimes slightly sissy young scholarly strategist to the big screen. The casting of Taiwanese supermodel Lin Chi-ling (林志玲) also raised a few eyebrows, but she manages to hold her own in the film. With *Red Cliff*, Woo proves that China's rapidly developing film industry has both the know-how and talent to make Hollywood-style blockbusters. The country also has a seemingly inexhaustible archive of historical narratives to plunder at will, so expect many more to follow. Hopefully, more will be as well-made as this one.

This year, it's ladies first for a change

Between Charlize Theron in 'Hancock' and the rest of the stars below, this summer is suddenly looking like the 'Ride of the Valkyries' at box offices

BY TY BURR AND WESLEY MORRIS
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Every year around this time we hear the complaints: There aren't enough good parts for women, actresses are relegated to decorative supporting roles, the movies have become a man's world. We beg to differ, at least for the moment. *Sex and the City* has already proved there's a vast female audience desperate for entertainment, and *Wanted* has unexpectedly posited Angelina Jolie as the season's new action hero. (The movie's opening weekend in the US attracted a 52 percent female audience, thank you very much.) Between Charlize Theron in *Hancock* and the stars of the films below, this summer is suddenly looking like the *Ride of the Valkyries* at the box office. * Eve in *WALL-E* Guys: Have you ever met a woman who was just out of your league? That's what the look in *WALL-E*'s lenticular eyes says when he meets the gleaming, laser-sling-



From left to right: Actresses Charlize Theron, Angelina Jolie, Kristin Davis, Cynthia Nixon, Kim Cattrall and Sarah Jessica Parker. PHOTOS: AGENCIES

ing space probe from the mother-ship. Yet *WALL-E* works as a literally star-crossed romance while convincing us that Eve (voiced by Elissa Knight) could save the human race from its own worst impulses. Just don't get her angry. * Abigail Breslin in *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl* She wields a typewriter instead of a gun, but Breslin's Kit Kittredge is exactly as tough as you need to be to get through the Great Depression with family and soul intact. The movie lets the character skate along the edge of despair but refreshingly saves Kit



from cynicism. The hardest task in this movie is keeping faith, and Breslin channels the courage and everyday decency of an earlier era. * Galina Vishnevskaya in *Alexandra* The movie about the babushka who drops in on her soldier grandson at his barracks could have been some kind of sitcom. But not when the granny is the grand dame Vishnevskaya. The Russian opera diva's maternal force dominates Alexander Sokurov's dreamy antiwar picture.



She looks fearsome when holding a rifle, but she's even more moving when wondering why men need such stupid things. * Cate Blanchett in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* It's great to see Karen Allen back, but the fourth Indy adventure only kicks into gear when Blanchett's Colonel Dr Irina Spalko is strutting about barking orders like an S&M fusion of Natasha Fatale and Fearless Leader from *Rocky*

Hathaway stands beside Carell more than she stands next to him. Contrary to Jolie's example, the definition of strength is not a woman's ability to hold a pistol. It's her ability to resist using it on a shamelessly funny co-star. * Hiam Abbass in *The Visitor* The best news about the movie's unhappy detour to an immigrant detention center is Abbass's arrival as the inmate's mother. Her refined beauty and mannerly carriage make her seem too delicate for the outrageous situation into which she's been swept. But by the end, you're floored by the realization that this patient, thoughtful woman is the strongest character in the film. * Ronit Elkabetz in *The Band's Visit* The leader of an Egyptian police band — a prim, sad man (Sasson Gabai) — is marooned with his men in a flyspeck Israeli town and forced to shack up with the local cafe owner (Elkabetz). She is everything he isn't: wild-haired, funky, oozing humor and weariness and sex. Is this a love story? Of sorts, but it's really a

comedy about a cautious man confronted with a gloriously uninhibited woman. * Lainie Kazan in *You Don't Mess With the Zohan* If women who go to movies are underserved, women who appear in them are undersexed. So it's Adam Sandler's Israeli assassin-turned-hairstylist to the rescue. He makes love to half the seniors in New York, and Kazan is his first and most unflappable partner, holding court with the hilarious wisdom of a dame who's been around the block. If not sexually, then comedically for sure. * Angelina Jolie in *Wanted* They call her ... Fox. Go ahead and laugh; she'll laugh with you, and then break your spine. Jolie's cool-eyed assassin is much the best part of this resplendently noisy summer boy's-toy, mostly because she's the only one who seems to know how silly it all is. Regally insinuating herself into the mayhem, the star riffs on her Amazonian public image and amps it up a few notches. There's no sex scene, though — who'd have the nerve?