

## FILM REVIEW

## It's teatime

'Tea Fight' has all the looks of a box-office draw — but looks aren't everything

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER



The Taiwanese and Japanese co-production *Tea Fight* (鬥茶), actor and theater director Wang Ye-min's (王也民) film directorial debut, opened in Japan last month.

The film's draws are readily apparent, as are its shortcomings. *Tea Fight* features Nippon's favorite Taiwanese heartthrob, Vic Chou (周渝民) of F4, and teen idol Erika Toda starring in a comically convoluted drama about the two countries' tea cultures. The production lacks cohesion as Wang employed an overly theatrical rather than cinematic approach, with artificial lighting and acting techniques taken straight from the stage.

The film opens with a once-upon-a-time story set in the Song Dynasty and two groups of thriving tea-makers: a bellicose male Black Tea Tribe and a peace-loving female Black Tea Tribe.

The two groups had kept to themselves merrily producing black tea until a male Japanese apprentice from the female side provokes the members of the other group by taunting them about the quality of their tea. In response, the male tea tribe massacres the female tribe and



Vic Chou, above, and Chang Chun-ning, top right, make an insipid kingpin and seductress in *Tea Fight*, which owes more to the stage than it should.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CREATIVE CENTURY ENTERTAINMENT

destroys its tea plantations.

Fast-forward to present-day Kyoto, Japan, and Yagi (Teruyuki Kagawa), a descendent of the Japanese apprentice, closes down his tea shop after his wife's death, which he believes was caused by a curse invoked by his forefather.

Anxious to help her father get back on his feet, Yagi's teenage daughter Mikiko (Erika Toda) sets out on a journey to Taiwan to find a descendent of the male tribe after she learns that the only way to break the curse is to beat him in a tea-making competition.

Meanwhile, in Taipei, Yang (Vic Chou, 周渝民) is the ruthless kingpin of an underground tea market and a descendent of the male tea tribe



who schemes against Ruhua (Chang Chun-ning, 張鈞甯), a descendent of a member of the female tea tribe who miraculously escaped the massacre. Yagi follows his daughter to Taipei to protect her.

The denouement doesn't come a moment too soon, when the four meet in what the director probably intended to be a climactic tea-making competition that forces the participants to confront the demons in their hearts. No one wins. The credits roll.

*Tea Fight* begins with a promising premise that draws

elements from the perennial motif of food-making competitions abundant in Japanese comics and animations, and the tale about ancient China is fertile ground for fantasy. The first half of the film looks set to blossom as an attractive commercial flick, as the story about Yagi and Mikiko unfolds in the manner of a J-pop soap opera. However, when the action switches to Taiwan the film loses focus, as it is told through a series of vignettes strung together not by a strong narrative but for visual entertainment. A theatrically

lit illegal tea-trading den looks like a stage set, and several sequences have pantomime acting accompanied by voice-overs.

Standing squarely in the spotlight is the blue-haired Vic Chou, who looks like a kitsch computer-game character and delivers the narrow range of emotional expressions that gives pop idols-turned-actors a bad name.

But perhaps not everything is for naught. With scenes of verdant tea plantations and shots of Japan and China, the film may serve some purpose in promoting tourism.

## OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

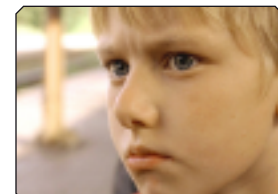
## My Brother is an Only Child

Last week this newspaper's film review excoriated *Mrs Ratcliff's Revolution* for, among other things, trivializing Iron Curtain oppression. A similar accusation might just be leveled at this film, set in postwar Italy, in which fascism and communism are the developmental playgrounds of two brothers from a leftist family. But the real concern of the filmmakers is not the political realities of 20th-century Italy as much as vivid family drama. Critics were kind to this film; the *San Francisco Chronicle* called it "a provocative character study and portrait of the times."



## Tricks

Rave reviews and awards came from the European festivals that featured this unusual, unsentimental Polish comedy-drama. A precocious young boy in a mining town conspires to have a man whom he thinks is his father return to the family, all the time using strange "tricks" he has learned from his newly adult sister. The Chinese title translates as "Train-Chasing Diary" and refers to one of the boy's favorite activities while riding a motorcycle with his sister's boyfriend. Director Andrzej Jakimowski is a name to watch.



## My Mom's New Boyfriend

George Gallo is not a household name, but he did write the screenplay for *Midnight Run*, one of the best American films of the 1980s. This is his latest effort as writer-director and stars Meg Ryan as a sexually voracious older woman whose FBI agent son (Colin Hanks) has her latest conquest (Antonio Banderas) under surveillance for art theft. You can guess what happens next, so start cringing. This is a straight-to-DVD-in-the-US offload, despite the lead actors, which means you may as well stay home and rent *Midnight Run* instead.



## Doraemon the Movie: Nobita's New Great Adventure into the Underworld — The Seven Magicians

Our best blue friend returns in this feature released last year in Japan, itself a remake of a 1984 *Doraemon* entry. *Doraemon* and Nobita enter a magical alternate universe in which every human has magical powers — except Nobita, of course. This has to change very quickly when a demonic celestial body is discovered to be hurtling toward their planet. Notable as the first in the series to be directed by a woman (Yukiyo Teramoto); in another first, animation direction is also by a woman (Shizue Kaneko). Also known as *Doraemon the Magic 2007*.



## Spot Seminar Series No. 8

Looking at Movies from Another Angle is the theme for the latest set of lectures on film at the Spot theater in Taipei, and runs until the end of next month. Speakers include Liao Shu-chen (廖淑珍), make-up artist and longtime Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢) collaborator; calligrapher Chen Shih-hsien (陳世憲); and academics and industry professionals. For tickets and booking details (in Chinese), go to [www.spot.org.tw/forum/index8.asp](http://www.spot.org.tw/forum/index8.asp).



## TAIPEI'S TOP FIVE

City cinema weekend box office takings  
(July 26 and July 27)

Source: Group Power Entertainment Corp



■ **Wanted**  
(刺客聯盟)  
NT\$9,577,031



■ **The Dark Knight**  
(黑暗騎士)  
NT\$4,361,518



■ **WALL-E**  
(瓦力)  
NT\$3,547,466



■ **Red Cliff**  
(赤壁)  
NT\$2,367,056



■ **Journey to the Center of the Earth**  
(地心冒險)  
NT\$1,437,084

## REEL NEWS

**Jennifer Lopez** will be able to call on her newly acquired parenting skills for her latest film role, where she plays a professional thief posing as a

nanny, it was reported on Tuesday. *Daily Variety* reported that "7" has confirmed bagging a lead role in romantic comedy *The Governess*, her second movie project since giving birth to twins earlier this year.

The 39-year-old music and acting diva will play a robber planning a bank heist who pretends to be a nanny for children of a wealthy widower, the report said. Filming gets underway later this year.

Lopez, whose last film was 2006's *El Cantante*,

is already working on another project, *Love and Other Impossible Pursuits*, due for release in 2009.

This year's Venice film festival showcasing new offerings by the **Coen Brothers**, **Takeshi Kitano** and **Hayao Miyasaki**, will be dedicated to the late Egyptian director **Youssef Chahine**, organizers said on Tuesday.

The central figure in post-war Arab cinema, Chahine died Sunday aged 82 after spending several weeks in a coma.

"The 65th Mostra will be dedicated to Youssef Chahine, a unique filmmaker: who else could have succeeded in mixing the philosopher Averroes with Fred Astaire? That's what cinema should be about," festival director **Marco Muller** told a press conference in Rome.

The film to which he was referring, *Destiny*, which won the Cannes film festival's 50th anniversary award in 1997, is set in 12th-century Andalusia, with the Arab philosopher Averroes, a harbinger of the Enlightenment, as its dancing hero.

Egyptian screen stars were among around 1,500 mourners who gathered at a Cairo church on Monday to bid farewell to Chahine. Hundreds of celebrities and

Jennifer Lopez, will be able to channel motherhood for her next movie, *The Governess*, which is due to be shot later this year. PHOTO: EPA



Left: Some 1,500 mourners gathered at a Catholic church in Cairo on Monday to bid adieu to Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine. PHOTO: AFP



Right: Venice Biennale president Paolo Baratta, left, and Cine-art director Marco Muller. This year's festival opens on Aug. 27 and is dedicated to Chahine. PHOTO: EPA

officials were crammed into the Roman Catholic Church of the Resurrection, with hundreds more gathered outside as the controversial director's coffin was carried in, draped in the Egyptian flag.

His protege and colleague **Khaled Youssef**, who co-directed Chahine's latest film *Chaos* in 2007, was among the pall bearers.

The congregation included many of the biggest stars of Egyptian cinema — for decades the Arab world's most popular — alongside officials from the ruling National Democratic Party which was often targeted in Chahine's films.

Representatives from other parties across the political spectrum were also in attendance, along with dozens of journalists. Japanese directors Kitano,

with *Achilles and the Tortoise*, and Miyasaki, with his animated feature *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, are among the favorites for the festival's coveted Golden Lion award.

Other strong runners include US director **Darren Aronofsky's** *The Wrestler*, starring **Mickey Rourke**, and French filmmaker **Barbet Schroeder's** thriller *The Beast in the Shadows*.

The festival opens on Aug. 27 with an out-of-competition world premiere for **Joel and Ethan Coen's** *Burn After Reading*, which unites perennial Coen favorite **George Clooney** with **John Malkovich**, **Brad Pitt** and Oscar-winning Scottish actress **Tilda Swinton**.

Australia has hired filmmaker **Baz Luhrmann** to make ads touting the nation as a tourist destination after Prime Minister

**Kevin Rudd** labeled the previous campaign a "disaster."

Luhrmann, director of the upcoming film *Australia* starring **Nicole Kidman**, will use footage from the movie in television ads running in Europe, Asia and North America starting in October until the middle of next year.

"These are challenging times for the tourism industry and I hope this campaign will motivate people around the world to visit Australia," said Tourism Minister Martin Ferguson.

The earlier campaign highlighted the nation's beaches and indigenous culture in television ads that finished with a bikini-clad model asking viewers "Where the Bloody Hell Are You?" The campaign was a "rolled-gold disaster," Rudd said in June. —AGENCIES