



# No exit from Katyn

*Katyn, like Auschwitz or the Somme, is one of those place names the very mention of which calls forth images of death and the breaking of the human spirit*

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER



**K**atyn is one of those place names, like Auschwitz or the Somme, the very mention of which calls forth images of death. Not just the deaths of individuals, terrible as that is in itself, but also the death, the willful ravishing of the human spirit, in the victims as well as the perpetrators.

The title of the film refers to the 1940 Katyn massacre in which an estimated 22,000 Polish prisoners of war were executed by Soviet troops. A concerted Soviet propaganda campaign was subsequently launched to place the blame for the massacre on the defeated Nazi regime, a campaign that, especially in its use of willing or unwilling collaborators, heaped insult on injury.

This is hardly new territory for Wajda, who has made many highly acclaimed feature films exploring Poland's history, especially the depredations of the Soviets. *Katyn* cleaned up at the Polish Film Awards last year, and though the film's appeal may not be quite so apparent outside Poland, it has also been nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at this year's Oscars. The first hurdle to *Katyn* is that considerable knowledge of the complex political maneuvering behind Soviet-German relations during the early 1940s is crucial in appreciating the complexity of the enormous tapestry that Wajda weaves in *Katyn*.

The film juggles a number of story lines. It follows the gradual

## Film Notes

### KATYN

**DIRECTED BY:** ANDRZEJ WAJDA

**STARRING:** ARTUR ZMIJEWSKI (ANDRZEJ), MAJA OSTASZEWSKA (ANNA), ANDRZEJ CHYRA (LIEUTENANT JERZY), DANUTA STENKA (ROZA), MAJA KOMOROWSKA (ANDRZEJ'S MOTHER), WLADYSLAW KOWALSKI (PROFESSOR JAN)

**RUNNING TIME:** 118 MINUTES

**LANGUAGES:** IN POLISH AND RUSSIAN WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

**TAIWAN RELEASE:** TODAY

progress of the Polish officers toward their final destruction and the slow realization that the standards of war they had been taught no longer applied in this new and horrific conflict. It also follows the families left behind, who first hope, then grieve, then revolt against the imposition of lies they are forced to swallow. Wajda presents Poland, with its high intellectual traditions and strong middle-class values, as caught between two messianic regimes that want to recreate the world in their own images.

In the very first scene, we see that Wajda is setting *Katyn* up as a Greek tragedy on a grand scale. Anna (Maja Ostaszewska), the wife of an army officer, flees the Germans only to run

into friends coming the other way, fleeing the Soviets. Which way to run? Poland is caught between the hammer and the anvil. Anna's husband Andrzej (Artur Zmijewski), has a chance to sneak away in the chaos as Polish troops are corralled by the Soviets, but refuses to leave his regiment in the belief that as POWs, he and his troops will be dealt with according to recognized rules of war. His gradual realization that these rules have long since been thrown out the window is heartrending to witness.

And so the film progresses through its 118 minutes, and it is a marvel that Wajda is able to condense so much into such a sort time. In Hollywood, nothing less than three hours would suffice for such an epic, but Wajda is a master storyteller, conveying enormous complexities in three or four lines of dialogue. The emphasis of *Katyn* is political rather than personal, or, more correctly, its focus is the psychological and emotional impact that politics can have on ordinary people. Anna and Andrzej are both

a kind of Polish everyman rather than deeply drawn characters, but they are convincing enough to elicit sympathy at their horrendous plight. Lieutenant Jerzy (Andrzej Chyra), Andrzej's friend and comrade in arms, is a good man who toes the Soviet line in order to live, but shoots himself when he realizes that his actions have lost him everything he values. The characters are sketched with conviction, but you are left in no doubt that the protagonist throughout is Wajda's beloved Poland.

And for the Polish officers held by the Soviets, Wajda lingers over the terrible images of carnage as man after man

is taken from a Black Maria and shot in the back of the head. Some are stoical, others call on Jesus, others are merely bewildered, husbands, fathers, sons, dispatched with a terrifyingly dispassionate efficiency over a scene that runs for more than 10 minutes. This is the final exclamation point on which the film ends, and the harrowing injustice that such an action should have taken place stays with the viewer long after one leaves the theater. And, Wajda seems to say, this is only the beginning, for on top of the bodies lie a mountain of lies, and these lies will breed further injustice and more violent death.



*Katyn*, a nominee for best foreign-language film at this year's Oscars, documents the 1939 Soviet massacre of 22,000 Polish POWs and the ensuing cover-up. PHOTOS COURTESY OF SWALLOW WINGS



Hao Lei shines in *Summer Palace* as the neurotic and vulnerable Yu Hong. PHOTO COURTESY OF ONEPLEX DEVELOPMENT

## They left their hearts in Tiananmen

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER

**W**hen first shown in competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006, *Summer Palace* (頤和園) caused the Chinese government to ban director Lou Ye (婁燁) from making films for five years because he brought the movie to France without official permission.

A candid story about politics and sex, *Summer Palace* irked Beijing not because it has plenty of full-frontal nudity and sex scenes so much as because it directly addresses the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in an intricate and gripping tale that chronicles 14 years, from 1987 to 2001, in the life of a woman named Yu Hong.

It is the fall of 1987 when Yu Hong (Hao Lei), a soulful young woman from a provincial town in northern China, arrives at Beijing University with a reckless appetite for new experiences. Yu's longing to live with maximum intensity, as she confides in her diary, is met through newfound friendships, a series of flings and, especially, her passionate relationship with Zhou Wei (Guo Xiaodong), a fellow student and the love of her life.

Her group of friends goes about exploring the city and themselves, reveling in a world that suddenly seems wide open. These feelings of freedom and youthful euphoria in late-1980s China make anything seem possible.

The sexual and emotional upheavals come to an abrupt end on June 4, 1989, when the People's Liberation Army shoots its way through Beijing to quash the pro-democracy demonstrations centered around Tiananmen Square.

In the aftermath, Zhou joins some of his university friends as an expatriate in Berlin. Yu drops out of school, roaming from city to city, working mundane jobs while clinging to the belief that something poignant and far more than ordinary will someday happen in her life.

Zhou returns to China a decade later and finds Yu. The old lovers arrange a meeting, knowing, however, that they are not the people they once were, and that the world has changed and become almost unrecognizable.

Apparently autobiographical, the film doesn't merely summarize the important events of a troubling recent past. It paints a feverish swirl of emotions, desires and impulses against a backdrop of sociopolitical unrest, and it does so with a sense of personal immediacy and epic grandeur. Lou's breathless handheld camera, jump cuts and tracking shots recall the cinema of the French New Wave and capture well the outburst of freedom and youthful idealism that sweeps his protagonists (and, indeed, his entire generation) in the film's heady first half.

The second half of the film shows the compromises and disappointments that leave this generation of Chinese youth feeling defeated and disillusioned, as Yu Hong and Zhou Wei are seen wandering through the mundane landscape of their lives after an extraordinary moment in history, both personal and collective, has long vanished. Though *Summer Palace*'s running time is close to two-and-a-half hours, no scene in this well-structured and constantly shifting narrative is excessive, no flourish is superfluous.

Hao Lei is unquestionably the strongest presence in the film. As if without effort, the uninhibited actress becomes a character who is complex and headstrong, and yet at the same time vulnerable.

As discussion of the 1989 massacre is still taboo in China, Tiananmen Square can only be represented by the sound of a gunshot in the distance and a spectacle that Lou's protagonists happen upon as innocent bystanders. The momentous event is like a phantom looming in the background, unable to speak because it has yet to be named.

Nonetheless, history reveals itself in fleeting images of violence and passion, much in the same way as love is sketched in the film. Scenes such as sweaty sex in a dorm room, blurred bodies and faces in nightclub, and a rowboat at sunset convey impressions rather than narrative meaning. Love doesn't have motives. It shows itself in strokes of poetry, conjuring up fragments of a distant memory that belong not so much to the characters as to us, the audience.

*Summer Palace* tells a tale in which love and sex intersect with politics. The motifs run parallel, reflect and resonate with each other to summon a collective memory that has yet to be defined and articulated.

## Film Notes

### SUMMER PALACE (頤和園)

**DIRECTED BY:** LOU YE (婁燁)

**STARRING:** HAO LEI (郝蕾) AS YU HONG, GUO XIAODONG (郭曉冬) AS ZHOU WEI, BAI XUEYUN (白雪雲) AS WANG BO, DUAN LONG (段龍) AS TANG CAOSHI, HU LING (胡伶) AS LI TI

**RUNNING TIME:** 140 MINUTES

**LANGUAGE:** IN MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

**TAIWAN RELEASE:** TODAY