

Love songs from Hengchun

Wei Te-sheng's feature film debut has it all: romance, music and a cast of veteran actors and musicians

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER



Director Wei Te-sheng (魏德聖) was 25 when he stepped into the movie business wanting to tell good stories. For the following 14 years, he worked with masters such as Edward Yang (楊德昌) and Chen Kuo-fu (陳國富), and is best known as the wild man who took NT\$2.5 million out of his own pocket to make a five-minute demo in a bid to attract investors for his yet-to-materialize epic about the Seediq Aborigines and their anti-Japanese revolt in 1930.

Wei has put himself further into debt, this time to the tune of NT\$30 million, to make *Cape No. 7* (海角七號), his feature film debut. If nothing else, it is likely to establish him as a more than competent storyteller and maker of warmhearted movies.

The story goes something like this: 60 years ago, a Japanese teacher was forced to leave his Taiwanese lover in the town of Hengchun (恆春) when the repatriation of Japanese nationals began following the end of World War II. Back at home he wrote a letter each day to the lover he would never see again.

Sixty years on, a young man named Aga (Van Fan) returns home to Hengchun after his dream of becoming a rock musician in Taipei falls flat. Reluctantly, Aga takes up a job as a substitute for Uncle Mao (Lin Tsung-ren) after the old postman breaks his leg.

Equally reluctantly, Tomoko (Tanaka Chie) from Japan is asked to stay in Hengchun to supervise a warm-up act scraped together at the last minute for an upcoming concert by Japanese superstar Kousuke Atari. The newly enlisted band members seem, however, less than promising: the reckless Aga, hot-tempered Aboriginal policeman Laoma (Min-Hsiung), auto mechanic Frog (Clipper Xiao Ying) who has a thing for his big-breasted lady boss, elementary school student Dada (Mai Tzu), and Uncle Mao, a *yueqin* (月琴) master.

With the concert just three days away, Uncle Mao is still having a hard time figuring out how to pluck his bass. Aga has yet to write something for the band to play. In fact, the band looks verge of breaking up even before its first gig. There is also the parcel of letters, posted 60 years ago, which Aga is not able to deliver, as the mailing address no longer exists. Amid all of this, a romance begins to bud between Aga and Tomoko.

Though the narration feels forced and stretched at times, Wei does a commendable job weaving together stories of characters from different generations and diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. He has a fine



Cape No. 7 mined Taiwan's indie music scene for much of its cast. PHOTOS COURTESY OF AHS FILM PRODUCTION

command of the vernacular and the troupe of musicians, including pop singer Van Fan, Aboriginal crooner Min-Hsiung, indie musicians Clipper Xiao Ying and Ma Nien-hsien, and real-life *beiguan* (北管) wizard Lin Tsung-ren, share an explosive onscreen chemistry. The weakest link is the romance between Aga and Tomoko. Although Van Fan is reasonably charming as the reticent, bitter teenager Aga, Tanaka Chie is excessively irritated and grouchy, so that even a night of intimacy fails to make the pair into plausible lovebirds.

Film Notes

CAPE NO. 7 (海角七號)

DIRECTED BY: WEI TE-SHENG (魏德聖)

STARRING: VAN FAN (范逸臣) AS AGA, TANAKA CHIE AS TOMOKO, MIN-HSIUNG (民雄) AS LAOMA, CLIPPER XIAO YING (夾子小燕) AS FROG, MA NIEN-HSIEN (馬念先) AS MALASANG, LIN TSUNG-REN (林宗仁) AS UNCLE MAO, MAI TZU (麥子) AS DADA, KOUSUKE ATARI AS JAPANESE TEACHER AND HIMSELF

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN, TAIWANESE AND JAPANESE WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME: 133 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



Lucasfilm's *The Clone Wars* fills in the blanks between Episodes II and III of the *Star Wars* prequels. PHOTOS: AGENCIES



In 'Star Wars: The Clone Wars,' it's all about CGI

BY NATHAN LEE
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Expectations were set so low by George Lucas' lousy trilogy of *Star Wars* prequels that the latest from the Lucasfilm factory, a feature-length digital animation called *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, comes as something of a surprise: it isn't the most painful movie of the year!

Set between Episodes II and III, this new *Star Wars* saga (II.5?) completes the franchise's divorce from photography-based cinema, as well as from any relationship to credible human feeling.

As a mechanical thrill ride, however, *The Clone Wars* has an uncluttered look and furious pace that make it more or less as satisfying as its wildly overdesigned predecessors, although it's neither as agile nor as well made as the terrific series of short, traditionally animated *Clone Wars* installments shown on the Cartoon Network from 2003 to 2005.

The director, Dave Filoni, has cited *Thunderbirds*, the 1960s British animation series with marionettes, as an inspiration for the, uh, wooden style of his picture, but the stiff, self-important characterizations; corny space-war talk; and overheated militarism kept reminding me of *Team America: World Police*.

No more than a pretext for exploding robots and light-saber duels, the plot concerns the efforts of Anakin Skywalker and Ahsoka Tano, his neophyte sidekick, to secure a fragile alliance by retrieving Jabba the Hutt's baby son from the double-crossing clutches of Count Dooku, blah, blah, blah. Exploding robots!

Film Notes

STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS

DIRECTED BY: AVE FILONI

STARRING: MATT LANTER (ANAKIN SKYWALKER), ASHLEY ECKSTEIN (AHSOKA TANO), JAMES ARNOLD TAYLOR (OBI-WAN KENOBI), DEE BRADLEY BAKER (CAPTAIN REX/CLONE TROOPERS), TOM KANE (YODA), NIKA FUTTERMAN (ASAJ VENTRESS), IAN ABERCROMBIE (CHANCELLOR PALPATINE), COEY BURTON (ZIRO THE HUTT), CATHERINE TABER (PADME AMIDALA), ANTHONY DANIELS (C-3PO), CHRISTOPHER LEE (COUNT DOOKU), SAMUEL L. JACKSON (MACE WINDU)

RUNNING TIME: 95 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

Art with a capital 'A,' and acting, too

Martin Freeman's splendid evocation of Rembrandt helps 'Nightwatching' rise above the self-conscious artistry of its composition

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Peter Greenaway is one of those English directors who have embraced the European tradition of the art film, with its ostentatious intellectualism and its consuming passion for post-modernism. But he has occasionally flirted with the mainstream, most notably in his controversial film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), which had something that might be described as a narrative line and the recognizable faces of Michael Gambon and Helen Mirren. He is back in flirtatious mood with his most recent film *Nightwatching*, which is purportedly a biographical snippet from the life of the Dutch Renaissance painter Rembrandt, and which stars Martin Freeman of *The Office* in a truly stunning performance.

It doesn't take many minutes into the film to realize that biography is the least of Greenaway's concerns and that

Film Notes

NIGHTWATCHING

DIRECTED BY: PETER GREENAWAY

STARRING: MARTIN FREEMAN (REMBRANDT VAN RIJN), EMILY HOLMES (HENDRICKJE), EVA BIRTHISTLE (SASKIA), JODHI MAY (GEERTJE), TOBY JONES (GERARD DOU)

RUNNING TIME: 134 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

popular appeal is not uppermost in his mind. This is a film about Art, capital "A," and why art matters, and how art both raises up humanity, yet may also destroy individuals. Freeman shows himself a powerful actor who is able to humanize genius, both in its tormented and obsessive aspects, as well as in the many failings that artistic genius is also somehow



Like the Rembrandt painting it takes as its subject, *Nightwatching* has many subtleties and complexities that reward the attentive viewer. PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZEUS INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTIONS

able to encompass. While Freeman is the best known of the cast, there are some splendid performances, most notably by Eva Birthistle, who plays Saskia, Rembrandt's wife and the dominating female influence in the story.

Unsurprisingly for a Greenaway film, the main subject is itself a work of art. *Nightwatching* is



how Rembrandt's famous painting *The Night Watch* came to be created. The painting depicts a group of citizen militia turning out for a parade, but Greenaway posits that it contains a secret accusation against the men it depicts: the sexual abuse of young children entrusted to their care. Freeman's character accepts the

commission to create a group portrait because of the much-needed money and the kudos it will bring, but cannot resist using the work to accuse the men of terrible crimes, which he learns of during the course of painting the group portrait.

In this respect, comparisons can be made with the otherwise

very different movie *The Da Vinci Code*, in which a picture reveals hidden truths. Greenaway has always insisted on playing games with the way art relates to life, and this is done quite elegantly in *Nightwatching*, as he embarks on a remarkably subtle and detailed analysis of the picture as it is formed on the canvas through the course of the movie while exploring how it resonates through Rembrandt's life and the lives of all those depicted. Rembrandt as played by Freeman has an intense physicality and many, many weaknesses, both of the spirit and the flesh.

Freeman creates a character who is charismatic, vain, insecure, arrogant, talented and intensely stupid all at the same time, and it is this fully realized version of an artist that saves *Nightwatching* from the self-conscious artistry of its composition. It gives the film a beating heart and sets it apart from the soulless pseudo-Brechtian wilderness of something

like Lars von Trier's *Dogville*.

But even Freeman's best efforts cannot overcome the convoluted plot line, which seems to willfully confuse. There are elements of a who-done-it about *Nightwatching*, as Rembrandt gradually gathers the evidence that convinces him that these members of the citizen militia prey on the very society they are sworn to protect, but the plot sags under the weight of an overextended cast and Greenaway's almost pathological disdain for linear narrative. Working out who is who becomes increasingly like an art history exercise of identifying characters in a large and complex Renaissance painting such as *The Night Watch*. But as with the painting, it also has many subtleties and complexities that repay attention, and you leave the cinema wanting to watch the film again in the hope of discovering more from it, rather than simply dismissing it as the intolerable mess that it sometimes appears.