

FILM REVIEW



Director Yang Ya-che's feature debut is a children's film that will give many more serious local productions a run for their money

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Child actors Li Kuan-i and Pan Chin-yu play lovable troublemakers in *Orz Boyz*.

PHOTO: 1 PRODUCTION FILM



Kids' pranks spark

laughs and tears

Orz Boyz (囍男孩), a feature debut by award-winning playwright, novelist and director Yang Ya-che (楊雅喆), tackles a genre not much favored in Taiwanese cinema — children's film. With witty dialogue, an affectionate mood and two untutored child actors, his effort is a triumph that can be enjoyed by children and adults alike.

The film tells a bittersweet tale about two best friends in elementary school. Branded as the school's biggest troublemakers, the two friends, Liar No. 2 (played by Pan Chin-yu) and older classmate Liar No. 1 (played by Li Kuan-



i), are inseparable. Together they tease girls, play pranks on classmates, summon imaginary ghosts, and more. Their teacher, unable to cope, sends them to the library to repair books every day. Instead of fixing books, the more literate No. 1 becomes a great storyteller, reading stories to his one-man audience, No. 2. Their imaginations run wild, allowing the two to escape from their troubled home lives.

The friends decide to save money to go to a water park together. The spiral waterslide at the park, as they believe, is a portal to Oz, a wonderland where children turn instantly into adults and live happily ever after.

Competently scripted and directed, the film doesn't rely on expensive CGI effects to recreate the fantastic world of childhood. Instead, the children's whimsical cosmos is brought to life through innocent escapades and imaginative games. Hints are given of the boys' difficult family situations to build up psychological depth. The audience gradually learns that No. 2 and his baby cousin are being raised by their elderly

grandmother and that No. 1 lives in a shack on a bend of the Tamsui River with his mentally disturbed father.

By alternating the boys' lives with charming animation sequences inspired by Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and the Brothers Grimm's *Pied Piper of Hamelin*, Yang ingeniously leaves room for the audience to reflect and reminisce on fragments of their own memories. Animator Fish's contribution to the film is worth a special mention for his work in realizing a dreamy Taiwanese cityscape lit by neon signs and filled with concrete buildings, above which the Happy Prince stands.

But it is the two child actors who are the real stars of the show and give the film its special glow. Though neither has been formally trained in acting, they are as natural as the most experienced veterans and share amazing onscreen chemistry. Comedians by nature, they create some of the film's most hilarious moments with veteran actress Mei Fang (梅芳), whose grandmother character is arguably the most lovable adult role seen on the big screen in years.

Orz Boyz (囍男孩) proves that with a well-written story and strong cast, local productions can be more attractive than Hollywood blockbusters, for here are familiar scenes of traditional markets, street life and school life, grandparent figures and childhood memories that speak directly to a local audience.

Film Notes

ORZ BOYZ (囍男孩)

DIRECTED BY: YANG YA-CHE (楊雅喆)

STARRING: LI KUAN-I (李冠毅) AS LIAR NO. 1, PAN CHIN-YU (潘親御) AS LIAR NO. 2, MEI FANG (梅芳) AS GRANDMOTHER

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN AND TAIWANESE WITH ENGLISH AND CHINESE SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME: 110 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

Unsolved equations

'*Emotional Arithmetic*' casts a sceptical eye on grand propositions about remembering the past

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

The accepted wisdom is that those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. *Emotional Arithmetic* does the sums on this proposition and suggests that memory is not necessarily an unadulterated good. As its point of departure, it takes the uneasy reunion of three survivors from Drancy, a transit camp in Vichy France for Jews bound for Auschwitz. They meet in the idyllic surroundings of rural Canada, full of red maple, glistening lakes and snow-capped mountains, and into this Eden they bring their memories, their hurt and their love, which were formed in the dark days of the Holocaust.

Emotional Arithmetic is an intimate drawing-room drama that wants to make some big points about how we should remember the past, but also about how we must embrace the present. This rather didactic quality brings to mind the plays of J.B. Priestly or Terence Rattigan, which are very much out of fashion these days.

A wonderful cast is headed by Susan Sarandon, who plays Melanie Lansing Winters, a woman still suffering from depression as the result of her childhood ordeal

Film Notes

EMOTIONAL ARITHMETIC

DIRECTED BY: PAOLO BRAZMAN

STARRING: GABRIEL BYRNE (CHRISTOPHER LEWIS), ROY DUPUIS (BENJAMIN WINTERS), DAKOTA GOYO (TIMMY WINTERS), CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER (DAVID WINTERS), SUSAN SARANDON (MELANIE LANSING WINTERS), MAX VON SYDOW (JAKOB BRONSKI)

RUNNING TIME: 99 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

in the camp. She has invited the aging poet Jakob Bronski (Max von Sydow) to her lakeside lodge which she shares with her husband David (Christopher Plummer). Bronski brings along Christopher Lewis (Gabriel Byrne), Melanie's childhood friend from Drancy, whose attachment — love is too unambiguous a word for the complex relationship — to Melanie remains unaffected by years of separation.

The cast alone is worth the price of admission, for each puts in a magnificent if understated perfor-



mance. Director Paolo Brazman is unfortunately unwilling to let these fine actors simply get on with telling their story through words, looks and eloquent silences, and feels that dramatic themes need to be underlined with flashbacks to fill in the back-story, and somewhat heavy-handed imagery, such as rain washing away the words of a diary kept by Melanie of her days in Drancy. But these are small hiccups, and *Emotional Arithmetic* can be enjoyed for some fine moments of dialog and the overall mood of civilized malaise that the characters try to keep under control, if not always effectively.

Approached by an officious neighbor to introduce her friend Christopher, Melanie

Susan Sarandon, right counts the cost of her friendship with the elderly Max von Sydow, above.

PHOTOS: BESTMOVIE



disingenuously — and with a bitter irony directed at herself — says that they "met at camp."

Plummer puts in a lovely performance as the older husband who lives in a state of constant frustration with his wife's memories.

"Being a victim of some terrible apocalyptic event does not make you a saint," he says, venting his frustration over playing host to this Holocaust survivors club.

But in fact, the elderly von Sydow manages a wonderful evocation of a man close to sainthood, a man who could conceivably put himself through years of torture in concentration camps and the gulag to ensure the safety of two children. The tragedy is that Melanie's undying gratitude and total commitment to Brodski's belief at the time that nothing should be forgotten has driven her to the edge of madness, an obsessive keeper of information about the victims from various persecutions. "We have 6,000 Jews living in our attic," Plummer's character blurts out at one point.

The mood is anti-heroic, skeptical, always with one eye raised about any broad statement of truth, and while the scale of the production is more like a television drama than a feature film, it is a thoughtful work that dares raise occasional challenges to the cut-and-dried verdicts of history. After all, whatever has gone before, life still has to go on, and those who did not suffer still need to be loved and cared for.

Too much of a good thing

Hallam Foe tries to be too many different kinds of movie all at once and comes apart under the strain

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



Above, Jamie Bell as Hallam Foe, watching and waiting. Below, with Sophia Myles, as Kate Breck.

PHOTOS: FILM

There are so many good things about *Hallam Foe* that the feeling of dissatisfaction one feels on leaving the cinema is particularly perplexing.

First and foremost in *Hallam Foe*'s appeal is Jamie Bell, last seen in a leading role as a 13-year-old in *Billy Elliot*. Since then there have been minor parts in *King Kong* (2005) and *Jumper* (2008), about which the less said the better. In *Hallam Foe* he has a worthwhile role, and shows himself to have survived his stint as a child actor and carried his talent into maturity. He plays the title character, the sensitive son of a wealthy architect who has become somewhat unhinged by his mother's death. He develops a rather unsavory skill as a picker of locks and Peeping Tom, goes on to suspect his father's new wife of murder and then stalks and eventually seduces a woman he sees on a Glasgow street because she looks like his mother.

To some extent, it is Bell's success in realizing the character of Hallam Foe and his ability to bring his psychosis to life that is the undoing of this film. The problem is that Hallam is just not a very nice boy, and when, midway through the film, director David Mackenzie decides to change tack, swerving drunkenly for psychological thriller to romantic comedy, the mood is just way out of kilter. Mackenzie's attempt to turn Hallam's paranoia against his stepmother and his systematic prying into the life of a young woman to fulfill ill-defined Oedipal longings into something of a lark comes off as more queasy than quirky.

This change of direction wrong-foots Bell and sends Sophia Myles, who plays Kate Breck, the object of Hallam's infatuation, reeling, the underpinnings of her character knocked out from under her. Myles conveys a lovely combination of toughness and vulnerability in the first half of the film, but both these qualities are stretched to breaking point when stalker turns lover after a rude uncovering of Hallam's unsavory pastime of watching Kate her in her bedroom through the skylight. This plays off against a subplot, never quite fully realized between Hallam and Kate's occasional lover, Alasdair. Hallam tries to blackmail Alasdair, who sets up a scenario in which Hallam, in his role as Peeping Tom, is made to watch him have sex with Kate. Mid-coitus, Alasdair looks up to the skylight behind which he knows Hallam is hiding and gives him the finger.

These dark themes of sexual need and exploitation drive the film along at a steady pace and are given context by a couple of lovely cameos by Maurice Roeves and Ewen Bremner as less-than-lovable below-stairs types in the hotel at which Hallam works. Claire Forlani is wonderful as Hallam's stepmother, full of dignity but not above turning vicious when her position is threatened — there is a hint, if nothing more, that she would be capable of murder.

One gets the idea that Mackenzie wants to make a neat little knot from the two strands of Hallam's relationships with Kate and his stepmother, but instead these two strands slip through his hands and wander off in separate directions. To solve the problem, Mackenzie opts for the easy payoff of a romantic comedy, and even this is handled with delicacy, but by this point the film is going in too many directions at once.

Film Notes

HALLAM FOE

DIRECTED BY: DAVID MACKENZIE

STARRING: JAMIE BELL (HALLAM FOE), SOPHIA MYLES (KATE BRECK), CIARAN HINDS (JULIUS FOE), MAURICE ROEVES (RAYMOND), EWEN BRENNER (ANDY), CLAIRE FORLANI (VERITY FOE)

RUNNING TIME: 95 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

