

F I L M R E V I E W

# For two movie titans, a long-awaited clash



Robert de Niro and Al Pacino go macho-a-macho with each other in this paint-by-the-numbers police thriller

BY MANOHLA DARGIS  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK



Robert de Niro and Al Pacino have squared off only once on the big screen before *Righteous Kill*. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

Film Notes

RIGHTEOUS KILL

DIRECTED BY: JON AVNET

STARRING: ROBERT DE NIRO (TURK), AL PACINO (ROOSTER), CURTIS JACKSON (SPIDER), CARLA GUGINO (KAREN CORELLI), JOHN LEGUIZAMO (DETECTIVE PEREZ), DONNIE WAHLBERG (DETECTIVE RILEY), BRIAN DENNEHY (LIEUTENANT HINGIS), TRILBY GLOVER (JESSICA), ROB DYRDEK (RAMBO)

RUNNING TIME: 100 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

Oh, if only Robert Aldrich were alive! The pulpmeister of the horror lollapalooza *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* certainly knew how to build a grand showcase for his corrugated divas (Bette Davis and Joan Crawford), while the hapless Jon Avnet hasn't a clue what to do with his (Al Pacino and Robert De Niro). In *Righteous Kill* these two godheads of 1970s cinema go macho-a-macho with each other — furrowing brows, bellowing lines, looking alternately grimly serious and somewhat bemused — in a B-movie (more like C-minus) duet that probably sounded like a grand idea when their handlers whispered it in their ears.

De Niro and Pacino have squared off only once before on the big screen, in Michael Mann's 1995 thriller, *Heat*, in which they spent most of the film in separate story lines, joined only by the parallel editing and a late-act, disappointingly anticlimactic meeting at a diner. They share far more face time in *Righteous Kill*, playing well-seasoned New York City Police Department detectives and long-term partners who take turns clucking at each other like hens while swaggering around town like gamecocks. True to strut, pouf and wattles, Pacino's cop goes by Rooster, while De Niro is just Turk, which doesn't appear to be short for Turkey, though it sure does help to pass the time if you think about it.

Time, alas, doesn't so much pass in *Righteous Kill* as crawl, despite the usual overcutting, which tries to pump energy into the inert proceedings. Avnet, whose last movie was the clunker *88 Minutes* (one of Pacino's worst), is not a natural director, to put it kindly. His handiwork is most evident in the unsteady tone, though to be fair it's always hard to know who deserves most of the blame for this kind of star-struck, suit-crammed (eight producers, three executive producers, one co-producer) mush. Suffice it to say that everything from the camera placement to the cheap use of the consistently good, lamentably underemployed Carla Guginno is shoddy. (Note to Avnet: Yes, Guginno has breasts, but, really, her acting is more interesting.)

Like most actors, Pacino and De Niro need a strong hand, some kind of visionary authority to put them in their best light and prevent them from leaning on the tics and tricks — Pacino tends to turn up the volume, while De Niro glowers until he looks ready to pop — that now too often mar their performances. *Righteous Kill*, a clutter of recycled cop-movie and serial-killer film clichés (it's hard to believe that the screenwriter, Russell Gewirtz, also wrote *Inside Man*), is far from their worst effort. And the two have some nice moments with each other and some of the other actors. Pacino seems to be genuinely moved during his final showdown with De Niro, or maybe he's just a sweet sentimental fool.

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Melody's Smile

A deceptive title, this; the original French title is *La Chambre des Morts*, which gives viewers a much better idea of what's in store (the Chinese translates as "Sample of a Smile," which is somewhere in between). The *Hollywood Reporter* raved about this "horror classic," in which single mother and detective Melanie Laurent closes in on a duo of sick puppy lesbian kidnappers as a ransom goes missing. The multiple viewpoint style of *Rashomon* collides with *The Silence of the Lambs* in this depiction of the worst and best that humanity has to offer.



Always: Sunset on Third Street 2

A sequel to the 2005 original, this film is essential viewing for anyone who has lived in Tokyo. Following several story strands, Part 2 mixes good-natured neighborhood and family melodrama with another widescreen presentation of unusually detailed and moving special effects that recreate the Japanese capital of the late 1950s. *Variety* and the *Japan Times* disagreed on the accessibility of this film for those who didn't see the first one; that debate is quickly shut down by a quick trip to the DVD store.



One Piece The Movie: Episode of Alabaster — The Desert Princess and the Pirates

Part 8 in Japan's *One Piece* theatrical saga has Princess Vivi of Alabaster and our trusty band of Straw Hat Pirates travel once again to the scorched kingdom. This time it's to do battle with a formidable crocodile who heads a criminal network and who has designs on the kingdom's subjects, and is prepared to use the most nefarious means to take power. Lots of fight scenes for the faithful.



4bia

In case you don't get the pun, this film is also listed as *Phobia*. Four of Thailand's better suspense directors deliver short pieces for this "portmanteau horror film," but with titles like *Happiness*, *Tit For Tat*, *In the Middle* and *Last Fright*, it may seem more like *Twilight Zone: The Movie* than *Creepshow*; the last episode even takes place on an aircraft. Still, ghostly images on a cellphone, curses, ghost stories that come true and animated corpses should please fans of the latter minor classic.



The Love of Siam

This pastel-shaded Thai youth film pits female fans of a boy band frontman against his unstoppable desire for another young gentleman who has reentered his life, all the while coping with dysfunction in the latter's family. Amid military coups and the protests of an autocratic middle class, Thailand keeps churning out gay and ladyboy-themed flicks such as this to the delight of local audiences, a phenomenon one would be hard pressed to find anywhere else. *Variety* says the film courts gay audiences and their straight friends; one could add to this list indiscriminating fans of boy-band music.



Winds of September PLUS The Pain of Others

With local productions *Cape No. 7* and *Orz Boyz* doing splendidly at the box office, the producer of *Winds of September*, a coming of age drama set in Hsinchu, is re-releasing the film to boost its modest haul. There are two more incentives this time around to see it. The first is a cut price ticket of NT\$150; the second is a bonus, award-winning short film from 2005 by *Winds* director Tom Shu-yu Lin (林書宇), *The Pain of Others*, a drama about military service. Screening exclusively at Xinyi Vieshow.



TAIPEI'S TOP FIVE

City cinema weekend box office takings (Sept. 13 and Sept. 14)  
Source: Group Power Entertainment Corp



■ Cape No. 7 (海角七號) NT\$8,187,336



■ Hellboy II: The Golden Army (地獄怪客II: 金甲軍團) NT\$3,476,094



■ Mamma Mia! (媽媽咪呀!) NT\$878,604



■ Orz Boyz (囡男) NT\$860,516



■ You Don't Mess With the Zohan (特勤沙龍) NT\$574,797

REEL NEWS

Communist North Korea rolled out its version of the red carpet this week when the reclusive state opened its biannual international film festival, allowing its masses to watch forbidden foreign films.

Movies are near to the heart of leader Kim Jong-il, a fan of *Daffy Duck*, *Steven Spielberg* and *Elizabeth Taylor*, who is thought to have a library of about 20,000 films that includes all of the James Bond movies, intelligence sources have said.

Kim, who is suspected of suffering a stroke in recent weeks, usually does not attend the event. But his state's propaganda machine

typically runs a news item at the time of the festival praising him as a "genius in cinematic art."

In state media reports late on Wednesday monitored in Seoul, the North said the festival "was opened with due ceremony," which included an all-women marching band. Instead of stars in designer clothes, it brought ageing cadres in dark suits to the stage.

In recent years, the North has screened about 70 films from about 30 countries at the festival, that include its own movies as well as films from Europe, the US and the Asia-Pacific region.

North Koreans can normally be thrown in jail for watching unauthorized foreign movies.

But during the 10-day festival, they have seen films such as *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Whale Rider*, which is a far cry from the home-grown product that is heavily steeped in its state's communist ideology.

In other festival news, US

German actor Til Schweiger arrives at the premiere of the film *The Baader Meinhof Complex* at the Delphi Cinema in Berlin on Tuesday. PHOTO: REUTERS

actress *Meryl Streep* will receive a lifetime achievement award at the San Sebastian film festival which got underway yesterday in northeastern Spain with 15 movies in competition for the best movie award.

She will receive an honorary Donosti — which means San Sebastian in the Basque language — along with Spanish actor *Javier Bardem* who earlier this year won his first Oscar for his supporting role in *No Country for Old Men*.

Streep has won two Oscars — in 1980 for *Kramer vs Kramer* and in 1983 for *Sophie's Choice* — and been nominated 12 other times.

Organizers expect some 200,000 people to attend the 56th edition of the festival, the oldest and most prestigious event of its kind in the Spanish-speaking world, over its 10 days.

This year's festival will feature films from all five continents and fewer movies from Latin America.

"We have plenty of established directors this year like *Kim Ki-duk*, *Kore-Eda*, *Christophe Honore* or *Michael Winterbottom*," the director of the festival, *Mikel*

*Olaciregui*, said "This year, given the criticism received by the Venice Film Festival, we feel we have a potent and competitive festival. Maybe we were better at convincing directors to take part," he added.

Among the films in competition for the festival's Golden Shell for best film is British director Michael Winterbottom's *Genova* starring *Colin Firth* as a widower who takes his two daughters to Italy after the death of their

mother in a car crash.

The festival will also feature retrospectives of the works of British filmmaker *Terence Davies*, director of *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*, of the comedies of 93-year-old Italian filmmaker *Mario Monicelli* and of Japanese post-war film noir.

Last year's Golden Shell for best film went to Hong Kong-born *Wayne Wang's* (王穎) *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*.

Germany has nominated a

true-life film about the 1970s Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang for an Oscar as best foreign movie of the year, its film export board said on Tuesday, just hours before the VIP premiere of the movie in Munich.

Launched under the German title *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, the movie describes the rise and fall of a group of urban terrorists who conducted bank robberies, kidnappings and assassinations while dreaming of a communist revolution in West Germany.

The initial nomination for the February 2009 Oscars was made by a panel of judges appointed by the German Films board. About 100 countries are expected to make similar nominations.

A short list of five foreign films from round the world will be selected as final nominees by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in January, with the winner to be announced Feb. 22, 2009.

Spanish actor *Antonio Banderas* and his wife, US actress *Melanie Griffith*, arrive at the 56th San Sebastian International Film Festival yesterday in San Sebastian, northern Spain. PHOTO: EPA

