

## FILM REVIEW

## Three times the fun

The three shorts showing at Spot over the following three weeks showcase Taiwanese cinema's emerging talents

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER



From left to right: *The End of the Tunnel* by Chang Rong-ji; *Summer Afternoon* by Ho Wi-ding; and *Family Viewing* by Kuo Cheng-chu.

The unexpectedly huge box office successes of *Cape No. 7* (海角七號) and *Orz Boys* (囡男孩) are looked upon by defenders of Taiwanese cinema as a sign of revival. Audiences are being gradually drawn back to the theater to watch local productions, they say, since younger generations of filmmakers think of cinema not only as tool of personal expression but a medium through which to entertain.

If the three shorts that hit the screen at Spot — Taipei Film House (台北之家—光點) starting tonight are any indication of what can be expected in the near future, then the Taiwanese movie industry is in for a renaissance of sorts.

*The End of the Tunnel* (天黑) by Chang Rong-ji (張榮吉) is a genre-bending boy-meets-girl story about a talented young pianist who lost his eyesight when he was little. He meets a lovelorn schoolmate through music. The newly found friendship takes both of the characters out of their respectively closed cosmoses and into the world.

Ho Wi-ding's (何蔚庭) *Summer Afternoon* (夏午) starts off as an innocent road movie with three friends arguing and bickering on their ride in the countryside. Things take a shocking turn when the annoying backseat driver takes control.

*Family Viewing* (闔家觀賞) by Kuo Cheng-chu (郭承衢) begins with a French TV crew barging into a family's home in Taipei to document the life of a typical Taiwanese family for a French reality show. Agreeing to be followed by cameraman Pierre for the weekend, the father, mother and daughter hospitably show how they live and what they think in front of the lens, and in the process reveal family secrets that lead to an unexpected denouement.

Having co-directed documentary feature *My Football Summer* (奇蹟的夏天) with veteran documentary director Yang Li-chou (楊力州), young filmmaker

Chang once again demonstrates his aptitude for blending the fictional and non-fictional genres in *The End of the Tunnel* where reality, memory, dreams and fiction are spun into an arresting swirl of emotions.

Featured previously in Chang's documentary film about a group of visually impaired people, musician Huang Yu-xiang (黃裕翔) is the inspiration of the well-scripted *The End of the Tunnel* and plays himself in the film. Promising young actress Sandrine Pinna (張榕容) is well cast as the young woman, who turns in an admirably natural and seemingly spontaneous performance that is more in the league of documentary filmmaking.

Malaysia-born, US-trained and Taiwan-based Ho first came to the attention of international film circuit with his highly stylish, SARS-themed post-apocalyptic short *Respire* (呼吸). *Summer Afternoon* is another of the director's filmic experiments with his cinematographer friend Jake Pollack. Comprising five long takes and shot in black-and-white, the film draws the audience into a deceptively simple story with Pollack's fluid camera work that tracks, moves in and out of the car, circles and floats around the characters, engaged but unnoticed.

In *Family Viewing*, the camera never moves. It stands still as a quiet observer. The world Kuo and his steadfast camera capture is a seemingly stable and secure straight family that is at the same time stuffy and repressive.

Veteran actress Lu Yi-Ching (陸奕靜) is excellent, as usual, as the mom, matched by seasoned actor Li Tien-chu's (李天柱) seemingly effortless performance. Taiwanese cinema's new favorite Guey Lun-mei (桂綸鎂) dabbles in light comedy, with slight success. The biggest flaw of the film is its hasty ending, which may leave audiences unsatisfied.

## Film Notes

## FAMILY VIEWING (闔家觀賞)

DIRECTED BY: KUO CHENG-CHU (郭承衢)

STARRING: LU YI-CHING (陸奕靜) AS THE MOTHER, LI TIEN-CHU (李天柱) AS THE FATHER, GUEY LUN-MEI (桂綸鎂) AS THE DAUGHTER, BRYAN POLANICH AS PIERRE

RUNNING TIME: 28 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH ENGLISH AND CHINESE SUBTITLES

## Film Notes

## THE END OF THE TUNNEL (天黑)

DIRECTED BY: CHANG RONG-JI (張榮吉)

STARRING: HUANG YU-XIANG (黃裕翔) AS THE YOUNG MAN, SANDRINE PINNA (張榕容) AS THE YOUNG WOMAN

RUNNING TIME: 37 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH ENGLISH AND CHINESE SUBTITLES

## Film Notes

## SUMMER AFTERNOON (夏午)

DIRECTED BY: HO WI-DING (何蔚庭)

STARRING: KE HUAN-RU (柯奂如) AS TRACY, WANG YU-TAN (王榆丹) AS JANE, KAO YING-HSIUAN (高英軒) AS VINCENT

RUNNING TIME: 18 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH FRENCH SUBTITLES

## Film Notes

## QUEENS

DIRECTED BY: MANUEL GOMEZ PEREIRA

STARRING: VERONICA FORQUE (NURIA), CARMEN MAURA (MAGDA), MARISA PAREDES (REYES), MERCEDES SAMPIETRO (HELENA), BETIANA BLUM (OFELIA), GUSTAVO SALMERON (HUGO), UNAX UGALDE (MIGUEL), HUGO SILVA (JONAS), LLUIS HOMAR (JACINTO)

RUNNING TIME: 107 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

LANGUAGES: IN SPANISH WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

## ‘Women of a certain age’

Manuel Gomez Pereira delights in making his middle-aged actresses even more attractive than the stylish young actors ‘Queens’ is ostensibly about



It's not difficult to tell which queen reigns supreme in Manuel Gomez Pereira's movie. PHOTO COURTESY OF ZEUS INTERNATIONAL

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER

*Queens* (Reinas) tells the story of a bevy of gay men who are about to be married in a group wedding to celebrate the legalization of homosexual unions in Spain. But though there is no shortage of petulant drama queen behavior from this group of stylish young men, the real queens of this movie are the mothers.

Superficially a gay-themed movie — outside of Spain, it has played mostly in gay and lesbian film festivals since it opened in 2005 — its best roles are played by Veronica Forque, Marisa Paredes, Mercedes Sampietro and Carmen Maura (the best-known of the ladies to English-speaking audiences, having featured in many of Pedro Almodovar's films). These women are the royalty of Spanish cinema, and though none of them could be considered young, director Manuel Gomez Pereira delights in making these “women of a certain age” even more attractive than his eligible male actors.

Pereira nails his colors on a scene early on in which Marisa Paredes, who was 59 when the film was made, walks down the stairs of a luxury apartment. She's wearing a flowing evening gown that falls low off the shoulders, and walks to the torrid strains of Michael Buble doing a cover of Peggy Lee's *Fever*. Pereira's camera lingers, caressing every line, both the curves and the wrinkles. It is utterly gratuitous, and totally lovely, managing to be both touching, funny, camp and enormously sexy. For anyone with a mother complex, or a grandmother complex for that matter, this is essential viewing.

Much else in the film is equally gratuitous and absurd, but Pereira clearly couldn't care less. His film is a farce, with all kinds of complications as workers at the hotel where many of the wedding participants are staying go on strike, an old English sheepdog goes walkabout, infidelities are revealed, the presiding judge has a heart attack and the queens — both male and female — generally act out. Pereira manages to draw all the improbable strands together, forming a framework for his real objective, which is to charm the audience. He has a light touch, and is aided by a brisk script with lots of amusing moments and a good command of comic pacing (the story is revealed through a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards that adds a frenetic energy and complexity), but the story itself is really just a piece of fluff.

What makes *Queens* more than just a pastiche of stylish images and amusing jokes is the director's very touching admiration for his leading ladies. There is Paredes, who plays a well-known actress, Veronica Forque, an aging nymphomaniac (“It is a weakness, I always have sex with the most inappropriate people.”), Carmen Maura, the owner of a hotel catering to a gay clientele, Mercedes Sampietro, the judge who will preside over the wedding, and Argentine actress Betiana Blum, who causes havoc with her sticky-beaking. Their faults range from homophobia to nymphomania, bossiness, arrogance, appalling ignorance of those supposedly closest to them, greed, selfishness and on and on. Pereira delights in every petty-minded, self-seeking moment, so that he can, at the right moment, highlight the gorgeousness within. They are awful, but we can't help loving them to bits.

The men, with the exception of Lluís Homar who plays a gardener who has a fling with the wealthy Paredes, are nothing more than comic ciphers. That's really all they are expected to be, and anyone looking for any exploration of gay relationships or gay marriage will not find it here.

*Queens* is an homage to the older woman (though fortunately there is plenty of tongue in cheek) and the young men about to be married can be seen as far more innocent than their gorgeously, gloriously scheming mothers.

## Hollywood and Hong Kong cinema spawn a handsome hybrid

Popular director Benny Chan renders the remake of ‘Cellular’ attractive to local audiences by staying true to Hong Kong's cinematic sensibilities

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER

Dubbed the first Chinese remake of a Hollywood blockbuster, *Connected* (保持通話) takes its story from David R. Ellis' *Cellular*, and was shot by Hong Kong's foremost action flick director, Benny Chan (陳木勝).

With a top-notch cast led by Nick Cheung (張家輝), Louis Koo (古天樂) and Liu Ye (劉燁), Chan proves that movies translated from West to East can be attractive to local audiences brought up on the fine tradition of Hong Kong action cinema.

Fast-paced and dynamic, the film wastes no time in introducing its female protagonist Grace (played by Taiwan's Barbie Hsu, 徐熙媛). A widowed electronic engineer, and mother to a daughter, Grace finds herself in



a car crash, then kidnapped by some gangsters involved in a murder that her younger brother had witnessed and recorded on camera, and locked up in a hut. Cut to Bob (played by Louis Koo, 古天樂), a single dad who works a dead-end job as a debt collector and can barely keep his family together. On his way to see his son off at the airport, Bob receives a phone call from Grace, who drew on her engineering know-how managed to put a smashed phone back together but could only dial a random number.



Believing Grace and her family are in mortal danger, Bob takes the information to the police only to be told the call was as a phone prank. He then takes matters into his own hands.

Enter detective Fai (played by Cheung), a former rising star of the force who fell from grace and was demoted, who launches a one-man investigation.

The Hollywood transplant has been renovated in a quintessentially Hong Kong style. The elements are all there: well-executed fight choreography;

adrenalin-stimulating car chase sequences; the timeworn plot of good guys versus corrupt cops; and of course, a dash of Hong Kong-esque humor. The film's production values are unquestionably high and slick, exemplified in the scene where a crane swoops down on Koo who is trapped in a car that dangles on the edge of a cliff.

Though not without a few far-fetched plot devices, the action thriller coaxes viewers to suspend disbelief with a bevy of characters that have well-developed motivations and personalities. Liu makes a charming and slightly psychotic villain. Cheung, a favorite supporting actor in Hong Kong, shines as a family-man police officer who clings to virtues that no longer apply to the contemporary world. Koo turns in a convincing performance as an

unlikely hero who struggles to be a good father and helps to soften the film's hard edge with a father-and-son subplot drama.

## Film Notes

## CONNECTED (保持通話)

DIRECTED BY: BENNY CHAN (陳木勝)

STARRING: LOUIS KOO (古天樂) AS BOB, BARBIE HSU (徐熙媛) AS GRACE, LIU YE (劉燁) AS THE KIDNAPPER, NICK CHEUNG (張家輝) AS DETECTIVE FAI

RUNNING TIME: 110 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN AND CANTONESE WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

As with most action movies in which the female lead serves as an eye-pleasing prop, Hsu is easily overlooked amid the strong male cast. Apparently, the star needed more practice and training to master her craft than her costars. Perhaps she should seriously consider shedding the pretty-faced pop idol look next time she plays a character who is kidnapped and tortured.

Never has a female kidnap and torture victim managed to keep her makeup so intact as Barbie Hsu in *Connected*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BVI

