

The devil reads 'Pravda'

A young girl travels to Moscow with a head full of dreams
— and a willingness to do anything to make it to the top

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

IN *Gloss* (Glyanets), *The Devil Wears Prada* is transplanted to Russia and inhabits a world that would chew up and spit out anyone as principled and lovely as Anne Hathaway. There are plenty of preening designers and bitchy models, but in the world of *Gloss*, people are bought and sold — literally — and a red-hot soldering iron is regarded as a legitimate tool for business negotiations.

Gloss tells the story of Galya, a young girl from a dirt-poor town in the coal mining badlands of the Russian interior who is mesmerized by the models she sees on TV and in fashion magazines. She dumps her alcoholic father, bitter mother and gangster boyfriend and heads for the Big Onion — Moscow. With only a single item in her portfolio, a slutty photo that she managed to post in a local rag, it's no surprise that things don't go smoothly when she runs up against the glitterati. But Galya, who doesn't have the type of good looks modeling agencies in Moscow are looking for, is as tough as nails and willing to do anything, but anything, to make it to the top. This includes a stint as a talent scout and manager of a glorified brothel that pairs up models (who imitate Hollywood film stars) with members of Russia's new rich looking for trophy wives. And suffice to say, she's willing to go further than that.



Gloss, like *The Devil Wears Prada*, is intended as a comedy, but the humor is black as sin and while there is a happy ending of sorts, this rags-to-riches story leaves a trail of broken and destroyed lives along the periphery that cannot be wholly ignored and which lingers long after the film ends. It is this that makes the film interesting, for with a point of departure so similar to *The Devil Wears Prada*, it is hard not to feel that *Gloss* is just a low-budget remake.

It is in fact much more than that, and *Gloss* can be appreciated for its very different sensibility. That said, the film, quite apart from its off-hand appropriation from *The Devil Wears Prada* and other Hollywood movies, has the feeling of having been somewhat haphazardly cobbled together.

Yuliya Vysotskaya, who plays Galya, does a fine job in developing her personality from the ambitious, ignorant young girl from the back-of-beyond to the hardened woman making it on the fringe where the rich and the criminal gather. She manages to be constantly sympathetic, while remaining someone you would probably never want to have dealings with. But in the end, Vysotskaya's efforts are not quite enough. The story is too loose, and the acting too uneven, to be convincing.

Director Andrei Konchalovsky is probably best-known for films such as *Runaway Train* (1985) with Jon Voight and Rebecca De Mornay and *Tango and Cash* (1989) with Sylvester Stallone and Kurt Russell. He also has a slew of critically acclaimed art house work to his credit. In *Gloss*, there are occasional sparks of the rough-and-ready power that made the low-budget *Runaway Train* such a masterful work, but it has none of that film's discipline, nor the narrow focus that gave its anti-hero (Voight) a certain tragic dignity. In the end, *Gloss* fails to either convincingly put a layer of gloss on the world of fashion (which *The Devil Wears Prada* did even while pretending to remove it) or convincingly remove it.

The characters in *Gloss* make Meryl Streep's Miranda Priestly look like Dharma Master Cheng Yen.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOINT ENTERTAINMENT INTERNATIONAL



Film Notes

GLOSS

DIRECTED BY: ANDREI KONCHALOVSKY

STARRING: YULIYA VYSOTSKAYA (GALYA),
IRINA ROZANOVA (ALINA), ALEKSANDR
DOMOGAROV (MISHA KLIMENKO), YEFIM
SHIFRIN (MARK), ALEKSEI SEREBRYAKOV
(STASIS), GENNADY SMIRNOV (PETYA),
ILYA ISAEV (VITEK)

RUNNING TIME: 118 MINUTES

LANGUAGES: IN RUSSIAN WITH CHINESE
SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

The Sparkle in the Dark (黑道之無悔今生)



Set in Taiwan but largely a Hong Kong production, *The Sparkle in the Dark* tells the story of an orphan whose tragic and grisly loss and inability to adapt to subsequent home life leave him marooned in a world of hatred and drug abuse. Eventually he gets involved with gang members, among whom he finds support, animosity, romance and — judging by the trailer — no shortage of machete violence. Most of the songsters starring in this effort hail from Hong Kong, which isn't likely to lend the movie any verisimilitude. That's possibly the reason why this downbeat flick is being released in only one theater in Taipei (Vieshow Xinyi).

Eagle Eye



The big-budget release for this week is a chase film in which the pursued (Shia LeBeouf and Michelle Monaghan) are caught up in a plot involving government security forces, terrorism, a renegade supercomputer with a female voice and an FBI interrogator (Billy Bob Thornton). *Eagle Eye* has Steven Spielberg as executive producer, but that doesn't necessarily lend it the trenchant worldview that marks his later films, such as *Minority Report* and *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. Expect big explosions, crashing trucks and disposable paranoia instead. Also screening in IMAX format.

Igor



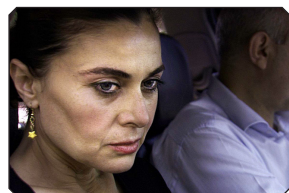
Produced by a French animation company, this US coproduction is a film for kids that explores the world of the title character who, like his fellow Igors, works for mad and bad scientists. Our Igor (John Cusack), however, makes the leap to mad scientist himself, creating new creatures for sinister ends — but with results that don't quite live up to expectations. As usual for bigger budget animated features, *Igor* has a noteworthy cast of voice talent (Christian Slater, John Cleese, Steve Buscemi, Jay Leno, Arsenio Hall), but this time around the script and animation have resulted in a "mirthless," "underimagined" and "strenuously unfunny" movie, according to *Variety*.

Fear Factors (恐懼元素)



Two short thrillers combine for this feature-length outing from Hong Kong — which the Hong Kong Movie DataBase's review claims was shot on the cheap in unfinished Chinese office blocks. In the first yarn, a dying man and his female abductor are confined in a room as flashbacks paint a more complicated picture. The second has a meat vendor come upon an inheritance in the form of a factory — if he can survive an encounter with a knife-wielding lady wearing the obligatory white sheet. Perhaps released in Taiwan to take a bite out of *4bia's* slice of the box office pie, this undistinguished pairing might even struggle to make money on DVD, let alone in its limited theatrical release.

Three Monkeys



A real downer awaits audiences with this Turkish entry. A fatal accident prompts a politician to convince his driver to take the rap, but the reward he promises once the latter leaves jail doesn't save anyone involved from deteriorating relationships with spouses, children and lovers. The title seems to refer to the act of shunning responsibility, and the moral of the tale leaves no way out, while some suggest that the scenario is a metaphor for Turkey as a whole. For this film, Nuri Bilge Ceylan won the Best Director award at this year's Cannes film festival.

Vow of Death



A couple of months ago the Thai film *The Coffin* taught us that lying in coffins when you're not dead is an overrated tradition that can shorten one's lifespan. In *Vow of Death*, also from Thailand, a bunch of teenagers clearly suffering from excessive parental expectations discover that a supernatural tree, which they hoped would help them with exams, has been ripped from the ground and wants them dead. More than a year-and-a-half since its home release, this one is entering theaters here with virtually no fanfare.

They're out!

Film Notes

CITY WITHOUT BASEBALL (無野之城)

DIRECTED BY: LAWRENCE LAU (劉國昌) AND YUN XIANG (雲翔)

STARRING: HEUNG TZE-CHUN (香港) AS CHUN,
LEUNG YU-CHUNG (梁宇聰) AS CHUNG, JOHN TAI
(戴于程) AS COACH TAI, JASON TSANG (曾建忠) AS
JASON, LIN YUAN (林苑) AS MEI ZHI, MONIE TUNG
(鍾敬利) AS KIM

RUNNING TIME: 132 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN CANTONESE WITH CHINESE AND
ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

Billed as a sports movie, 'City Without Baseball' has less to do with the sport itself and more to do with homoeroticism and repressed sexuality

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Billed as a sports drama based on the experiences of the real-life members of Hong Kong's baseball team who play themselves in the film, *City Without Baseball* (無野之城) explores the little-known story of the official baseball team in a city where the game is virtually unheard-of. On the surface, it seems like a melodramatic sports movie. But a closer look shows it to be something altogether different.

Building up to the 2004 Asia Baseball Cup tournament in Pakistan, the film focuses on three characters: Coach Tai (John Tai, 戴于程), who arrives in Hong Kong from Taiwan to train the team for the big game; the team's

starting pitcher, Chung (Leung Yu-chung, 梁宇聰); and his not-so-popular teammate, Chun (Heung Tze-chun, 香港). Insecure about his position both in the team and in his relationships with women, Chun starts dating Mei Zhi (Lin Yuan, 林苑) after finding out that his girlfriend has cheated on him. Mei Zhi, however, becomes infatuated with Chung when she meets the macho pitcher. Chung, meanwhile, develops an interest in Kim (played by Monie Tung), who he almost accidentally runs over when she tries to commit suicide by getting in front of his car. And complicating matters considerably, Chun discovers that he has feelings for his teammate and rival Chung. Amid the tension and excitement



Real-life baseball players make for surprisingly good actors in *City Without Baseball*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VISION FILM WORKSHOP

built around the matches in the tournament, Chun decides to profess his love to Chung.

Directed by novice Yun Xiang (雲翔), and Lawrence Lau (劉國昌), known for his films that explore youth-related issues in Hong Kong, *City Without Baseball* is notable

for the absence of actual scenes involving the sport. Though there is footage of games and dramatic tension built around baseball-related activities, the film has more to do with relationships and identity issues, existential crises, homoeroticism and repressed

sexuality. As the story unfolds, it focuses on revealing the protagonists' backstories and inner reflections rather than following their drive to victory.

Overloaded with too many themes and subjects, *City Without Baseball* ends up being a hazy mishmash that is less than the sum of its parts. Background music seems to suggest nostalgia for the end of a better era but what that means is never made clear. And certain plotlines, such as the romance between the Taiwanese coach and a young Chinese woman, suffer a premature death.

Many moviegoers, however, will no doubt be delighted by the movie's full-frontal nudity and scenes of athletes horsing around in the locker room and in the showers. In terms of storytelling, Scud's script is solid and able to maintain the audience's attention. And the baseball players themselves come across as natural and uninhibited actors with strong on-screen presences, despite their lack of formal training.