

'Brideshead Revisited,' again

Class, Catholicism and a love triangle are central motifs in this adaptation of the 1945 novel Evelyn Waugh once considered his magnum opus

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Film Notes

BRIDESHEAD REVISITED

DIRECTED BY: JULIAN JARROLD

STARRING: MATTHEW GOODE (CHARLES RYDER), BEN WHISHAW (SEBASTIAN FLYTE), HAYLEY ATWELL (JULIA FLYTE), EMMA THOMPSON (LADY MARCHMANN), MICHAEL GAMBON (LORD MARCHMANN), ANNA MADELEY (CELIA RYDER), PATRICK MALAHIDE (EDWARD RYDER), JOSEPH BEATTIE (ANTHONY BLANCHE)

RUNNING TIME: 133 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



Where filmmakers fear to tread.
PHOTO COURTESY OF SERENITY ENTERTAINMENT INTERNATIONAL

Film adaptations of long and complex novels are dangerous territory for filmmakers, especially British period drama, when the two-plus hour cinema format must compete with the broader canvas provided by any number of outstanding television miniseries. Julian Jarrold faced a particularly daunting task given that *Brideshead Revisited* was adapted for television in 1981 in an 11-part series that ranks 10th on the list of the British Film Institute Greatest British Television Programs compiled in 2000.

It is interesting to note, according to the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), that the producer and cast of the 1981 production requested that the original six-hour script by John Mortimer be expanded in order to do justice to the book. Slightly over two hours, Jarrold's *Brideshead* proves woefully inadequate, and required the production team to take enormous liberties with the plot. It has not simply been condensed, but restructured in such a way as to almost disassociate it from the work it claims to be adapting.

The *Brideshead* of the title refers to the home of the Flyte family, of which Sebastian and Julia, the two middle children of four, become involved with Charles Ryder, a young artist from a middle-class background who falls in love with the privileged lifestyle and ultimately with the religion of the Flytes. Brideshead Castle is played in the film, as it was in the miniseries, by Castle Howard in North Yorkshire. It is surprising that even despite the advantages of the big screen, Jarrold fails to give this splendid pile, which is a central motif within the story, the same impact it had on television. There simply isn't the time. It also underlines one of the central failings of the film, which otherwise is beautifully shot with costumes and sets that are likely to enchant anyone who enjoys British period drama. But splendor without context makes the whole thing ring a little hollow.

The characters too, suffer much the same fate, and this despite outstanding performances from the likes of Emma Thomson. The other senior members of the cast, Michael Gambon and Patrick Malahide, have lovely cameos, but Thomson, who is given a larger part in the film adaptation, struggles in yeoman fashion against becoming a caricature of the wicked mother. The younger members of the cast are almost uniformly indifferent, and Matthew Goode's performance as Charles Ryder is nothing more than a watered-down version of Jeremy Iron's performance in the miniseries.

Even taken independently and divorced from its links to the miniseries, Jarrold's film seems a peculiar mix of love triangle and religious meditation. The romantic aspect may well have succeeded, but efforts to include the niceties of Roman Catholic theology, in this case the concept of God's grace in an imperfect world, seems utterly bizarre. Recourse is made to some rather heavy-handed expository dialogue that has the quality of having seemingly been taken from an English literature primer.

It is also odd how Jarrold plays fast and loose with the social conventions of life in a great country house between the wars. One thinks fondly of the careful attention to period detail found in films such as *The Remains of the Day* (1993) and *Gosford Park* (2001), where a real sense of a world of aristocratic privilege and the gradually faltering but still ridged class system is seen in operation. Class, as much as religion, drives the story of *Brideshead Revisited*, but the production team seems at best casually interested in these, and feels happier pottering around with the conventional clichés of steamy and forlorn glances and melodramatic outbursts about love and sex.

Jarrold's *Brideshead Revisited* is pretty to look at, but inside it is empty, and the central concerns of the characters remain murky to the last. It is likely to sink into well-deserved oblivion, the 1981 miniseries remaining the definitive adaptation for the foreseeable future.

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Tropic Thunder

A bunch of neurotic Hollywood actors go on location in a Southeast Asian country to shoot the testosterone vehicle *Tropic Thunder*, but things go postal when some locals decide to start taking pot shots before the war flick wraps. While the central conceit seems borrowed from *Severance*, audiences and a lot of critics have been lapping up this irreverent flick. Laughs are guaranteed — at some point. Starring and directed by Ben Stiller, comic energy is added by Jack Black, Nick Nolte, Tom Cruise and especially Robert Downey Jr. — as a pompous Aussie Oscar winner who has his melanin darkened to get inside his black character.



Blindness

A contagion of sightlessness breaks out in an unnamed city, and pretty soon it's clear that nothing can stop it. A doctor (Mark Ruffalo, who was simply excellent as a serial killer-hunting cop in *Zodiac*) is infected and sent to a prison-based concentration camp for the newly blind. His wife (Julianne Moore) miraculously avoids infection, and the film concentrates on her tactical response to social breakdown and atrocities as she fakes blindness to stay with her beau. From Fernando Meirelles, director of *The Constant Gardener*, the film has not been so well-received, especially by those who have read Jose Saramago's book. The *Los Angeles Times* blinked, calling it an "overly long car commercial crossed with a scare-mongering public service announcement."



I'm Not There

Cate Blanchett, Richard Gere, Christian Bale and three others (including the late Heath Ledger in his third-last role) star as a Bob Dylan-like character who travels through a wild variety of settings corresponding to major events in Dylan's life or impressions thereof. Director Todd Haynes (*Poison, Velvet Goldmine*) is offering a sophisticated gift to music fans and particularly fans of Dylan with this one, though only the most devoted of the legendary folk singer's following will understand what Haynes is getting at. Most of it.



Ca\$h

This French production might be the first movie to send audiences running for the exits out of sheer confusion. But there are reasons to stay. Cash (Jean Dujardin) is a charismatic criminal whose nefarious colleagues — and even girlfriend — cannot be trusted, and that's before cop Valeria Golino (*Hot Shots!, Leaving Las Vegas*) turns up in plain clothes looking for trouble. The ever-entertaining Jean Reno plays a top thug whom Cash turns to for his next vengeful enterprise, perhaps to his regret. Similar in visual style to the *Ocean's Eleven* remake and its sequels, *Ca\$h* aims to please.



Documentary networking

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Rather than one curator's brainchild, this year's Taiwan International Documentary Festival (台灣國際紀錄片雙年展) is the fruit of international collaboration coordinated by Taiwanese festival director Jane Yu (游蕙貞). The biennial showcase was mostly put together by the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in Japan, the Asian Network of Documentary initiated by Pusan International Film Festival in South Korea, Doc Alliance in Europe and the Beijing Film Academy (北京電影學院).

In memory of Japan's documentary heavyweight Noriaki Tsuchimoto, who passed away in June this year, Yamagata Festival organized a retrospective program of the filmmaker's 40-year artistic career. Tsuchimoto is best known for his series that records the lives of minamata disease sufferers, an illness caused by exposure to mercury. Not confined to his role as observer, the director and his camera come off as active participants in the victims' and their families' life-long struggle for justice.

A fine example of Tsuchimoto's early works that vividly portray ordinary people, *On the Road* follows a cab driver who toils almost 24 hours a day and seven days a week during the 1960s. The film reveals a rarely seen Japan, one that was then on the road to developed nation status.

Films grouped in the Doc Alliance section focus on European societies, while Asian viewpoints can be found in the festival's And program, which was launched in 2005 through collaboration between curators in Japan, Thailand, Taiwan and China.

Past winners at the festival's international competitions return with new works this year. *Letter to Anna* by Eric Bergkraut examines the life and death of the controversial Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was murdered in 2006.

On a lighter tone, the festival will screen *Maverick Mother*, 39-year-old director Janet Merewether's whimsical journey into single motherhood.

FESTIVAL NOTES:

WHAT: 2008 Taiwan International Documentary Festival (台灣國際紀錄片雙年展)

WHEN: Today through Nov. 9

WHERE: National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (國立台灣美術館) and Taichung City Cultural Affairs Bureau (台中市文化局)

TICKETS: NTS\$30, available through ERA ticket outlets or online at www.ticket.com.tw



Invisibles is made up of five shorts shot in Africa by five directors, including Wim Wenders. The film, which seeks to give voice to those forgotten by the rest of the world, screens at this year's Taipei International Documentary Festival.
PHOTO COURTESY OF TDF

Acts of desperation

When his son's life hangs in the balance, a good man chooses evil

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Serbia's official nomination for the 2008 Oscars, *The Trap* (Klopka) is a film noir morality tale that takes no prisoners. The version being screened in Taipei is dubbed into German (the film was screened at the Berlin International Film Festival under the title *Klopka — Die Falle*), but as there are probably few in Taiwan for whom hearing the original Serbo-Croatian is a big issue, it probably doesn't matter too much.

The Chinese title of the film translates as "Saving Nemanja" (搶救紐曼亞), which gives some indication of the plot, but the real meat of the film is expressed in the German title. Mladen (Nebojsa Glogovac) is a crew foreman working on a stalled construction project on the outskirts of Belgrade. He is a good husband and a good father to his son Nemanja (Marko Djurovic); a moral man who faces his less-than-rosy economic situation with fortitude and good humor. Then he discovers that his son has a heart condition that will almost certainly kill him if an expensive operation is not performed.

This is the trap: as a loving father he must get the money to save his son; as a proud and moral man, the effort to get the money, first by borrowing, and ultimately through a terrible criminal action, will in the end destroy him. It is only one tiny step from his bedrock of certainty into a confused world where the life of his son is pitted against everything he knows that is decent and right. Once this step is taken, there is no going back.

Golubovic pushes the story forward relentlessly, portraying Mladen's betrayal of his own sense of justice and the final and bloody retribution that he brings on himself without sentimentality and without mercy.

The plot is not without contrivance, but *The Trap* is not a thriller in the conventional sense, but rather a dramatic presentation of



Nebojsa Glogovac, above right and inset right, stars in *The Trap*, directed by Srdan Golubovic.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF SWALLOW WINGS FILMS

a moral dilemma. Glogovac balances the intrinsic seriousness of his character with humor (in his appalled realization of what he is turning into. As his relationship with his wife, Marija (Natasa Ninkovic) is subject to the increasing pressure of fear and deceit, Mladen turns to alcohol and violence.

The presence of Anica Dobra, who played the lead in *Love and Other Crimes* recently released in Taipei (and still playing at second-run cinemas), is an added treat as a woman who finally gives Mladen the money to save his son, an act of generosity that ironically pushes Mladen to his final destruction.

Mladen's penurious world of suburban Belgrade is constantly contrasted against the luxurious lifestyle of the mobsters with whom he is forced to become involved. His little red tin-pot car from the communist era is dwarfed by gigantic SUVs with tinted windows in a recurrent motif that underlines the essential

unfairness of society. There is much in *The Trap* to be enjoyed, not least the craftsmanship of the story-making and a number of fine performances that more than make up for the pessimism, the drab backdrop and the palette of grays and browns.

Film Notes

THE TRAP

DIRECTED BY: SRDAN GOLUBOVIC

STARRING: NEBOJSA GLOGOVAC (MLADEN), NATASA NINKOVIC (MARIJA), ANICA DOBRA (JELENA), MIKI MANOJLOVIC (KOSTA ANTIC), MARKO DJUROVIC (NEMANJA)

RUNNING TIME: 102 MINUTES

LANGUAGES: IN GERMAN WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY