

F I L M R E V I E W

Backed by an exceptional crew, first-time director Chen Hsiao-tse's romance is a glossy-looking flick aimed at the teen market

Sandrine Pinna, right, stars in *Miao Miao*, directed by Chen Hsiao-tse.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JET TONE FILMS



Film Notes

MIAO MIAO (渺渺)

DIRECTED BY: CHENG HSIAO-TSE (程孝澤)

STARRING: KE JIA-YAN (柯佳嬿) AS MIAO MIAO, SANDRINE PINNA (張榕容) AS AI, FAN CHIH-WEI (范植偉) AS CHEN FEI, WU KANG-REN (吳慷仁) AS BEI

RUNNING TIME: 83 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



Heartbreak at high school

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

A feature debut by director Cheng Hsiao-tse (程孝澤), *Miao Miao* (渺渺) is the latest addition to the adolescent romance genre that has become a staple of contemporary Taiwanese cinema. What sets it apart from the pack is its big-name production team — Jet Tone Films (澤東電影), founded by Wong Kar-wai (王家衛), producers Stanley Kwan (關錦鵬) and Jacky Pang (彭綺華), editor William Chang Suk-ping (張叔平) and cinematographer Kwan Pun-leung (關本良).

The payoff of working with the heavyweights is a piece of well-executed, technically polished pop art that should prove popular with the youth market.

Ai (Sandrine Pinna), a sassy high school girl, meets Miao Miao (Ke Jia-ya, 柯佳嬿), the new exchange student from Japan, and is immediately attracted to the quiet, gentle newcomer. The two become best friends, palling around after school, sharing each other's secrets and baking cakes

together. Life is sweet, for a little while.

It doesn't take long for Miao Miao to find first love in the form of sullen record store owner Chen Fei (Fan Chih-wei, 范植偉), who shuts out the world with a pair of headphones. Miao Miao enlists Ai's help in stealing into the taciturn man's life and winning his affections. Jealous and frustrated, Ai finds her feelings for her best pal go beyond friendship.

Miao Miao tells a solid story about friendship and first love. The well-cast Ke and Eurasian actress Pinna are keys to the film's authenticity, as the rapport between them feels real and heart-felt. Pinna particularly stands out with her seemingly effortless performance. The sole male lead, Fan, however, struggles with a role that requires nothing more than a sulky face.

On the technical side, Chang's smooth editing means the narrative structure is sound and clean-cut.

The tasteful cinematography by Kwan Pun-leung (2046 and *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*, 姨媽的後現代生活) lends a glossy look with an atmospheric palette of greens, purples, oranges and yellows. The urban landscapes of Taipei appeal lyrically, are saturated and rich in detail and stand in pleasing contrast to the clear and transparent hues of suburban life.

The script, however, doesn't live up to the big names behind the film. Plot clichés are cloyingly overused and narrative devices intended to develop the characters sometimes feel manufactured and forced. And the film's occasional tone of literary pomposity eats away at the realism generated by the "slices-of-life" acting and dialogue.

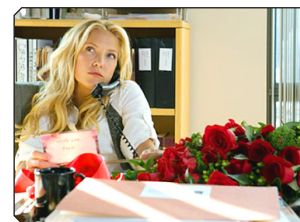
In other words, when the leads start citing Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and *The Little Prince*, the goose bumps the audience gets aren't the kind the scriptwriters intended.

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

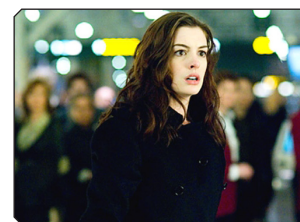
My Best Friend's Girl

Jason Biggs (*American Pie*) is back, but he's not the main character in this, the latest rude and sexually aggressive comedy to come from the US. Dustin (Biggs) adores Alexis (Kate Hudson), but the feeling isn't mutual, so he calls on his buddy Tank (Dane Cook) to weave his manly magic and disgust her so grievously on a date that she will flee back to our Jason. But — you guessed it — the two hit it off instead. Wicked, politically incorrect humor abounds, but *Variety* warns of a possible altered ending to pacify preview audiences, which suggests that director Terry Zwigoff (*Bad Santa*) might have been the man to stand up to the studio and keep the mayhem real instead of Howard Deutch.



Passengers

Peter Weir's *Fearless* from 1993 has been on cable TV lately, and fans of that fine film might be interested in a similarly themed offering in *Passengers*. As with *Fearless*, this film focuses on plane crash survivors and their debilitating traumas, but unlike Weir's film, this one is just as interested in thriller elements in the form of mysterious characters, twists and revelations. Case in point: Attendees at a counseling session start disappearing. Stars Anne Hathaway, Patrick Wilson and David Morse.



Finishing the Game

The "game" is *Game of Death*, the film that Bruce Lee didn't finish shooting before his tragically premature death. In this "mockumentary," a bunch of luckless Asian American actors, including Dustin Nguyen (*21 Jump Street*), vie to be the one to replace Lee in the completion of the kung fu classic. M.C. Hammer, George Takei and Ron Jeremy appear in cameos. It's taken a little while to get released here, which is a little surprising given that director Justin Lin (林詣彬), who directed the third *Fast and the Furious* entry, has Taiwanese heritage.



Seraphine

Fittingly released here in the week of the 90th anniversary of the end of World War I, this is a French film based on the relationship between famed painter Seraphine Louis and art enthusiast Wilhelm Uhde. Uhde spies the struggling Seraphine's art while visiting her village on the eve of the war and their patron-client relationship blossoms, but bloody conflict and personal vulnerability take a heavy toll. Yolande Moreau (*Amélie*) stars as the troubled artist in a film that is receiving warm reviews.



One Piece The Movie: Episode of Chopper — Bloom in the Winter, Miracle Sakura

Those crazy anime pirates are back in action in this perennial series, this time revisiting the story of Chopper — the crew's adolescent medic and transformable blue-nosed reindeer — for the first time since 2002. A search by the Straw Hat pirates for a doctor brings them to an island kingdom where danger and evil characters lurk and preparations for battle are made, but also where a horned hero waits in the wings.



Back to the Dark Ages

Inspired by a role-playing game first published in 1993, *The Mutant Chronicles* is clearly earmarked for a species of cult immortality

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

"Put the detonator in the hole," shouts the well-proportioned Valerie Duval (Devon Aoki).

"Which hole," replies six-packed, partially disfigured Major "Mitch" Hunter (Thomas Jane).

"Any hole," shouts Duval, as she and Severian (Anna Walton), a priestess-warrior with a talent for swordplay decapitate, eviscerate and generally lop the limbs off the crab-clawed mutants who have taken over the world.

It is moments like this that make great B-movies, and *The Mutant Chronicles* is clearly earmarked for a species of cult immortality. One thinks of other gloriously terrible movies such as *Red Sonja* (1985) and *Flash Gordon* (1980) that raise wooden acting and formulaic story-making to the level of artistry.

The Mutant Chronicles cannot boast a sound track by Queen, or feature Brigitte Nielsen in leather lingerie, but Devon Aoki, reprising her role of mysterious woman warrior/supermodel from *DOA: Dead or Alive* (2006) and Anna Walton, who was Princess Narula in the recently released *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008),

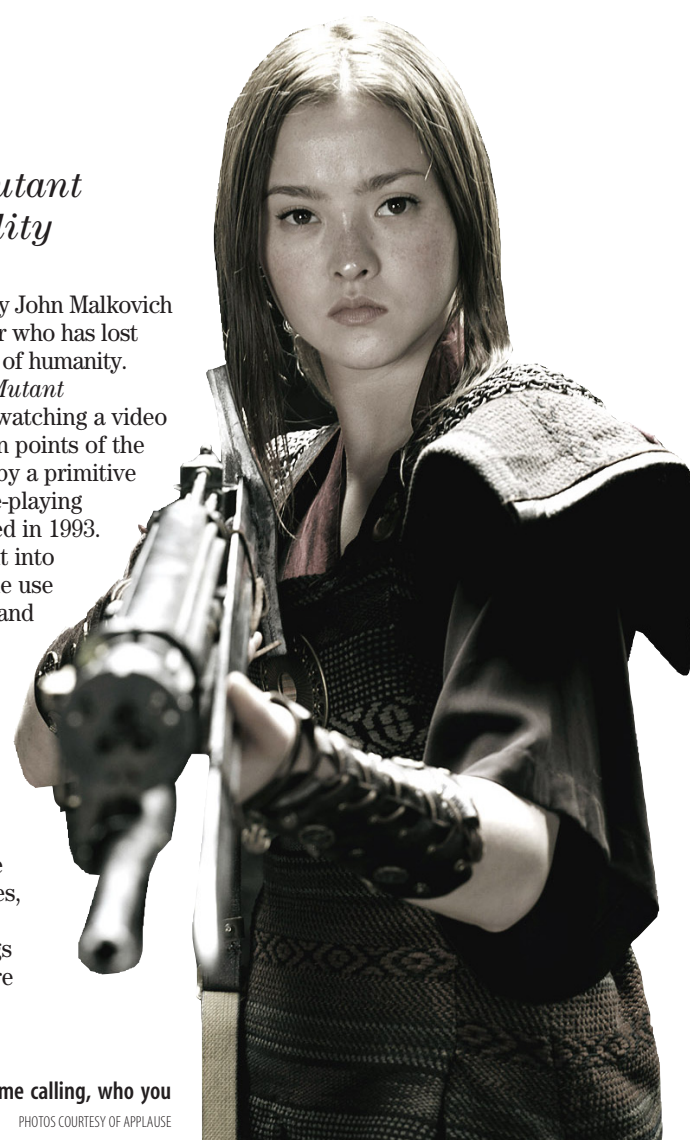
provide plenty of eye candy for the boys. They wear strappy combat vests, sweat a lot and handle huge crusader-type two-handed swords with elegance. And then there is Ron Pearlman, whose growing reputation in this country following *Hellboy II* is probably responsible for the release of this film, and *Outlander*, a blood-and-battle axe Viking adventure, scheduled to hit movie theaters on Nov. 21. Pearlman, who invariably plays himself, whatever bizarre outfit he is required to wear (in this case a high priest of a cult dedicated to the destruction of the mutants), manages to deliver lines such as "God is life; the enemy is unlife" with the same kind of conviction that Arnold Schwarzenegger gave to the great moments in the *Conan* movies. Then there is Thomas Jane, who has a brooding and muscular presence that is more than adequate for his role as the main mutant executioner.

The additional appeal of *The Mutant Chronicles* is the faux realism of its background, which embraces the retro-futurist chic of Keith Roberts' *Pavane* with its wonderful steam-powered aircraft and pre-Reformation religious iconography. The setup is big on atmosphere, from the opening battle sequence featuring a futuristic take on World War I trench warfare to a rather

surprising cameo by John Malkovich as a religious leader who has lost hope for the future of humanity.

Watching *The Mutant Chronicles* is like watching a video game, and the main points of the story are inspired by a primitive pen-and-paper role-playing game first published in 1993. It has been brought into the cinema with the use of many narrative and stylistic devices that would not be out of place in a modern first-person-shooter. It bears some similarities to other game based movies such as the *Resident Evil* series, but the stylish and imaginative settings make it rather more fun.

When the mutants come calling, who you gonna call?
PHOTOS COURTESY OF APPLAUSE



Film Notes

THE MUTANT CHRONICLES

DIRECTED BY: SIMON HUNTER

STARRING: THOMAS JANE (MAJOR "MITCH" HUNTER), RON PERLMAN (BROTHER SAMUEL), DEVON AOKI (VALERIE DUVAL), SEAN PERTWEE (CAPTAIN NATHAN ROOKER), JOHN MALKOVICH (CONSTANTINE), ANNA WALTON (SEVERIAN)

RUNNING TIME: 111 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY