



Spotting Ingmar Bergman

A retrospective of Ingmar Bergman films scheduled to run in Taipei and Taichung shows the many facets of one of the world's great directors

FESTIVAL NOTES

WHAT: Winter With Ingmar Bergman

WHEN AND WHERE: Today through Dec. 12 at Spot — Taipei Film House (光點—台北之家), 18, Zhongshan N Road Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市中山北路二段18號); Dec. 16 to Dec. 21 at Wonderful Cinema (萬代福影城), 38 Kungyuan Rd, Taichung City (台中市公園路38號)

TICKETS: NT\$170 for members and NT\$200 for non-members at Spot; screenings in Taichung are free

ON THE NET: www.twfilm.org/bergman



Clockwise from above: stills from Ingmar Bergman films *Cries and Whispers*; *Fanny and Alexander*; *The Seventh Seal*; *Summer With Monika*; and *Smiles of a Summer Night*.



BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Ingmar Bergman passed away on July 30 of last year, the same day as Italy's Michelangelo Antonioni. The world has been mourning for the losses ever since in the form of retrospectives and festivals. Starting today at Spot — Taipei Film House (光點—台北之家), POP Cinema (國民戲院) presents 15 films made by Bergman, many of which are early works that have never before been screened in Taiwan.

Openly acknowledging that his experiences with women, frustrated marriages and family life were the source of inspiration behind his works, the Swedish maestro showed an early interest in the motif of love and betrayal in films such as *It Rains on Our Love* (1946), *To Joy* (1950), *Sandvaster and Tinsel* (1953) and *Summer With Monika* (1953).

In *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Through a Glass Darkly* (1960) and *The Virgin Spring* (1960), Bergman embarks on an existential journey into mortality and faith, a leitmotif he is best-remembered for, in a world of despair and bleakness.

The imagery of four women strolling through a Swedish forest is immortalized in *Cries and Whispers* (1973), the director's homage to his mother, incarnated by three sisters and a servant. His most beloved film, *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), can be seen as the sum total of the director's art as it is here that Bergman returned to the most familiar themes — death, religion, family and the memory of his father.

To festival curator Wang Pai-chang (王派章), however, it is the *The Hour of the Wolf* (1968), *Shame* (1968) and *The*

Passion of Anna (1969) that occupy a key place in Bergman's art, along with his 1966 masterpiece *Persona*. The trio signals the maestro's inclination toward an image-driven aesthetic, whereas most of his popular films appropriate a more melodramatic look to explore such topics as marriage, gender relationships and family.

"Even in his early works, Bergman reveals a genius for expressing an event or emotion through visuals rather than narrative. To me, it is where the power of his art lies," Wang said.

For Bergman novices there is no need to despair if the initial reaction to the movies includes adjectives such as "obscure" and "abstruse." Even the young Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢) had to see them more than once in order to understand the Swedish director's

films, which in Hou's words, "dare to venture into the deepest part of the soul."

The gray-haired Hou attended a press conference earlier this month to promote the event as the Honorary President of the Taiwan Film and Culture Association (台灣電影文化協會), the group behind POP Cinema.

"When I was young I saw Bergman's films on Beta videotapes. It was pretty much the same scenes and characters so you fell asleep, woke up and fell asleep again," Hou said. "To me, all directors are much more interesting in their early works. The older you get, the more mannered your films become as you find the earlier 'you' too immature and lean more toward abstractionism. This is why I think cinema belongs to the young — unlike words, images should be flesh-and-blood and visceral."



Chang Chen, left, convincingly plays a man lost in a Kafkaesque quandary.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CREAM FILM PRODUCTION

One night in Taipei

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

What's the deal with people who double-park without leaving a note? Such curiosity led to the making of *Parking* (停車), a blackly comic drama by seasoned television commercial director and cinematographer Chung Mong-hong (鍾孟宏).

Set during one night in Taipei, Chung's debut feature film, which boasts a cast of fine actors from Taiwan and Hong Kong, opens with Chen Mo (張震) finding his car blocked in after he stops at a pastry shop on his way home for a dinner date with his estranged wife (Kwai Lun-mei, 桂綸鎧).

The search for the double-parked vehicle's driver takes Chen through a chain of bizarre situations and a gallery of eccentric characters: a friendly one-armed barber (Jack Kao, 高捷) with a shady past; an elderly couple who look after their young granddaughter and seem to mistake him for their long-lost son; a Chinese prostitute (Peggy Tseng, 曾珮瑜) who is virtually imprisoned by her abusive pimp (Leon Dai, 戴立忍); and a Hong Kong tailor (Chapman To, 杜汶澤) who is on the run from underground loan sharks.

With richly colored tableaux and unusual camera movements and framings, Chung's cinematography creates a stylish effect that prevents the viewer from becoming too emotionally engaged in the narrative. Enveloped in haunting contrasts of light and shadow, Taipei appears alien and inhabited by phantom-like loners and pale drifters.

Chen, a typical-looking white-collar urbanite, is seen casting a long headless shadow on a barren street early in the film, which is just one example of the well-executed ways in which director Chung conveys the theme of estrangement in visual terms.

The protagonist's Kafkaesque journey sees him enter the lives and pasts of the other characters who seem to be trapped in a dilapidated apartment building that is frozen in time. The story's sense of absurdity is accentuated by occasional bursts of dark humor that include an arresting episode involving a fish head.

As well as Chen's frustrated attempt to extricate himself from his predicament, the film takes on a political tone through the roles of trapped Taiwanese, lost Hong Kongers, and Chinese who become victims of capitalism, though the director avoids wearing his heart on his sleeve.

The film feels slightly too long and drags on towards the end, while some scenes are less developed than others. *Parking's* coda is forced as its bright mood clashes with the rest of the film.

Without a solid cast the episodic story would not have worked. Two of Taiwan's finest actors, Jack Kao (高捷) and Leon Dai (戴立忍), stand out with their seemingly effortless performances, while Hong Kong's Chapman To lends the flick a Wong Kar Wai-esque tone. Chang Chen (張震), who is emerging as a serious actor, approaches the main character with a proper sense of perplexity.

Premiered this year in the Cannes Film Festival's Un Certain Regard section, *Parking* establishes Chung as a new talent in Taiwanese cinema and a name to watch closely.

Film Notes

PARKING (停車)

DIRECTED BY: CHUNG MONG-HONG (鍾孟宏)

STARRING: CHANG CHEN (張震) AS CHEN MO, KWAI LUN-MEI (桂綸鎧) AS CHEN'S WIFE, JACK KAO (高捷) AS ONE-ARMED BARBER, LEON DAI (戴立忍) AS PIMP, CHAPMAN TO (杜汶澤) AS HONG KONG TAILOR, PEGGY TSENG (曾珮瑜) AS CHINESE PROSTITUTE

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN AND CANTONESE WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME: 106 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

Sin leaves many a mark in Cronenberg's 'Eastern Promises'

David Cronenberg dips his toes into the mainstream with a tale of the Russian mob

BY MARTIN WILLIAMS
STAFF REPORTER

Director David Cronenberg's latest film has arrived late in Taiwanese theaters. Viggo Mortensen was nominated for Best Actor at this year's Academy Awards for *Eastern Promises* after his alluring embodiment of a most repellent character won many fans, but he was beaten at the post by Daniel Day-Lewis, whose oil man sociopath in *There Will Be Blood* was even more repellent.

Late, indeed, but great. With *A History of Violence* and this film, Cronenberg has shifted a pioneering, intellectual, lifelong concern with the body — its strengths and frailties, its beauty and all its horrid aberrations, almost always intertwined — just a little inward.

In *A History of Violence*, Mortensen played a model husband in rural America with a past so terrible that he had to transform himself mentally, even physically, to escape. In *Eastern Promises*, Mortensen is Nikolai, an ambitious Russian mafia kingpin in the making who has to muscle in on his employers' organization to get where he wants to go. This, too, requires bodily change as part of a step up from his mundane jobs for the mob: ritual tattooing and wounds from would-be assassins are among them. But his critical, inward change is hidden until late in the film.

At first, Nikolai is nowhere to be seen. The story starts with two grisly acts that seem unconnected: the slaughter of a customer at a barber shop and a very young



Viggo Mortensen, right, applies his special brand of tough love.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

foreign mother dying as she gives birth in a store. Midwife Anna (Naomi Watts) tends to the baby that arrives at the hospital, and locates a diary that leads her to a friendly old Russian restaurant owner, Semyon (Armin Mueller-

Stahl), whose interest in the diary and the baby drag Anna into London's Russian underworld.

Nikolai also takes a keen interest in Anna and the diary, even as he maneuvers to usurp his boss Kirill (Vincent Cassel), Semyon's

son and the organizer of the hit at the barber shop, to claim the head seat at the gangsters' table. Through all this, the survival of the baby hangs in the balance, because its existence poses a very big threat to very dangerous people.

Eastern Promises is a mainstream film by Cronenberg's standards, yet it retains the cool, detached eye that has marked his films over the decades. The rich

colors and congeniality of Semyon's home are an illusion, while the sinister intentions of Nikolai are more complex than they seem, yet unknowable to almost everyone. Cassel is fine as the undisciplined pretender to the throne, as is the rest of the cast, though Watts comes across as a plot catalyst rather than a fully developed character with a credible motivation to flirt

with extreme danger. In the end, however, the film prizes Mortensen and his body — gaunt, muscular, naked, sliced up, branded, aroused — and this carries the film to a twist that takes it deep into Cronenbergland.

Cronenberg has brought some of the most gruesome fantasy images imaginable to multiplex and art-house theaters over the years (Samantha Eggart linking her newborn mutation in *The Brood*, the exploding head in *Scanners*, body-weapon morphing in *Videodrome* and the gynecological instruments in *Dead Ringers*, for example), yet in *Eastern Promises* even the most bloodcurdling moments of ruffian blade meeting flesh and bone seem discreet and concise. The emphasis here is not on bodily decay or dismemberment but on how the body acts as a canvas for power, both physical and moral.

Film Notes

EASTERN PROMISES

DIRECTED BY: DAVID CRONENBERG

STARRING: NAOMI WATTS (ANNA), VIGGO MORTENSEN (NIKOLAI), VINCENT CASSEL (KIRILL), ARMIN MUELLER-STAHN (SEMYON)

RUNNING TIME: 100 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY