

FILM REVIEW

OTHER RELEASES

▶ COMPILLED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Pride and Glory

Edward Norton and Colin Farrell are New York policemen and brothers-in-law and Jon Voight is Norton's father and top detective for Manhattan. The story starts with a disastrous drug bust in which four police are slain, then pits family loyalties against propriety with an ethnic Irish angle. For these compromised, feuding men, there's no genuinely happy ending; dare it be said that the title of the film is meant to be ironic? Lukewarm reviews carped about the familiarity of it all, though a strong lineup should attract the faithful. Either way, the bluster of *Pride and Glory* only reinforces the contention that the opening half hour of *World Trade Center* remains the most credible portrayal of NYC cops in recent years.



Big Stan

Rob Schneider stars, directs and flogs anal rape humor for all its worth in this comedy eventually set in a prison. Schneider is a real estate shyster who gets jail time, but not before undergoing a course in self-defense from The Master (David Carradine). Unreleased in the US (a shame, because a Roger Ebert review of the film would have been a corker), though it's been wandering through European and Asian territories for a year looking for a home. Now it's Taiwan's turn, presumably thanks to the modest success of *You Don't Mess With The Zohan*, which was made later. The elegant Chinese title of the film ("Fierce Men Rape Prison") should snare exactly the local audience Schneider is looking for.



The Women

Meg Ryan, Annette Bening, Jada Pinkett Smith, Bette Midler, Candice Bergen, Cloris Leachman, Carrie Fisher, to name a few... what a cast. The relationships of four friends — with each other and the unseemly men in their life — are the basis for a very loose remake of the George Cukor favorite from 1939, itself based on a hit play. This post-*Sex and the City*, Taiwanese-financed yarn is being marketed as having no male actors whatsoever, which might have worked in the 1930s, but it all seems a little desperate today, and a lot of critics were unimpressed. Still, watching the films back to back might offer a fascinating exercise in how women's mores have changed — and stayed the same — over 70 years, at least in Hollywood's eyes (but can you imagine Joan Crawford doing a tampon gag?). Directed by Diane English, a writer-producer of *Murphy Brown*.



Quarantine

Apparently there is yet to be a simultaneous release of a non-English-language film and its English-language remake (though 1931's *Dracula* and a Spanish-language cover with the same title were shot over the same period in the same studio), but *Quarantine* has gone some way toward making this possible. A quickly produced stateside version of the Spanish zombie flick [*Rec*], which was released here only five months ago, this version follows the leader and tries to scare and disorientate in equal measure as a building's residents succumb to a horrifying virus — but the survivors can't get out. What needs to be asked is how many more shakycam epics will be made before the plug is finally pulled on this audience-unfriendly gimmick.



The Wave

A teacher in Germany launches a sociological experiment in his class that spreads, gets out of hand and sets the dogs of fascism loose for a new era. Critics sniffed at the obviousness of some of the moralizing, but the film's momentum and intriguing premise — based on a real experiment conducted in a California high school in 1967 — sound like something that would happen if Jane Elliott of *The Eye of the Storm* fame lost control of her campaign to destroy racism and prejudice and ignited an iris race war. It's interesting to contemplate what Taiwanese schoolkids would make of this film, not to mention the tantalizing ramifications of a "green versus blue" experiment in local classrooms — were it not for the suffocating conservatism of Taiwan's education system.



A Job to Kill For

In a week of too many new releases and an Ingmar Bergman festival, it's a mystery why this Canadian made-for-cable entry from 2006 would be dressed up as a cinema product and expected to capture market share. But if the idea of a humorless boardroom version of *To Die For* by veteran TV director Bill Corcoran (*21 Jump Street*, *Wiseguy*) grabs you, rush to catch this one before it disappears in a week or so. Sean Young (a long way from *Blade Runner*) is an executive whose new female assistant really wants a promotion.



Taiwan Association for Human Rights Film Festival

Lots of good titles are featured in this timely showcase, including *Let Him Have It* from the UK, *Small Soldiers* on the child soldiers of Liberia and works on state terror relating to Taiwan, Cambodia, North Korea, Tibet and Chile, among others, as well as indigenous issues. All screenings are free, so get down to the EsLite bookstore on Dunhua South Road (tomorrow and Sunday) and the Chinese Taipei Film Archive (from Monday through next Saturday) in Taipei and the Kaohsiung Film Archive (Dec. 21 to Dec. 31). More details at udhr60.twbbs.org.



Art designer aims high with ambitious film plan

The success of 'Cape No. 7' breathes new life into Chiu Ruo-lung's dream of bringing the Wushe Incident to the big screen

BY DEBORAH KUO
CNA, WITH STAFF WRITER

Cape No. 7 (海角七號), a small-budget, independent production that has become the biggest-grossing locally produced film in Taiwan's cinematic history, would not have been so successful were it not for several factors, including its meticulous art design.

Chiu Ruo-lung (邱若龍), a cartoonist-turned-movie art designer, did a tremendous job on the hit in designing, drawing and verifying the historical accuracy of the characters in *Cape No. 7*, which tells two parallel stories that occurred in Taiwan and Japan over a span of 60 years.

Chiu is now working on his second feature in cooperation with *Cape No. 7*'s director, Wei Te-sheng (魏德勝), a more ambitious project titled *Seediq Bale* (賽德克巴萊). The film is an epic account of an uprising by the Seediq Aborigines against the Japanese and requires even greater efforts in verifying the accuracy of the characters, their backgrounds and historical accounts of the event.

Despite the success of *Cape No. 7*, which so far has taken first prize at the Asian Marine Film Festival in Japan and won the best narrative film award at the Louis Vuitton Hawaii International Film Festival 2008, Wei is still preoccupied with his long-term ambition to make *Seediq Bale*, a story that examines the Wushe Incident (霧社事件), in which the Japanese military brutally put down a Seediq uprising in 1930.

The story centers on the Seediq hero Mona Rudao, who led an attack in Nantou County that resulted in the deaths of more than 130 Japanese nationals and two Taiwanese. In response, the Japanese sent more than 2,000 troops into the mountains and used poison gas bombs dropped from aircraft to quell the revolt, which ultimately lasted 50 days.

In 2004 Wei, then 35, spent NT\$2.5 million — his entire life savings — to make a five-minute short about the incident with the aim of raising NT\$500 million in sponsorship. The short was made using a script written by Wei, which was inspired mainly by a documentary on the incident made by Chiu.

However, the fund-raising encountered difficulties. The projected budget was too



PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

big and none of the potential sponsors were optimistic about the movie's success, given the anemic state of the domestic film industry at that time.

Now Wei and his team are in a far better position following the unexpectedly strong showing of *Cape No. 7*, which had reached a record high of NT\$450 million in box office takings in eight weeks as of late last month — a harvest that is now providing them with a much easier footing from which to begin making *Seediq Bale*.

Cape No. 7's success has attracted swarms of offerings of sponsorship. Wei said recently that *Seediq Bale* will cost more than US\$10 million to make, with international investment and publicity and a projected release date of mid next year.

At a recent press conference held in Taipei to announce this year's Golden Horse Film Festival, Wei said making a great motion picture was not just about how much money you spend but also about solid teamwork, because "every part of the team must be put into full play."

Chiu will be Wei's art designer and history consultant on *Seediq Bale*.

Although neither of them are Aborigines, both Chiu and Wei are intrigued by Aboriginal stories.

Chiu, whose father was a noted political cartoonist in the 1960s, first came into contact with Aborigines and their culture at the age of 18 after graduating from high school.

That summer, on a lazy, sultry day, an aimless Chiu road his motorcycle to the Central Mountain Range, where he eventually found himself in Wushe, a mountain township that is home to the Seediq people.

Chiu returned there many times, staying in Wushe on and off for six years, during which he found himself a Seediq girlfriend — now his wife — was given the Seediq name Bawan by the tribe's elders, and finished his Wushe Incident comic book, considered Taiwan's first historical investigative manga.

The deeper he dug into the history of the Seediq, the more urgently Chiu felt the need to preserve their culture. This sense of urgency prompted him to take up a camera and recording equipment and begin documenting Seediq culture, language and oral history, which led to the creation in 1993 of a two-hour documentary on the Wushe Incident that attracted the attention of critics at various film festivals around the world.

"The Seediq's fading culture was being further lost on a daily basis, with research possibilities being reduced even more every time another tribal elder died," Chiu said.

Chiu said the film will also serve as a witness to the Seediq people's social rules, core values and tribal beliefs.

"All the so-called historical truths consist of differing accounts recorded by differing people from differing angles, which does not necessarily make them right or wrong," Chiu said. "[A]ll I'll try to do in the making of *Seediq Bale* is to represent the Wushe Incident from the point of view of the Seediq people of the 1930s who lived through the events."

"For me, a people's culture exists not in tourism promotion brochures, nor in products displayed at tourist attractions. Instead, it sometimes exists in a dying tribesman's closet, where a worn-out hand-woven cloak could better reflect the culture," Chiu said. "People in Taiwan lack a common memory. It's sad that we've grown up under the influence of Mickey Mouse or Doraemon but have only vague knowledge of the original residents of this land."

As pure as driven sludge

When an extra-marital affair is uncovered in 'Black Ice,' revenge is a dish that's served cold and with relish

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Black ice is a reference to that almost invisible layer of ice that forms on roads and can send you spinning into a snowbank when you least expect it. Relationships are a bit like that in *Black Ice* (Musta Jaa) by Finnish director Petri Kotwica. This is a classy melodrama, though it relies totally on the strong performances of its lead characters to keep the project from fishtailing off into absurdity.

The story starts off conventionally enough with the discovery of an infidelity and the desire for revenge. The world of Saara (Outi Maenpaa), a gynecologist married to philandering architect Leo (Martti Suosalo), comes apart with the discovery of an open packet of condoms in his guitar case. Leo makes lame excuses, even as the object of his amorous attentions, an architectural student Tuuli (Ria Kataja), watches his discomfiture through binoculars. What follows is the convoluted progress of Saara's revenge, which involves becoming close friends with her rival Tuuli and working to destroy the extra-marital affair from within.

The theme that emerges is the fine line between love and hate, from which Kotwica develops a series of variations which end up tying the main character up in emotional knots. Only death will release them — but whose? The two female leads put on a facade of cold rationality and independence as they face off in a game of



PHOTO COURTESY OF SWALLOW WINGS

Film Notes

BLACK ICE (MUSTA JAA)

DIRECTED BY: PETRI KOTWICA

STARRING: OUTI MAENPAA (SAARA), RIA KATAJA (TUULI), MARTTI SUOSALO (LEO)

RUNNING TIME: 103 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

LANGUAGE: FINNISH WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

emotional chess in which one of the players has no idea that her new best friend is actually her opponent. On the surface it is all cold calculation, but underneath there is a maelstrom of violent passions that respond in unexpected ways. The object of contention is Leo, a rather feckless man with a roaming eye, who inevitably comes out badly from a situation admittedly

of his own making, but which, after the first moments of the film, he utterly loses control over.

The ebb and flow of the relationship between the two women is what drives this film, and it is the tension between expectation and reality that gives *Black Ice* a sense of danger even while the background is kept relentlessly within the bounds of affluent middle-class Finnish society. There is no need for dark corners and hidden knives here, for there is no darkness greater, and no hatred sharper than love gone astray, and Maenpaa and Kataja are more than equal to keeping up the suspense in their duet of love and hate.

Beyond the tortuous progress of the revenge plot, there are some biting humorous moments both in dialogue and visuals (such as Leo dressed in a penguin outfit for a fancy dress party during which the flames of hatred and misunderstanding are fanned by Saara), which are little sparkles that adorn the somber elegance of this well-constructed entertainment.

[ROMANCE]

Love kills

Chinese director Liu Fendou's new feature woos the art-house set with beautiful visuals and dark emotions

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Tenderly sadomasochistic and defiant toward politically correct views on gender politics, Chinese director Liu Fendou's (劉奮鬥) second feature *Ocean Flame* (一半海水，一半海洋) takes the bad-guy-corrupting-innocent-girl story to the extreme with this tale of a tortured love affair between a ruthless criminal and an innocent waitress.

The film plays out in flashbacks as ex-con Wang Yao (廖凡, 廖凡) barges in on a family after being released from prison. A small-time criminal who ran a prostitution ring with friends before his incarceration, Wang made a comfortable living by blackmailing male customers in hotel-room sex scams.

To the unscrupulous Wang, it is love at first sight with attractive young waitress Li Chuan (莫小奇, 莫小奇). The two are soon consumed with sex and passion, captivatingly shown in a sex scene on a glittering, empty beach.

Yet as Wang introduces Li to his sordid world and lists her as one of his working girls, the pair's desperate addiction to love inevitably paves the way for self-destruction.

The third big-screen adaptation of renowned Chinese writer Wang Shuo's (王朔) novel of the same title (previous versions include the 2001 US film *Love the Hard Way* starring Adrien Brody), Liu's violent and erotically charged film creates an enclosed world in which the characters, twisted and bursting with overwrought emotions, swing between unsettling sadomasochism and brutal romanticism, the contrasting feelings suggested by the film's title.

Chinese actor Liao possesses enough dangerous charisma to help him get away with the sometimes overwritten dialogue and come off as an almost enchanting abuser. Newcomer Mok has been nominated for best leading actress at the upcoming Golden Horse Awards (金馬獎) for her daring and intense performance. The cameos by Hong Kong veteran actors, however, feel superfluous to the narrative.

Exactly arranged and masterfully crafted in terms of filmmaking, *Ocean Flame* derives its charm, or shortcoming to some, from a pronounced feel of theatricality and staged emotions that will attract art-house moviegoers with dark characters whose pride and despair lead to self-destruction.

Film Notes

OCEAN FLAME

(一半海水，一半海洋)

DIRECTED BY: LIU FENDOU (劉奮鬥)

STARRING: LIAO FAN (廖凡) AS WANG YAO, MONICA MOK (莫小奇) AS LI CHUAN, HAI YITIAN (海一天) AS ZHENG ZHONG

RUNNING TIME: 98 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN AND CANTONESE WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES



Chinese actor Liao Fan, left, comes off as a charming criminal, while newcomer Monica Mok plays a wishful victim of desperate love in *Ocean Flame*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FILMKO ENTERTAINMENT