

F I L M R E V I E W



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZEUS INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTIONS

Estomago is a cautionary tale that serves up its morals with a twist and a knowing smile. When we first meet Raimundo Nonato (Joao Miguel), he is just off the bus at a big city terminal with nothing much more than the clothes on his back, a total innocent from the backwoods. He finds himself a job at a local diner and discovers that whatever he may lack in charm, looks or intellect, he certainly has a way with food. This talent leads him through a world where the sins of lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride flourish, and by which he is eventually swallowed up.

The film has a rather over-ambitious structure, cutting backwards and forwards between Nonato's life in the city and his life in prison, the exact sequence of these two parts of his life left slightly in doubt until the middle of the film. This leads to some initial confusion, but director Marcos Jorge pulls it all together in the end, to amusing effect.

Nonato, as he leads his rake's progress through the superficially very different hierarchies of the restaurant world and that of the regulated mayhem of a Brazilian prison, remains very much an innocent, almost to the very end. On his arrival in the big city, he finds a job with miserly diner owner Zulmiro, hooks up with the glutinous working-girl Ira, connects with the proud and lustful restaurant owner Giovanni, and at another time finds himself subjected to the whims of slothful prison bully Bujiu. He himself succumbs to jealousy and wrath, but ultimately finds his own somewhat twisted redemption — in his own mind at least.



“For a film that involves a brutal stabbing, cannibalism, and the dispatch of one character through poison, ‘Estomago’ manages to be extremely funny in an off-kilter sort of way.”

Estomago deals mostly with character types, and in this respect harks back to an ancient tradition of morality plays. The cynical eye with which these types and the workings of the world are observed, however, is definitely modern. Nonato, like many innocents, is very literal in his perception of what he sees and hears, and the constant kitchen metaphor about the very best type of steak tasting like the rump of a callipygian woman leads to an act that takes *Estomago* right out of the world of a restaurant rom-com and into the world of Hannibal Lector.

Although there are plenty of laughs in *Estomago*, there is a distinct shortage of beautiful people. The acting is solid, with Miguel masterful in revealing the banality of evil and the fine line that separates evil from innocence. The supporting roles are more than adequate, and while none of the characters are particularly attractive, they manage to elicit some degree of sympathy as human beings caught up ineluctably in a fate not of their own making.

For a film that involves a brutal stabbing, cannibalism and the dispatch of one character through poison, *Estomago* manages to be extremely funny in an off-kilter sort of way and contains some entertaining reflections on the human relationship with food. Even after you fit all the parts of the story together, Jorge leaves you wondering exactly whether we should despise Nonato as a psychopath or cheer his success in a world that has stacked the odds against him.

Jealous of her new maid, Peirong begins to suspect that Xiaowei may be responsible for a spate of gruesome killings that occurred upon her arrival and strives to reveal the vixen's real identity: a fox spirit who has assumed human form and feeds on human hearts to maintain

Eat or be eaten

Revenge is a dish cooked up by Joao Miguel in ‘Estomago — A Gastronomic Story’

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Film Notes

ESTOMAGO — A GASTRONOMIC STORY

DIRECTED BY: MARCOS JORGE

STARRING: JOAO MIGUEL (NONATO), FABIULA NASCIMENTO (IRIA), BABU SANTANA (BUJIU), CARLO BRIANI (GIOVANNI), ZECA CENOVICZ (ZULMIRO), PAULO MIKLOS (ETEETERA)

RUNNING TIME: PORTUGUESE WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

LANGUAGE: 112 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



Zhou Xun shines as the vixen in *Painted Skin*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUBLE EDGE ENTERTAINMENT

Film Notes

PAINTED SKIN (畫皮)

DIRECTED BY: GORDON CHAN (陳嘉上)

STARRING: DONNIE YEN (甄子丹) AS YONG, ZHAO WEI (趙薇) AS PEIRONG, ZHOU XUN (周迅) AS XIAOWEI, CHEN KUN (陳坤) AS WANG SHENG, BETTY SUN (孫儷) AS XIA BING

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH ENGLISH AND CHINESE SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME: 103 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

A supernatural love triangle

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

An adaptation of a short story from the classic *Strange Stories From a Chinese Studio* (聊齋誌異), a collection of supernatural tales by Qing Dynasty writer Pu Songling (蒲松齡), *Painted Skin* (畫皮) is designed to be a blockbuster that appeals to all with a recipe of ghosts, kung fu and romance, a little comedy and an ensemble of Chinese A-listers including Zhao Wei (趙薇), Zhou Xun (周迅), Chen Kun (陳坤) and action superstar Donnie Yen (甄子丹).

The story begins with general Wang Sheng (Chen Kun) rescuing the charming young Xiaowei (Zhou Xun) from bandits in the desert. Trouble soon arises in Wang's household as Xiaowei plots to take over as the new Mrs Wang and sows discord between the general and his demure wife, Peirong (Zhao Wei).

Jealous of her new maid, Peirong begins to suspect that Xiaowei may be responsible for a spate of gruesome killings that occurred upon her arrival and strives to reveal the vixen's real identity: a fox spirit who has assumed human form and feeds on human hearts to maintain

her youth and beauty.

Wang, who has erotic dreams involving Xiaowei, naturally wants to hear nothing of it. In despair, Peirong turns to Yong (Donnie Yen) for help. A former general himself and one-time rival of Wang for Peirong's affections, Yong still carries a torch for the general's wife.

With the help of bumbling demon buster Xia Bing (Betty Sun), Yong sets out to investigate Xiaowei and the series of murders in which the victims' hearts have been ripped out. The drama that unfolds explores loyalty and temptation, unrequited desire and unconditional love.

With its narrative-driven, genre-meshing bent, *Painted Skin* recalls the greatly successful *A Chinese Ghost Story* (倩女幽魂) series from the late 1980s and early 1990s. The film is content to tell a melodramatic story laced with a bit of everything, and in so doing sets itself apart from the hollow epics that have plagued Chinese cinema in recent years.

Leading the action is Yen, engaging in a generic rooftop chase in the night, sword duels and a blurry desert battle that are well-executed but offer

nothing new or exciting.

Yen delivers a refreshing change of pace from his usual onscreen persona as he takes up the role of comic relief together with Chinese actress Sun. Unintentionally amusing moments are provided by a murderous lizard demon, who also has a thing for Xiaowei, and, with his silver-highlighted hair, looks like a character from a computer game.

Painted Skin's biggest drawback is its lack of well-developed romantic plots among its characters, especially the love triangle between Wang Sheng, Xiaowei and Peirong, which is the focal point of the narrative. Incredibly miscast, Chen lacks the intensity to play a husband torn between his devoted wife and a temptress, rendering a drama that is based on intricate emotions less convincing, a situation that is only worsened by a jerky script that fails to develop chemistry among the characters.

What impresses and engages are the performances by Zhou and Zhao. A versatile actress, Zhou is able to instill a fair dose of humanity into her role as the evil vixen, while Zhao shows composure as the loyal and modest wife.