

# FILM REVIEW

## Mei Langfeng in full rose-tinted Technicolor

*Chen Kaige's biopic of the Beijing opera legend Mei Langfang is a refined production but reveals nothing more than what is already known*

BY **HO YI**  
STAFF REPORTER

After 2005's disastrous fantasy epic *The Promise* (無極), Chinese director Chen Kaige (陳凱歌) seeks to re-establish his name with a return to Beijing Opera, the subject matter that brought him international acclaim more than a decade ago when his 1993 *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王別姬) won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and earned two Oscar nominations.

A biographical film about the life of Beijing opera legend Mei Langfang (梅蘭芳), *Forever Enthralled* (梅蘭芳) feels and looks like a mirror image of its iconic protagonist — polished, elegant, but fettered and lacking a real sense of flesh and blood.

Composed of three acts, the film begins with the young Mei (Yu Shaoqun, 余少群) coming to the fore as an emerging talent who isn't afraid to innovate and modernize the ancient performing art form. The climactic Beijing opera match between Mei and his mentor Shi Shanyan,

played by veteran Chinese actor Wang Xueqi (王學圻), ends with the passing of the aged maestro and thus the end of an era.

The following two acts pale in comparison to the opening chapter, which recalls director Chen's artistry and is worth a visit to the theater alone. The second part centers on the love affair between noted Beijing opera performer Meng Xiaodong (Zhang Ziyi, 章子怡) and the married Mei (Leon Lai, 黎明). Despite the cast members' competent performances, the story suffers from a lack of dramatic intensity and a sometimes labored narrative.

In the final act, the film takes up a tone of patriotism rather abruptly when Mei is painted as a flag-waving artist who refuses to ply his art in the service of the Japanese invaders during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Mei's legend concludes with China's greatest Beijing opera performer returning to the stage under the Communist regime.

Wang dazzles with his superb portrait of Shi, a tragic figure who clings to the ideas and virtues of imperial China, valuing dignity and honor over life.

Wang fills each of his gestures with drama and nuanced emotion. His opera performance exudes equal amounts of charm and delicacy, making it hard to believe that the actor spent a mere four months picking up the basics of Beijing opera before shooting the movie.

Surprisingly, novice actor Yu is not overcome by Wang's remarkable presence and turns in a commendable performance as the

young Mei. Cast in the role of Qi Rubai, Mei's mentor, agent and friend, seasoned thespian Sun Honglei (孫紅雷) steals the show for the rest of the film with his slightly overstated but potent performance.

Though it is opined that Lai's gentle and feminine disposition makes him the ideal candidate for the role of the adult Mei, the actor is fated to fail since he plays not a living person, but an immortalized legend, revered and extolled but deprived of weaknesses, secrets, emotions and even humanity.

The same failing applies to the film itself. Adhering to the orthodox historical perspective on Mei, Chen's work avoids the scandalous, the political and the human lying beneath the character's veneer.

Director Chen learns to adapt and compromise with those who are keen on preserving Mei as a national hero in *Forever Enthralled* and Lai's Mei is destined to be dull and flat, whereas other characters shine with their defects.

Leon Lai faced a tall order playing an immortalized legend.

PHOTO COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY FOX TAIWAN

### Film Notes

#### FOREVER ENTHRALLED (梅蘭芳)

**DIRECTED BY:** CHEN KAIGE (陳凱歌)

**STARRING:** LEON LAI (黎明) AS ADULT MEI LANFANG, YU SHAOQUN (余少群) AS YOUNG MEI LANFANG, WANG XUEQI (王學圻) AS SHI SHANYAN, ZHANG ZIYI (章子怡) AS MENG XIAODONG, SUN HONGLEI (孫紅雷) AS QI RUBAI, CHEN HONG (陳紅) AS FU ZHIFANG

**LANGUAGE:** IN MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

**RUNNING TIME:** 145 MINUTES

**TAIWAN RELEASE:** LIMITED SCREENINGS FROM TODAY THROUGH SUNDAY. OFFICIAL RELEASE ON DEC. 19

[ DOCUMENTARY ]

## Snow blindness

*'Beyond the Arctic' tracks a trio of athletes as they journey toward the North Pole, braving polar bears on the way. A pity then that the result is myopic*

BY **HO YI**  
STAFF REPORTER

Three men venture 650km to the Arctic Circle in 21 days. Extreme weather conditions cause limb-threatening frostbite and life-threatening dehydration and hypothermia. Polar bears pose a genuine threat.

*Beyond the Arctic* (征服北極), veteran documentary director Yang Li-chou's (楊力州) latest work, follows a trio of Taiwanese athletes on their grueling trek to the Magnetic North Pole as part of the 2008 Polar Challenge, an international race that takes place between mid-April and mid-May each year.

Known for his story-driven approach to documentary filmmaking, eloquently demonstrated in the Golden Horse-winning *My Football Summer* (奇蹟的夏天), Yang opens the film by introducing the team members: renowned ultra-marathon runner Kevin Lin (林義傑); Albert Liu (劉柏園), CEO of online games company Gamania Digital Entertainment (遊戲橘子); and college student Jason Chen (陳彥博).

For the following 75 minutes, the documentary tracks the trio's preparation and training in Resolute Bay, Canada, and their exhausting and perilous trudge under the midnight sun, filled with humorous, sometimes hilarious moments as the trekkers exchange jokes, dance Bollywood-style and sing Taiwanese tunes to keep their spirits up and distract themselves from the physical and mental torments they endure.

The climax of the film involves a polar bear raiding another team's tent, startling a Frenchman and two Chinese men out of their sleep. Yang juxtaposes footage of a European hunter (who was not involved in the race) showing off the hide of a polar bear he had just killed, against video of the Franco-Chinese team successfully scaring off the intimidating predator, just a stone's throw away, simply by shouting and yelling at it.

The athletes' endeavors are undoubtedly inspiring and commendable. The documentary, however, fails to fully convey the drama of the expedition. It is understandable that severe weather and treacherous terrain can impose insurmountable restrictions on filmmaking. Yet,



From left, Kevin Lin, Albert Liu and Jason Chen were the first Taiwanese to enter the Polar Challenge, an international race across the Arctic.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BACKSTAGE STUDIO

with the focus on the trio's morale-boosting sessions through lighthearted frolics and horseplay, director Yang misses a rare opportunity to explore the surrounding wilderness, its inhabitants and the human struggle to overcome its challenges. Substantial issues such as wildlife conservation and the predicament faced by Taiwanese athletes, who generally receive virtually no government support, grants or sponsorship but still try to make a career out of their professions, are only touched upon in the film.

### Film Notes

#### BEYOND THE ARCTIC (征服北極獸)

**DIRECTED BY:** YANG LI-CHOU (楊力州)

**STARRING:** KEVIN LIN (林義傑) AS HIMSELF, ALBERT LIU (劉柏園) AS HIMSELF, JASON CHEN (陳彥博) AS HIMSELF

**LANGUAGE:** IN MANDARIN AND TAIWANESE WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

**RUNNING TIME:** 75 MINUTES

**TAIWAN RELEASE:** TODAY