

## FILM REVIEW

## All about love

With four first-time directors at the helm, 'L-O-V-E' calls on a bevy of stars and pop idols to sell amour

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER



## Film Notes

## L-O-V-E (愛到底)

**DIRECTED BY:** JIU BA DAO (九把刀), VINCENT WEN-SHAN FANG (方文山), CHEN YI-XIAN (陳奕先), MICKEY ZI-JIAO HUANG (黃子佼)

**STARRING:** VAN FAN (范逸臣) A-CHENG, BLUE LAN (藍正龍) AS BLUE, ANNIE LIU (劉心悠) AS ANNIE, ETHAN RUAN (阮經天) AS TITIAN, ALICE TZENG (曾愷玟) AS KAI

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

**RUNNING TIME:** 92 MINUTES

**TAIWAN RELEASE:** TODAY



Determined to look after his girlfriend if he dies on the operating table, the terminally ill Van Fan (范逸臣) searches for a man who has exactly the same voice as he has to take his place.

Blue Lan (藍正龍), a reticent music video director, re-encounters old flame Annie Liu (劉心悠) and realizes a car accident has erased her memories of their love.

Movie stuntman Ethan Ruan (阮經天) dashes out the door after a lover's spat with his flight attendant girlfriend, Alice Tzeng (曾愷玟).

Plain homebody Tracy Chou (周采詩) turns to a fortune-teller for love advice, who tells her she'll meet six guys sporting bangs with the last being Mr Right.

The four love stories that form *L-O-V-E* (愛到底) are directed by four celebrities turned first-time film directors.

With homegrown stars making cameos and guest appearances, the film is an entertaining hodgepodge of comedy and romance, glossed up with A-list charm and a blitz of publicity. But the filmmaking delivered by some of its creators barely passes muster and hinders the wannabe blockbuster from living up to its star-studded ambitions.

Jiu Ba-dao (九把刀), also known as Giddens, a best-selling blogger, writer and cultural pundit, applies his talent in literature to filmmaking in his story about a young man's dying wish to look after the woman he loves long after he's gone. The narrative glides smoothly and turns from the fun, loving moments between the lovers to a more melancholy tone, though the film could use some trimming to tighten things up a bit.

Both Fan and Megan Lai (賴雅妍), who plays the girlfriend, are well cast as the young couple and turn in naturalistic performances that help make the opening scene in which the two frolic with toy lightsabers look cute.

In terms of technique, music video director Chen Yi-xian's (陳奕先) tale about the stuntman and flight attendant is the most professional looking of the four. Pop idols Ruan and Tzeng are on top form, appearance-wise. The former has matured into a charismatic soup opera actor and young heartthrob. Chen presents his thin subject matter, lovers' bickering and reconciliation, in images that are pleasing to look at, but which lack narrative punches.

The segment about an awkward girl's search for Mr Right feels more like a variety show than a film. Aiming for goofy humor and exaggerated hilarity, veteran entertainer Mickey Zi-jiao Huang (黃子佼) calls on a legion of showbiz luminaries to make surprise guest appearances that raise the level of entertainment and fun. The lineup includes "godmother of television" Chang Hsiao-yen (張小燕), former idol and actor Alec Su (蘇有朋), Ken Chu (朱孝天) of F4, boy group Lollipop (棒棒堂), established actress Lu Yi-ching (陸弈靜) and Makiyo, who are possibly the hottest gas pump girls on screen to date.

But as the exaggerated humor repeats and becomes overused, the picture grows tedious and feeble toward the end.

Vincent Wen-shan Fang (方文山) is the weakest link in the quartet. His story isn't engaging, while actors Lan and Liu struggle embarrassingly with the lead characters, which they portray as dreadfully lifeless.



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## Some magic, a book and Paco

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER

Taiwan is far from being unfamiliar with the vibrantly shameless expression of Japanese kitsch and its passion for pastiche, but the unrestrained outpouring that is *Paco and the Magical Book* (Pako to Maho no Ehon), a film by Japanese director Tetsuya Nakashima, would be hard to find. From the poster you might think it a film for young children, and for the first few minutes this illusion is preserved — rather worryingly. Then suddenly the director drops you breathless with shock into what at first appears to be some kind of *otaku* paradise of playschool eroticism.

There are certainly elements of this, but there is very much more. So much, indeed, that it is virtually impossible to get a grip on where you are, and director Tetsuya Nakashima seems to take delight in keeping you off balance.

The film opens in panto style with exactly the kind of grotesquely colorful costumes and exaggerated acting that might suggest you had walked into a show designed for the under eights. Minutes later, you are slammed into the generous cleavage of F-cup sex kitten and model Eiko Koike, who is wearing a beehive, vampire teeth and a super-mini nurse costume.

She is Masami, a nurse at a gothic horror house of cuteness, where the two main characters, Onuki (Koji Yakusho), a business tycoon who looks like he escaped from the set of a Tarantino martial arts fantasy, and Paco (Ayaka Wilson), the embodiment of all that is sweet and innocent about childhood. A second nurse is played by model and singer Anna Tsuchiya, sporting a heavily pierced punk look, who is secretly in love with child star, now turned drug addict, Muromachi, played by TV idol Satoshi Tsumabuki. Another patient at the hospital is Kinomoto, a drag queen who repeatedly breaks into the most horrific karaoke renditions of saccharine love ballads, played by another TV idol, Jun Kunimura. The musical score ranges from thrash metal to lullaby. Pseudo-punk attitude, lap-dance eroticism, the Hello Kitty culture of cute, fairy-tale sentimentality and a biting cynicism about the shallow posturing of a style-obsessed civilization all have a part in this film.

The central thread is a story of Onuki, a grumpy old man who thinks nothing of smacking the cute title character in the face, but who finds redemption and humanity in his growing affection for a girl who only has a memory that lasts for one day. Paco's life is a *Groundhog Day* of perpetual rediscovery, allowing her to soften the old man despite his horrendous treatment of her. Their relationship blossoms through Onuki's reading of a pop-up storybook about a violent fog king, his death and redemption. The film switches from pantomime to animation to CGI effects that allow the pop-up book to become a living part of the cinematic set.

*Paco and the Magical Book* may look a complete mess at first glance, but Nakashima manages to hold it all together, not simply referring outward to his clearly over-abundant supply of cultural references, but also internally, constantly making jokes at his own expense, and not allowing even the culminating tragic moment to be other than just another piece in his elaborate puzzle. But for all its formalistic fun and games, Nakashima never totally undermines a sentimental core of the film. The central fairy tale, as revealed through the reading of the magical book, remains intact. There is a beating heart beneath all the glitz and glitter of Nakashima's overactive imagination, and for the audience, there are a few tears amid the laughter.

## Film Notes

PACO AND THE MAGICAL BOOK  
(PAKO TO MAHO NO EHON)

**DIRECTED BY:** TETSUYA NAKASHIMA

**STARRING:** KOJI YAKUSHO (ONUKE), AYAKA WILSON (PACO), SATOSHI TSUMABUKI (MUROMACHI), ANNA TSUCHIYA (TAMAKO)

**RUNNING TIME:** 105 MINUTES

**LANGUAGE:** JAPANESE WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

**TAIWAN RELEASE:** TODAY

## OTHER RELEASES

►► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

## Zack and Miri Make a Porno

Here's a film whose release is timed to perfection. Two close friends (Elizabeth Banks and Seth Logan) in financial trouble find that their platonic relationship is no obstacle to getting their gear off on video to make some quick cash. But what will happen to their friendship? Because this is a good-hearted (if very lowbrow) American comedy, you can pretty much guess the outcome, even if it is written and directed by Kevin Smith (*Clerks*, *Chasing Amy*). Full of cameos for movie (and porno) buffs, Smith was able to slip this one past the American censors, without cuts, on appeal despite the sometimes grisly subject matter.



## Rumba

Anything described by *Variety* as "like an episode of *Sesame Street* scripted by Luis Bunuel and helmed by Jacques Tati" must be worth seeing, and sure enough, this French/Belgian co-production is one of the best releases of the week. A couple who love to dance find their lives falling apart after suffering severe injuries in a car accident. It's all downhill from there, but this is not what it appears. The movie mixes sight gags and very physical comedy with a good-humored tone that shifts between optimism and sobriety. And there's great dancing. Colorful and perfect for all the family, and not weighed down by the need to read subtitles — because there's very little dialogue. The glorious spirit of Tati lives on.



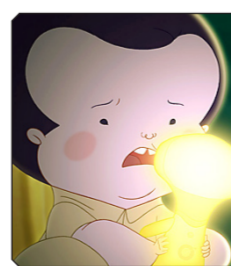
## Push

It's not such a good week to release this American action fantasy with *Watchmen* also opening, but it does feature Hong Kong prominently. US military experiments generate a number of people who can "push" (telekinetically move) objects and read minds, and one of the guinea pigs must flee to Hong Kong to escape the deadly plans for domination by one of their number. Dakota Fanning plays a teen "mover" who tracks down and teams up with her hunted colleague. Director Paul McGuigan made the reasonable *Lucky Number Slewin*, but the critics were generally less enthralled with this effort despite its visual and dynamic flair.



## Nocturna

A Spanish-French animated film from 2007, *Nocturna* is about an orphan who explores the night sky in search of a beloved missing star and finds the most unexpected creatures and machinations — some good, some sinister. Like most European animated features, this one struggled to enter the US market, perhaps because the benign sensibilities of the makers and a young US audience raised on adrenaline and vivid characterizations didn't quite connect.



## Climates

*Climates* (2006) is the award-winning feature that Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan made before *Three Monkeys*, which screened here in October. It's being released together with his earlier film *Distant* (see next preview) in a treat for fans of the director and Turkish cinema in general. *Climates* is a study in mood, atmosphere and seasonal locations as a relationship falls apart. Ceylan and his wife, Ebru Ceylan, play the leads. Also known as *Seasons*. Original title: *İklimler*.



## Distant

Winner of the Cannes jury prize, *Distant* (2002) involves the spiritual deterioration in the lives of a newly single photographer and an unemployed — possibly unemployable — relative from the country who comes to encroach on his life. With a measured pace and plenty of gloom, this is not for everyone, but it has many champions. J. Hoberman, writing in the *Village Voice*, likened Ceylan's works to those of Tsai Ming-liang (蔡明亮). Original title: *Uzak*.

