

FILM REVIEW

It's a pity 'The Reader' doesn't dig into the deeper questions of culpability and reconciliation for the Nazi death camps as energetically as Kate Winslet and David Kross practice carnal gymnastics

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



Never judge a book by its movie

The Reader, for which Kate Winslet won an Oscar for best actress, is about any number of things, and appeals at many levels, from that of soft porn to jurisprudence. Nevertheless, even with its excellent acting, a rock-solid script, and the serious consideration of important moral issues, the film somehow fails to coalesce into a satisfying unity.

The movie is divided into three sections. The first deals with an erotic relationship that develops between an academically precocious student, Michael Berg (David Kross) and an older woman, Hanna Schmitz, who works as a ticket collector on the tram service (Kate Winslet). The relationship is intense both physically and emotionally, but one day, Schmitz suddenly disappears.

The second section has Berg as an honors student in a university law program. The class is participating as observers in Schmitz's trial for her role as a concentration camp guard during World War II and her direct responsibility for the death of a number of inmates.

In the third section, Berg, now played by Ralph Fiennes, is a successful lawyer and failed husband and lover, torn between his knowledge of Schmitz the person and his acknowledgment of her actions. He spends considerable time engaged in a thoroughly unsatisfactory attempt at balancing a commitment to the truth and reconciling his love and horror of Schmitz.

The first section, before the production gets bogged down in a somewhat ham-handed moral dialectic, is the most appealing. It has Kross and Winslet showing off acres of well-toned flesh as they develop a relationship through sex and the great works of Western literature. Both the leads are certainly good to look at, with even Hanna's cramped studio apartment exuding a degree of slum chic. Watching the two go at it with considerable finesse, my mind wandered to a quote by the novelist and Hollywood screenwriter Raymond Chandler about sex: "It's excitement of a high order ... It's necessary and it doesn't have to be ugly. But it always has to be managed. Making it glamorous is a billion-dollar industry and it costs every cent of it."

It was hard not to be distracted by the glamour and celebrity wattage that was shining on screen, and for all the skill in which the trysts between Hanna and Michael are managed, you never forget that you are looking at Kate Winslet in her prime, and that millions of US dollars have been spent to make her look good in bed.

Hanna is addicted as much to Michael's reading as she is to his body, and the two get through books ranging from *The Odyssey* to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Hanna loves the stories, but the transformative power of

literature is certainly lost on her, and on the film, as Daldry moves on quickly to his next theme, involving truth and reconciliation in relation to the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime.

And here, once again, he is simply content to scratch the surface, satisfied with the semblance of moral seriousness, as in the first half of the film he is satisfied with a glossy airbrushed version of sex. In trying to understand what Hanna might have done after she joined the SS as a prison guard, Michael makes a visit to a concentration camp; a visit that is so artfully lit that it might have been footage for an interior design exhibit.

Kross, who is perfectly adequate as the young boy fumbling his way through a complex sexual relationship, is less appealing as a university student, doing a lot of sullen pouting as a means of conveying his deep unease at the proceedings in court. When Michael's role is taken over by Ralph Fiennes, all expressions other than that of acute dyspepsia vanish. Fiennes has made something of a specialty of playing men with grave difficulty expressing emotions other than those of anger and dissatisfaction, but while this might be perfectly acceptable for his stint as Lord Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* series, it is getting a bit trying after his leading roles in *The Constant Gardener* (2005) and *The Duchess* (2008).

Winslet saves the day for *The Reader*, not so much for getting her kit off in the early section of the film, but as a woman on trial for doing what she thought was her duty. There are moments in the courtroom in which Hanna the tram conductor burns with all the things she cannot or does not know how to say, as she sees her virtues of obedience and conformity transformed into incarnations of evil. It is these moments that make *The Reader* memorable. Unfortunately, Daldry hasn't time to linger, and wants to move on with a story that drifts dangerously close to being a legal thriller on the lines of a John Grisham novel.

But the thrills don't last long either, and the film then switches to an angst-ridden Fiennes trying to cope with his past. He has a run-in with a flinty camp survivor (Lena Olin), who puts the case for the prosecution once again, even as Hanna grows old in prison. She continues to work her way through the canon of Western literature, but all those books, all those words, never seem to be absorbed, or have any impact on her personality or thought.

The Reader has a similar lack of effect on the audience, and while it is interesting for the many of the questions it raises, it never hangs around long enough to answer them.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF APRILAE

Film Notes

THE READER

DIRECTED BY: STEPHEN DALDRY

STARRING:

RALPH FIENNES (MICHAEL BERG), DAVID KROSS (YOUNG MICHAEL BERG), KATE WINSLET (HANNA SCHMITZ)

RUNNING TIME: 124 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

‘Milarepa’ preaches to the converted

Lama-turned-director Neten Chokling's debut feature is an earnest account of the life of a Tibetan Buddhist saint

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

In cinematic terms, Bhutan is probably better known as the location of the highly publicized and hugely exclusive wedding of Hong Kong movie legends Carina Lau (劉嘉玲) and Tony Leung Chiu Wai (梁朝偉) in July last year, rather than for its own cinematic output.

So while *Milarepa* is certainly something of a cinematic curiosity, sadly, this worthy effort about the early life of the Tibetan Buddhist saint Milarepa is little else. The film is being marketed on the back of the relative success of Khyentse Norbu's *Travelers and Magicians* (2003) on which Neten Chokling served as second-unit director.

The lama-turned-filmmaker makes his own directorial debut with *Milarepa*, but in picking such a worthy, and indeed sacred, subject, he has jettisoned the humor and cultural interest that made *Travelers* such an appealing film

despite its lack of cinematic finesse.

While *Travelers* gained considerable interest from its depiction of contemporary small-town life in Bhutan, which few can claim to be familiar with, *Milarepa* takes place in a generic Tibet that might be that of Milarepa's time (the saint is said to have died in 1135), or might be that of today. Chokling sets out to tell his story in a step-by-step account that has all the narrative vibrancy of performing the Buddhist equivalent of the stations of the cross.

The story begins with Thopaga's childhood in a rich family and its fall into poverty and shame at the hands of money-grubbing relatives. It then moves on to the desire for vengeance, which first grows in his mother's heart, then is taken up by the son, who is sent off to learn black magic. Then there is the terrible act of vengeance itself, subsequent self-realization, and

Film Notes

MILAREPA

DIRECTED BY: NETEN CHOKLING

STARRING: JAMYANG LODRO (THOPAGA/MILAREPA), KELSANG CHUKIE TETHTONG (KARGYEN), ORGYEN TUBGYAL (YONGTEN TRUGYEL), GONPO (UNCLE GYALSTEN), TSAMCHOE (AUNT PEYDON)

RUNNING TIME: 94 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:

IN TIBETAN WITH ENGLISH AND CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

a desire to find transcendence. Unfortunately, that's were the film stops, with the journey that will turn Thopaga into the Buddhist saint Milarepa slated for a sequel,

which according to the distributor will begin production later this year. The best that can be said is that the director's total immersion in his material precludes the peopling of his film with exotics. He is presenting the bread and butter of his faith, and for those who are interested, it is rough but perfectly wholesome fare.

In terms of performance, *Milarepa* is not without its moments, and Kelsang Chukie Tethong as Kargyen, Thopaga's mother, makes a real attempt at acting. There are flashes of naturalism from the non-professional cast, but on the whole, performances are rather stilted, and the dialogue is totally focused on underlining the main moral points. The desolate magnificence of the Tibetan plateau, with its temples perched precariously on the tops of cliffs and its miles of barren scree and rough bushland are displayed with an insouciance and tender



PHOTO COURTESY OF GROUP POWER

Kelsang Chukie Tethong turns in a good performance as the jealous mother in *Milarepa*, directed by Neten Chokling.

familiarity that sets the film apart from the breathless wonder of Western presentations. *Milarepa*, for all its faults, is a good antidote to exotic fluff such as Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997).

OTHER RELEASES

►► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

The Pink Panther 2

Enough people saw and enjoyed the *Pink Panther* remake featuring Steve Martin as Inspector Clouseau for this sequel to be financed, but it's hard to imagine another one being made. The upside is that it's got a good cast: John Cleese, Jeremy Irons, Jean Reno, Alfred Molina and Martin's *All of Me* co-star Lily Tomlin, to name a few, though some critics lamented the waste of talent — not to mention a gratuitous CNN cameo (guess who). In Part 2, the Pink Panther diamond is targeted by a legendary thief, and Clouseau must foil him. Peter Sellers fans are advised to hire the old DVDs.



The Unborn

Now we've seen everything: an *Exorcist*-style movie steeped in Jewish religious lore and Nazi scientific atrocities. For the rest of the horror crowd not into such themes, there's also hot babes, creepy children and a catalog of shocks. Odette Yustman (*Cloverfield*) plays a young woman whose link to experiments at a World War II concentration camp turns her life into a supernatural nightmare. Also stars Gary Oldman (as a rabbi) and Jane Alexander. Director David S. Goyer is a prolific action/fantasy writer-producer; he played a big role in Christopher Nolan's *Batman* films. But his work here has not passed muster among those with little tolerance for the genre.



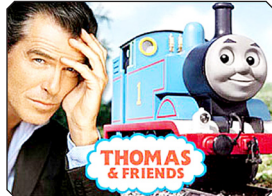
Personal Effects

A casualty of a nervous (or passionless?) US film industry amid the economic gloom, this Michelle Pfeiffer film had lone screenings in New York and Los Angeles before being dumped on the DVD market. Taiwanese audiences, however, are lucky because some of the many straight-to-DVD-in-the-US features screened here are worth the price of a ticket. Pfeiffer is the mother of a deaf child and, because of a murder, recently bereaved; she meets a man (Ashton Kutcher, from *That '70s Show*) in a support group and a bond develops between them. Also stars Kathy Bates.



Thomas & Friends: The Great Discovery

Fans of the long-running (25 years!) British TV show for kids about a friendly, hard-working locomotive, his engine friends and their controller will be delighted to see this up on the big screen. Thomas' "discovery" is an old mountain town on a little-used stretch of track. For the TV show, Ringo Starr and the late George Carlin were among the narrators for the UK and US markets respectively; for the movie, Pierce Brosnan steps into the sound-proof booth. Screening at the Vieshow complex in Xinyi District.



A Frozen Flower

South Koreans took to this sensual, bloody costume drama in record numbers — for an adults-only film. Set around 1,000 years ago, a homosexual emperor asks his lover/bodyguard to impregnate his wife and sire a son to avoid a clash over succession ... but allegiance to the emperor can only go so far. Handsomely mounted, beautifully filmed and featuring a gorgeous cast, this lengthy saga has sex scenes that fully earn its restricted rating.



Shakariki!

Some might argue that the Japanese film industry is an offshoot of that country's manga market, and here is yet more grim evidence of it. Selected members of the curious male acting ensemble known as D-BOYS star in this trifling story based on a dated manga of a high school bicycle racing team that must overcome assorted challenges to prevail. The film may score points for its enthusiasm, but this is no *Breaking Away*, sad to say.



The Bridge

A remake of a pioneering German film from the late 1950s that attempted to make sense of World War II, this is a made-for-TV production that will be quickly forgotten. A bunch of high school students find themselves called up to the army as US forces approach; their token job is to defend a bridge of no strategic value, but disaster looms anyway. Stars Franka Potente (Marie in *The Bourne Identity*) and a bunch of young male actors unknown outside Germany. Screening at the Scholar multiplex in Taipei and Wonderful Cinemas in Taichung.



Highway Star

The Baixue theater in Ximending is hosting more hiChannel promotional screenings, this time for *Highway Star*, a South Korean comedy from 2007 about an up-and-coming heavy metal singer who signs up to perform the dreaded form of music known as "Trot," which the atmovies Web site helpfully likens to Taiwanese pop songs — the ones with interchangeable melodies, plagal cadences and warbling saxophones beloved of variety shows. Stars Cha Tae-hyun from the hugely successful *My Sassy Girl*. Starts tomorrow.

