

FILM REVIEW

Strictly ballroom

Award-winning director Kuo Chen-ti tackles a tale about life in the slow lane with a combination of star charisma, comedy, dance and music

BY HO YI
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Deemed a tough sell in a youth and beauty-obsessed society, the elderly are usually overlooked in mainstream Taiwanese cinema.

Foreign films such as *Late Bloomers* (2006) and *Young@Heart* (2007), however, have hit local screens and through inspiring drama and heart-warming comedy have struck a chord.

In *Step by Step* (練·戀·舞), experienced female documentary director Kuo Chen-ti (郭珍弟), whose *Viva Tonal* (跳舞時代), a documentary about the Taiwanese pop music scene during the 1930s, won a Golden Horse Award, takes a similar approach. Starring promising actor Joseph Chang (張孝全) and supermodel Janel Tsai (蔡淑臻), the film weds star charisma with comedy in a dance genre package and winds up a lively story about a group of nursing-home residents.

Chang plays Biran, a young male nurse working in a small-town old people's home in Yunlin. Never the type to follow the caregiver's manual, Biran is custodian, friend and family to the group of aging eccentrics who are no longer interested in or excited by life.

Ruping (Tsai), a new dance teacher in town, catches Biran's eye and heart. Cold and detached, the mysterious

The true stars of *Step by Step* are its veteran actors, including Hsiao Hu-tou, far left, and Chang Fu-chien, second left.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DOUBLE EDGE ENTERTAINMENT

woman reluctantly agrees to teach the residents at the nursing home. New steps, beats and rhythm bring refreshing joy to all but Old Tang (Tien Ming, 田明), a retired military commander who harbors a secret that has been gnawing away at his mind for decades.

A specter of doom looms when the insidious head of the nursing home plans to close down the establishment and sell the property to a big enterprise. Determined to leave without regret, the residents train for the upcoming national ballroom dance competition. Meanwhile, both Biran and Ruping learn to heal emotional wounds and help their geriatric friends make the most of life.

Mostly shot in Hsilo (西螺) Township, Yunlin County, the film radiates a countryside charm, and the colonial Baroque-style architecture, which is used as the site for the nursing home, exudes a nostalgic sentiment that reflects the mood of the film's senior characters.

While model-turned-actress Tsai turns in a passable big-screen debut performance and Chang tackles the role of the young caretaker with ease, the stars of the film are the group of veteran actors including Chang Fu-chien (張復建), Hung Ming-li (洪明麗) and Hsiao Hu-tou (小舜斗).

Mostly remembered for serious and righteous roles, Chang Fu-chien is a delightful surprise as he plays a likable elder who suffers from mild Parkinson's disease. Tien's character, a retired officer, may bring tears to viewers' eyes when the reason behind his bitterness and longing for a family is revealed towards the end of the movie.

In *Step*, Kuo has blended a series of characterizations into a commercial genre flick. Yet, the film lacks the necessary dramatic tension that makes

a dance movie captivating and enthralling. The dance scenes mostly involve Tsai's elegant moves and svelte body. The elders are depicted as clumsy novices at tango at first, but their transformation in the ballroom is never shown, which hinders audiences from building up anticipation and makes the final dance competition nothing more than a show of feebleness.

Step by Step opens a new path in terms of subject matter, yet the lack of narrative transition and climax prohibit the film from fully developing into the piece of entertainment it sets out to be.

Film Notes

STEP BY STEP (練·戀·舞)

DIRECTED BY: KUO CHEN-TI (郭珍弟)

STARRING: JOSEPH CHANG (張孝全) AS BIRAN, JANEL TSAI (蔡淑臻) AS RUPING, TIEN MING (田明) AS OLD TANG, CHANG FU-CHIEN (張復建) AS TING, HSIAO HU-TOU (小舜斗) AS LICHANG, HUNG MING-LI (洪明麗) AS PILIAN

RUNNING TIME: 95 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

